Towards greater understanding of healthy food access among childcare workers

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Presenter Disclosures

Amanda S. Birnbaum

The following personal financial relationships with commercial interests relevant to this presentation existed during the past 12 months:

No relationships to disclose

Background

- Early childhood education settings are a major focus of childhood obesity efforts.
- Front-line childcare providers – predominantly low-wage earning females – are expected to implement healthy eating guidelines.
- Workers’ own food access and experiences that shape their contexts and behaviors have not been well-addressed.
Objective

Explore perceptions of local food environments and access to healthy foods among childcare workers in New Jersey.

Why does this matter?

- Social justice perspective
  - Social roles and dependencies
  - Good quality childcare
  - Educational and professional support
  - Economic stress
  - Food justice

- Pragmatic perspective
  - Children and families grow up in communities where food access, nutrition, and health are paramount
  - Observational learning
  - Verbal and nonverbal

A lot of us are on...welfare...or we have to get food stamps, um, just to get help to buy food alone

At the Shoprite that I go to...there's a vegetable section...but not much else...so I don't really know if there's an organic milk available. I'm sure there is, but it's not on the shelves at the Shoprite.
Methods

- Semi-structured guides were developed using a socioecological framework.
- Focus groups and interviews were conducted with childcare workers about:
  - Food shopping practices
  - Foods available at their regular stores
  - Affective and interpersonal experiences while shopping.

Methods

- Audio recordings
- Transcriptions
- On-going reviews for themes
- Codebook under development

Participants

19 females at two different childcare centers in northern NJ

**Center #1**
- University-based childcare center serving infants – pre-K
- Approximately 50 staff
- Mainly college-educated
- Unionized, higher wages than usual
- Participants were mostly white, moderate SES

**Center #2**
- Community-based childcare center serving infants – pre-K
- Approximately 80 staff
- College degrees not the norm
- Low wages
- Participants were mostly African- or Caribbean-American, lower SES
Shopping environment

I feel like I have the same conversation with myself every time I walk into Stop and Shop... it's always crowded and I'm just like "Why do I come here everyday?"

The people at Whole Foods... they don't treat you very nice to me. Like, you know, you ask them a question and they just assume you should know.

C-Town... that thing used to be nice. But now... and there are two reasons that save you money.

Where we shop... it's crowded... Now, some of the stuff that they have there, it could probably be a little better, but... it's like I said, it's what's affordable for us.

Budget constraints

As the reason for shopping in particular stores...

The prices at Shoprite are phenomenal. That's why I shop there. You can get two big, huge slices of pizza, with grilled eggplant, roasted red peppers and a can of soda for like $3.50. It's good quality stuff.

Walmart... it's extremely affordable. That's why I used to shop there.

... or as a barrier to shopping elsewhere.

It feels like it's more affordable... like... you know, like you understand what I'm saying? I also don't want to make it sound too... but that's the way it feels.

Family needs

I like a big chicken. I do crockpots. I do all that. But then they get tired, they want something different.

I prefer to cook my own food but, for my daughter and my husband, they don't necessarily see the healthy food that I'm eating, so that means, I'm going to try to feed them the kind of food that we would eat. So then we go to Fairway or Trader Joe's for meat. So even we go there... to get meat.

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My kids like to eat!
Multiple factors interacting

My daughter is big. She's bigger than me, now. You want to try to eat healthy for your child... but times, you're eating chicken, see that's all Money can afford... I want my daughter to lose weight. But in order for her to do that, I have to be able to afford healthy foods to fill her up...

So if I go getting Perdue chicken because it's healthier, you know, my kids, they like to eat. Now they're only gonna get one chicken leg. Cuz they've used to getting two. But now, if I gonna spend $10 on a pack of Perdue, I gonna cut their chicken out.

Food banks are good, but a lot of these stuff, don't be fresh... Sometimes you get the bread, it's got mold... When I see something like that, I'm like, oh, now I can't eat that. I have to throw away a lot of food and take away from the bill and just go and buy groceries.

What we learned

- Experiences of discrimination
  - They're like, "Do you have money for that?"
  - We get people looking at you like, "What are you doing here?"

- Perceived unsafe environments were reported as disincentives to shopping at particular stores.
  - I live between two Shopr... I'm not going to go to that because I'm uncomfortable there... it's got mold... I won't go to that Pathmark because I'm uncomfortable there...

- Some participants avoided stores due to such experiences and perceptions:
  - Others pushed through barriers to satisfy family food priorities.
  - Before I started going to Trader Joe's, I thought it was going to be all white people, but it's not... I would have been assuming all these years... I'm just trying to get some food in my house... I didn't care who's in there.
Discussion

- Childcare workers have complex, heterogeneous histories, practices, and perceptions regarding food.

  A lot of us want to eat right like everybody else... but... of course... but it’s hard... it’s hard. Other money issues... or being looked at a certain way... you don’t feel comfortable.

- Understanding and supporting their healthy food access could both reduce nutrition disparities and strengthen their effectiveness in implementing childcare center policies.

Where do we go from here?...

- Continue to seek inclusion of more voices, have not yet reached saturation.

- Explore a concept from architecture - “threshold fear” – as a possible mechanism for racial disparities in perceived access to a full range of food retailers

- Use GIS to explore geographic access and barriers to different food retailers, in light of home and work locations.

- Plan to develop a quantitative instrument to explore findings and relationships among constructs in a larger sample.