

SCHOOL FOOD ENVIRONMENT SURVEY IN CANADA

Executive Summary

Background

Poor diet quality is among the leading causes of morbidity and mortality in Canada and globally. Food environments, comprised of the structural, economic, political, and sociocultural factors that influence food choices, play a major role in shaping diets at a population level. School food environments have been identified as a key point of intervention to support healthy dietary patterns among students of all ages.

Methodology

The primary objective of this study was to benchmark and evaluate school food environments in Canada in 2023-2024 using an internationally adapted framework. A random sample of 112 schools from small, medium and large population centres participated in an online self-reported survey of school food environments completed by one administrator or teacher. The online survey included six sections: 1) School demographics; 2) Food services available in schools; 3) Foods and beverages available in schools; 4) Food and beverage marketing in schools; 5) School food policies; and 6) School food programs.

Results

Most schools in the sample (89%) either developed their own school food policy or adhered to their province's or school board's food policy, and 63% of all schools indicated that they followed standards that defined what foods and beverages were allowed to be sold in their school. Despite these policies, nearly all schools (82%) reported selling or serving at least one beverage option containing free or added sugar on a regular basis (\geq one time/week). Schools offered on average 2.1 (SD 1.9) of 9 possible sugary drink options and 2.4 (SD 2.1) of 10 possible less healthy food options, and there was no significant difference in the number of options available between schools with and without food and beverage standards. It was common for schools to report using less healthy foods and beverages for special occasions, such as fundraising activities (57%) or to reward students (49%). Most schools (83%) reported they did not have less healthy food marketing in their school, and schools that had a policy restricting less healthy food marketing less frequently reported unhealthy food marketing than schools that did not have a policy ($p=0.034$). Most schools had at least one type of school food program in place (93%), and 63% had a school food program that was free and universally available to all students daily.

Conclusion

Results from this study highlight current strengths and gaps in Canadian school food environments. Although most schools reported that they had a written school food policy and/or had a policy that restricted what foods and beverages were allowed to be sold in their school, these policies may not always translate into the provision of fewer less healthy food and beverage options.

Implication for policy

Schools should consider developing a comprehensive school food policy that addresses all aspects of the food environment, and that includes stronger nutrition criteria to determine what foods and beverages are allowed to be sold or served on school grounds.

INFORMAS (International Network for Food and Obesity / Non-communicable Diseases Research, Monitoring and Action Support) Canada is a network of food environment researchers conducting research to understand current Canadian food environments and searching for innovative ways to help create healthy and supportive environments.

This research was informed by the research and monitoring framework proposed by INFORMAS to measure food environments across a variety of areas, including school food environments.



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