

# Fast Food Advertising:



## Billions in spending, continued high exposure by youth

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Fast-food consumption among youth remains a significant public health concern. The findings in this report demonstrate that fast-food advertising spending increased from 2012 to 2019; youth exposure to TV ads declined, but at a lower rate than reductions in TV viewing times; many restaurants continued to disproportionately target advertising to Hispanic and Black youth; and restaurants did not actively promote healthier menu items. Restaurants must do more to reduce harmful fast-food advertising to youth.

### BACKGROUND



Excessive consumption of fast food is linked to poor diet and weight outcomes among children and teens,<sup>1</sup> and consumption of fast food has increased over the past decade.<sup>2</sup> On a given day, one-third of children and teens eat fast food, and on those days they consume 126 and 310 additional calories, including more sugary drinks, compared to days they do not eat fast food.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, fast food consumption is higher for Hispanic and non-Hispanic Black teens, who also face greater risks for obesity and other diet-related diseases, compared to non-Hispanic White teens.<sup>4,5</sup>

While many factors likely influence frequent fast-food consumption,<sup>6-8</sup> extensive fast-food advertising is a major contributor.<sup>9</sup> Frequent and widespread exposure to food marketing increases young people's preferences, purchase requests, attitudes, and consumption of the primarily nutrient-poor energy-dense products promoted.<sup>10-12</sup> Fast food is the most frequently advertised food and beverage category to children and teens, representing 40% of all youth-directed food marketing expenditures<sup>13</sup> and more than one-quarter of food and drink TV ads viewed.<sup>14</sup> In May 2010, the World Health Assembly unanimously adopted a set of recommendations to reduce the marketing unhealthy food and beverages to children up to age 17 and urged their adoption by governments.<sup>15</sup>

**Limiting fast-food marketing to youth is a key public health strategy to address poor diet among young people.**

Therefore, limiting fast-food marketing to youth is a key public health strategy to address poor diet among young people. Fast-food restaurants have responded to public health concerns by introducing healthier menu items, including kids' meal sides, and removing soda from kids' meal menus. Some restaurants have also pledged to advertise only healthier items directly to children. However, it is unknown if the amount of fast-food advertising to children and teens has changed or if restaurants have also begun to promote their healthier menu options in their advertising. Independent research is necessary to continue to monitor fast-food restaurant advertising to children and teens.

This report follows up on our Fast Food FACTS 2013<sup>16</sup> report and provides current data on fast-food advertising to children, teens, and Black and Hispanic youth.

## **METHODS & SCOPE**

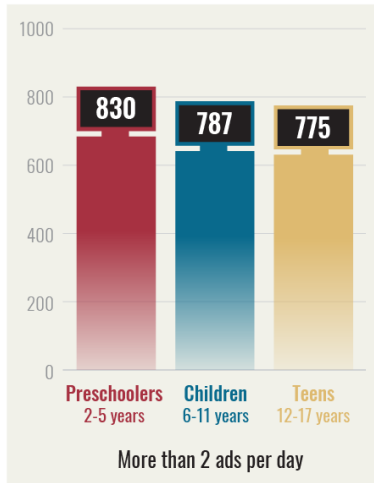
Using Nielsen data, we document 2019 advertising spending and TV advertising exposure for all fast-food restaurants, including detailed analyses of the 27 top fast-food advertisers with the highest advertising spending in 2019 and/or that targeted TV advertising to children, Hispanic, and/or Black consumers. We evaluate changes from previous years, documented in our previous Fast Food FACTS report<sup>17</sup> when available.

## **SUMMARY OF RESULTS & IMPLICATIONS**

### **Key Findings**

- In 2019, fast-food restaurants spent \$5 billion in total advertising, an increase of over \$400 million (9%) vs. 2012.
- Preschoolers, children, and teens viewed on average 2.1 to 2.3 fast-food TV ads per day in 2019. The majority of ads promoted regular menu items and the restaurant in general. Less than 10% of ads viewed promoted kids' meals.
- In 2019, fast-food restaurants spent \$318 million to advertise on Spanish-language TV, a 33% increase from 2012. The number of ads viewed by Hispanic preschoolers and children increased 2% and 7% over the 7 years, in contrast to a decline in ads viewed by preschoolers and children overall.
- In 2019, Black preschoolers, children, and teens viewed approximately 75% more fast-food TV ads than their White peers, an increase compared to 60% more ads viewed by Black youth in 2012.
- Although 274 fast-food restaurants advertised in 2019, six restaurants (McDonald's, Domino's, Burger King, Taco Bell, Sonic, and Little Caesars) were responsible for 46% of total fast-food ad spending and approximately 55% of fast-food TV ads viewed by children and teens.

### Fast-food TV ads viewed in 2019\*



\* Analysis of 2019 Nielsen data

The findings from our analyses of fast-food advertising to children, teens, and Black and Hispanic youth have implications for public health advocacy and other actions to address the negative impact of fast-food consumption on young people's diets and health.

***Over the eight years examined, fast-food restaurants did not noticeably improve their advertising to children or to Hispanic or Black youth.***

- Most restaurants increased their advertising spending from 2012 and 2019, with even greater increases in Spanish-language TV ad spending.
- Exposure to TV ads declined for all youth age groups, but these declines were lower than expected given substantial reductions in time spent watching TV, especially by children and teens.
- Many restaurants continued to advertise directly to children under 12 on children's TV channels, including preschool TV.

***Restaurants pledged to introduce healthier menu items, but the vast majority of fast-food ads viewed by children and teens continued to promote regular high-calorie menu items or the restaurant in general.***

- Restaurants also devoted four to six times as much advertising to low-cost value menus/meal bundles and digital offerings (mobile apps and websites) than to healthy menu items.
- Restaurants spent a higher proportion of their Spanish-language and Black-targeted TV advertising on value menus/meal bundles, compared to total ad budgets.
- McDonald's was the only restaurant to allocate more than 1% of its ad spending to promote healthier kids' meals.

***These findings highlight considerable opportunities for improvement in fast-food advertising to youth.***

Industry self-regulation of advertising to children, primarily through the Children's Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative (CFBAI), requires that participating companies advertise only healthier products on TV programming directed to children under 12 years. However, our findings demonstrate major limitations in the CFBAI:

**In 2019, fast-food restaurants spent \$5 billion in total advertising, an increase of over \$400 million vs. 2012.**

**Restaurants devoted four to six times as much advertising to low-cost value menus/meal bundles and digital offerings than to healthy menu items.**

- McDonald's Happy Meals that were advertised on children's TV met CFBAI nutrition standards for healthier fast-food kids' meals. However, these ads also promote child visits to the restaurant, where most purchases are for nutritionally poor menu items.<sup>18-20</sup>
- Only McDonald's and Burger King participate in the CFBAI. Non-participating restaurants continued to advertise primarily regular menu items (not kids' meals) directly to children on children's and preschool TV channels.
- Nine out of 10 fast-food ads that children saw appeared on other (not children's) TV programming and promoted other products (not kids' meals).

The amount of time teens spent watching TV and associated TV ads viewed declined dramatically from 2012 to 2019, but extensive fast-food marketing on social media, influencer marketing, product placements, sponsorships, and other newer forms of marketing disproportionately reach and appeal to children and teens.<sup>21-23</sup>



### Spanish-language TV\*

- **33% increase** in ad spending since 2012
- **0 ads** for healthy menu items

\* Analysis of 2019 Nielsen data

Increased spending on Spanish-language TV fast-food advertising and increases in exposure to fast-food TV ads by Black relative to White youth raise concerns given greater fast-food consumption by Black and Hispanic adolescents.<sup>24</sup> These youth also face greater risks for obesity and other diet-related diseases.<sup>25</sup>

Restaurants' corporate responsibility initiatives to offer more nutritious options and public support for racial justice, diversity, and inclusion,<sup>26</sup> have not included promises to improve unhealthy marketing practices aimed at communities of color.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Fast-food restaurants must do much more to limit the vast amount of advertising for nutritionally poor products aimed at children and teens and targeted to communities of color. Media companies, policymakers, and advocates also play an integral role in promoting responsible fast-food advertising practices.



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## **Industry**

- Strengthen CFBAI food industry self-regulation of advertising to children.
  - Participating companies should restrict unhealthy food advertising to children up to 14 years old, at a minimum.<sup>27</sup>
  - Additional fast-food restaurants should join the CFBAI and discontinue advertising regular menu items on children's and preschool TV channels.
  - Participating companies should discontinue offering unhealthy versions of products that meet CFBAI nutrition standards (and depicted in child-directed ads) inside restaurants.<sup>28, 29</sup>
- Healthier kids' meal beverage default policies should extend to digital ordering apps,<sup>30</sup> and policies should also require healthier sides and main dishes with all kids' meals.
- Fast-food companies should strengthen corporate responsibility initiatives, including
  - Commit to promoting more nutritious menu items and substantially reducing promotion of nutritionally poor products; and
  - Discontinue disproportionately high marketing of unhealthy products to Hispanic and Black youth.
- Media companies should follow the lead of Disney<sup>31</sup> and set nutrition standards for food advertising they will accept, including on
- All preschool and children's TV networks and third-party websites with large child audiences;
- Spanish-language and Black-targeted TV programming, especially programming aimed at youth; and
- Product placements of branded fast-food products promoted by child influencers on YouTube Kids.<sup>32</sup>

## **Local, State, & Federal Governments**

- Enact policies that require nutrition standards for the entire kids' meal, including main dishes and sides, in addition to healthier beverage default policies.<sup>33</sup> Require monitoring and enforcement of regulations for all policies.
- Limit fast-food promotion and availability for children and teens in neighborhoods, such as zoning restrictions for fast-food restaurants located near youth-oriented settings and signage in store windows.<sup>34</sup>



- Eliminate unhealthy food and beverage marketing to children as a tax-deductible corporate expense.<sup>35</sup>
- The Federal Trade Commission should publish an updated report on food marketing expenditures aimed at children and adolescents (previously published in 2008 and 2012).<sup>36</sup>

### **Public Health Advocates & Practitioners**

- Encourage policymakers to pursue federal, state, and local government actions that effectively improve the nutrition quality of fast-food consumed by children and teens.<sup>37</sup>
- Develop campaigns to increase public awareness of the vast amounts of primarily unhealthy fast-food advertising, especially advertising that disproportionately targets children, teens, and communities of color.<sup>38</sup>
- Support youth-led countermarketing campaigns to expose marketing practices by the top fast-food advertisers.<sup>39</sup>
- Organize shareholder actions to demand that corporations address problematic marketing practices that contribute to diet-related health inequities.<sup>40</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

Fast-food advertising is a powerful commercial determinant of health.<sup>41</sup> Fast-food restaurant initiatives to introduce healthier options to their menus and limit sugary drinks in kids' meals do not adequately address the negative impact of fast-food advertising on young people's diets and health. Media companies, policymakers, and the public health community can play an important role to demand more responsible fast-food advertising to children, teens, and youth of color.



For the full report, visit:

<https://uconnruddcenter.org/research/food-marketing/facts/>

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