



Corner Stores: The Perspective of Urban Youth

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ABSTRACT

Objective We examined the perspectives of low-income, urban youth about the corner store experience to inform the development of corner store interventions.

Design Focus groups were conducted to understand youth perceptions regarding their early shopping experiences, the process of store selection, reasons for shopping in a corner store, parental guidance about corner stores, and what their ideal, or “dream corner store” would look like. Thematic analysis was employed to identify themes using ATLAS.ti (version 6.1, 2010, ATLAS.ti GmbH) and Excel (version 2010, Microsoft Corp).

Setting Focus groups were conducted in nine kindergarten-through-grade 8 (K-8) public schools in low-income neighborhoods with 40 fourth- to sixth-graders with a mean age of 10.9±0.8 years.

Results Youth report going to corner stores with family members at an early age. By second and third grades, a growing number of youth reported shopping unaccompanied by an older sibling or adult. Youth reported that the products sold in stores were the key reason they choose a specific store. A small number of youth said their parents offered guidance on their corner store purchases. When youth were asked what their dream corner store would look like, they mentioned wanting a combination of healthy and less-healthy foods.

Conclusion These data suggest that, among low-income, urban youth, corner store shopping starts at a very young age and that product, price, and location are key factors that affect corner store selection. The data also suggest that few parents offer guidance about corner store purchases, and youth are receptive to having healthier items in corner stores. Corner store intervention efforts should target young children and their parents/caregivers and aim to increase the availability of affordable, healthier products.

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LACK OF ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE, HEALTHY FOOD IN low-income neighborhoods has been well documented.¹⁻⁷ Corner stores (also known as *bodegas* in parts of the country) are part of the urban landscape serving as convenience stores for children and adults in communities where there are few supermarkets. These stores occupy relatively small square footage (≤ 200 sq ft) and sell predominantly energy dense, low-nutrition items (eg, candy, chips, and sugar-sweetened beverages). Corner stores are often located within a few hundred feet of schools and after-school programs.⁸⁻¹⁰

Low-income urban youth spent slightly more than \$1 for more than 350 kcal per purchase in a study of 833 Philadelphia, PA, youngsters,¹¹ and almost \$4 per day among 242 Baltimore, MD, youth at corner stores.¹² In the Philadelphia study, approximately 42% of students shopped at corner stores twice a day and 53.9% report shopping once a day. The

most frequent shoppers (28.8%) shop two times a day, 5 days per week.¹¹ In the most recent and largest study to date, urban children spent \$1.61 for 476 kcal at each corner store purchase.¹³ An increased availability of stores near schools has been associated with an increased body mass index among youngsters.^{9-12,14} Given these data and the high rates of childhood obesity among low-income minority youth, obesity prevention efforts in urban settings have begun to focus on the corner store environment and its significant influence on energy intake.

Most corner store research has focused on quantitative factors such as store inventory and individual purchases.^{6-13,15-18} These studies, which were mostly conducted in corner stores in urban areas, show that families shop at corner stores for processed foods on a regular basis to help meet their food needs.¹⁶ The qualitative data that do exist have focused on corner store owners' perceptions of select topics such as the incorporation of the revised Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children package^{17,19} and an assessment of advertising and product placement.¹⁸ As Gittelsohn and colleagues²⁰ suggest, more research is needed to determine the best combination of interventions for small-store trials. Surprisingly, we are not aware of any study that has examined youth perspectives

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about the corner store experience. Such data are critical for informing intervention efforts.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the perspectives of urban youth about the corner store experience, including why youngsters shop at corner stores, how they choose these stores, and the factors that influence their purchases.

METHODS

Participants

Nine focus groups were conducted in nine kindergarten-through-grade 8 (K-8) public schools in Philadelphia during 2008. These focus groups were part of a randomized trial (Healthy Corner Store Initiative study) in 10 schools and 24 corner stores to evaluate a healthy corner store intervention on students' food and beverage purchases. Students were followed starting in fourth to sixth grades (baseline) through sixth through eighth grades (ie, 2 years). This age group was selected because students are young enough to recall their early corner store shopping experiences and old enough to participate in focus groups and to complete surveys about their eating behavior.¹⁷ The focus groups were conducted before the start of the intervention. Eligibility criteria for schools in the initial study were: kindergarten through eighth grade, $\geq 50\%$ of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals, and proximity (≤ 4 urban blocks) to ≥ 2 corner stores. Schools were located throughout Philadelphia. The average free or reduced-price meal eligibility rate across the 10 schools was $82.1\% \pm 7.4\%$. Most students in the schools were black (54.0%) or Hispanic/Latino (22.9%). The focus groups were conducted before any intervention occurred.

Eligible participants for this study were in grades four through six from 9 of 10 schools in the larger study. One school did not participate due to a lack of recruitment assistance for the groups from school administration. Consent and assent forms were sent home to all parents/guardians. The first 10 students in each school who returned their consent/assent forms were invited to participate in the focus groups. Students were excluded from the groups if their

teachers deemed them to have significant behavioral problems or would be unlikely to speak in a group setting. Only one teacher excluded a student due to a behavior problem. Forty students (10 boys, 30 girls) with a mean age of 10.9 ± 0.8 years participated in the study. Whereas more girls than boys participated in the focus groups, responses did not appear to vary by sex. The mean \pm standard deviation number of students participating in the groups was 4.4 ± 0.8 ; the range was three to six students per group. The small group size was conducive to all students participating in the discussion. The study was approved by Temple University's Institutional Review Board.

Focus Group Protocol

A focus group guide was developed based on a review of the literature and the desire to gather data on youth's perceptions about shopping at corner stores. The guide was developed and reviewed by the study team comprised of obesity researchers and nutrition interventionists. The focus groups explored five key areas, including youth's early experiences as corner store shoppers, how youth select stores, reasons for shopping at corner stores, parental guidance about corner store shopping, and what youth's ideal corner store would look like. Reviewers came to agreement on all questions (Figure 1).

Focus groups were held at the schools during the school day and were approximately 30 to 45 minutes in length. They were conducted by a moderator and co-moderator. In addition, there were two note-takers. One moderator conducted five groups; the other moderated four groups. The moderator explained to students that they would be discussing youth's thoughts and opinions about corner stores and the things they buy there. The moderator facilitated the discussion and the co-moderator assisted with managing behavior and addressing any interruptions. The groups were audiotaped and the co-moderator and note-takers took written notes. The audiotapes were transcribed verbatim, using notes from the co-moderator and note-takers to supplement the audiotapes. Any discrepancies in the notes were resolved by the

Opening questions

1. How often do you shop at corner stores?
2. Why do you usually shop at these stores?
3. What kind of snacks or drinks do you usually buy there?
4. Do you remember what grade you were in when you started buying snacks at the corner stores near here?

Key questions

1. Why do you think kids go to some stores and not others?
2. What do you like about the stores you and your friends go to?
3. Using the information from the answers that you just provided, if you could create your own store, what would it be like?
5. Who usually gives you money to buy snacks at the corner stores?
6. From the money that you receive, about how much do you spend in a day at the store? So on average, how much do you spend a day at a store, including both morning and afternoon purchases?

Debriefing

Do you have any additional comments and/or questions?

Figure 1. Focus group guide questions on perspectives of low-income, urban youth about their corner store experience.

Theme 1: Reasons youth select stores	Student quote
Product availability	Where I live, it's a lot of stores but I sometimes go to one certain store because they have like my favorite type of chips there and the other stores don't. So sometimes I would think some people go to certain stores because it has what they want, exactly what they want and the other stores don't.
	Like, the store on the corner, doesn't have a lot of types of ice cream, so I go to a different store because they have more variety of ice cream.
	I like the store that I go to because it's closer to my house, its closer, a block.
	Maybe that's the only store in the block that they can go to or maybe they can't go that far, maybe their parents don't let them go that far for other corner stores so they have to go to that one.
Prices	Some people go to different stores because some want different items that cost less. Like the iced teas, some of them are 75 cents and some of them are 65 cents at different stores.
	The thing about the prices because now prices are going up, like some chips are 35 cents in some stores and other stores they're still 25 cents. That's why people might go to a certain store because they are cheaper there than they are at other stores.
Store cleanliness	I like about the store that it's not dirty, it's not bitten up by mice.
Drug free	Some people go to other stores because like they might go to the one store but there are a lot of people running with drugs and alcohol, and stuff like that, and their mom doesn't want them to be around that so they just go to the store near their house.
Theme 2: Purpose of visit	
Snacks	Sometimes when I'm hungry and I think I'm starving I go there for a little while for a little snack.
	I just go in there to get a little bit of stuff, like chips and juice or something.
Buying items for others	Sometimes I go to the store because my dad needs something so he tells me to buy things.
	I go to the stores for my mom for like recipes stuff.
School meal supplement/ replacement	Some people think that the school lunches don't taste as good as what they eat at home and they use the corner stores as a back-up food thing.
Home food supplement	I went to the store cause the stuff they have at the store you don't have at your house and in the store sometimes they have things that you don't have in your house that you want to eat.
Social outlet	I don't really go to the corner store. I go with my friends so they could have company.
	Because usually their friends go there and you want to see your friends.
Theme 3: Parental guidance to youth	
	Usually my parents say not to buy a whole lot of candy because it has too much sugar and you'll get cavities.
	I don't get snacks every morning. I eat breakfast and then like at 12 or 1, I get a snack at home, and then at 3 or 4, I will go to the corner store and get something. Like it depends on how much money I have. If I have \$5, I just wasted \$2, if I have \$10, I would just waste \$1 or \$3, and I would save some of the money I have so I would not have to ask my mom or dad, so I can have it for money.
<i>(continued on next page)</i>	

Figure 2. Focus group themes and supporting quotes from nine focus groups with 40 fourth- to sixth-grade students in low-income neighborhoods: reasons youth select stores, purpose of store visits, parental guidance to youth, and descriptions of their dream store.

Theme 4: Description of dream store	Student quote
	I would make it have healthy food and a little junk food because usually kids go in stores they have gum and junk food, but adults go there too to get some healthy food. They have bread there. Like the corner store in school, they have bread, but they also have chips, soda, chocolate milk.
	The two things I would have in my store would be most likely healthy food and a little like in the store I would have like in the corners I would have chips and soda, I want a little bit but then rest of the store would be bananas, grapes, apples, and like cherries and bread.
	I would, in my store, some people would not be able to come to my store, because it would be mostly healthy things, it would have like a small size for nonhealthy things like chips, and a big side of apples and oranges and cereal and a lot of healthy things. No candy at my store, just water, 100% fruit juice and a whole lot of healthy things at my store.
	In my corner store, I would have already made hoagies and stuff for the teacher and all students that want a lunch to take to school, and like a cheap price, cause like in other stores they are very expensive.

Figure 2. (continued) Focus group themes and supporting quotes from nine focus groups with 40 fourth- to sixth-grade students in low-income neighborhoods: reasons youth select stores, purpose of store visits, parental guidance to youth, and descriptions of their dream store.

two note-takers. For participating in the group, youth were provided with a box lunch after the focus group because the groups were conducted during the lunch period.

Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed in the analysis of the data. Themes were identified through the process of coding, identifying, defining, and naming the themes. ATLAS.ti qualitative data management software (ATLAS.ti, version 6.1, 2010, ATLAS.ti GmbH) and Excel software (version 2010, Microsoft Corp) were used in analysis. ATLAS.ti was used to code the transcripts and identify representative quotes. Excel was used to organize descriptive statistics and ATLAS.ti output (code lists and resulting themes). Two members of the team who were not present at the focus groups read each focus group transcript and assigned codes independently. Codes emerged from key words and phrases that frequently appeared in the transcripts. One person coded the responses; a second team member verified the codes independently. Any disagreement was resolved by discussion.

Youth comments were grouped into 46 codes by frequency of response. A matrix was created recording all statements related to each code and the number of groups in which each statement was made. The number of statements per code ranged from 7 to 44 for the nine focus groups. Researchers discussed the meaning of the codes and discerned which themes were most common and the number of focus groups in which they appeared. Most of the comments were coded for why youth shop at corner stores and why they chose certain stores to frequent. The remaining codes addressed the age at which youth started shopping, parental guidance, their dream store, and comments about spending at the store. The 46 codes were collapsed into five themes. Codes that did not fit in one of the five themes were discussed by researchers to determine whether they represented areas of interest. It was

determined that there were a small number of outliers that did not merit further analysis. All codes that represented dominant themes were analyzed. Researchers reviewed all themes and codes to ensure the themes adequately reflected the codes and to compare frequency of responses across focus groups.

RESULTS

Age Youth Started Shopping

Youth reported going to corner stores with family members at an early age. Whereas a small number recalled shopping without a family member by first grade, these fourth-through sixth-graders reported shopping at corner stores with older siblings or caregivers and indicating a preference about what they wanted by this age. Additional fourth-through sixth-graders reported that, by second grade, they had shopped without a family member, and by third grade, many of those commenting recalled they were autonomous shoppers purchasing their own snacks and beverages.

Store Selection

The most important factor in youth's store selection was the type of items stores sold (Figure 2). Many youth (mentioned in nine focus groups) reported that the specific products sold in stores were a key reason they choose a specific store. When discussing the importance of a store's products, youth most often mentioned being able to find a variety of their favorite products, such as sandwiches or ice cream, at their chosen store. When they mentioned specific aspects of the products that led to store favorites, youth mentioned the taste of the product; freshness of the product, including expiration dates; or that the store sold healthy items such as fresh fruit.

The next most common reasons were store location (mentioned in nine focus groups) and product prices (mentioned in six focus groups). Most youth shop at stores

that are within a block or two of their home or school, usually frequenting stores on their way to and from school. Youth were most likely to choose stores with lower prices. Other reasons youth discussed included store staff who were trustworthy, kind, and nonjudgmental (mentioned in six focus groups), along with store cleanliness (mentioned in three focus groups), and a drug-free environment (mentioned in three focus groups) (Figure 2).

Reasons for Shopping at Corner Stores

There are multiple reasons why youth shop at corner stores (Figure 2). The predominant reason mentioned by youth was to purchase snacks and drinks (mentioned in nine focus groups). The second most frequently mentioned reason was to buy food for others (mentioned in six focus groups), followed by purchasing food for breakfast or lunch to replace, or supplement, what is served at school (mentioned in three focus groups). By the time youth are in grades four through six, most youngsters go to stores with friends or in a small group. A few youth mentioned shopping at corner stores to socialize and to buy foods they did not have at home (mentioned in three focus groups).

Parental Influence

A small number of youth said their parents influenced their corner store shopping, including parents telling them not to buy too much junk food and to buy healthy things instead (Figure 2). One young person mentioned that his or her parents instructed him not to spend too much money at the store. Whereas parents give youth money on a regular basis, most youth did not report receiving guidance from their parents. Youth frequently refer to their expenditures on food and drinks at corner stores as “wasting” money, a term that seems synonymous with spending money (Figure 2).

Dream Store

When youth were asked what their dream corner store would look like, a majority mentioned wanting a combination of healthy and less-healthy foods at the stores (mentioned in nine focus groups). Youth acknowledged that they would like chips and soda to be available for purchase, but also wanted to be able to buy fresh fruits and vegetables and to have food available that their parents want to buy, which was described as being mostly healthy. Some youth even suggested that stores should sell mostly healthy foods (Figure 2).

DISCUSSION

There were several principal findings from this study. First, youth report going to corner stores to purchase snacks and beverages with family members at an early age. By second or third grade, a growing number of youth report beginning to shop autonomously. Shopping patterns are established at a young age and appear to increase as youth gain autonomy. The few published corner store interventions have targeted middle school youth.^{11,12} Given the very young age at which youth start shopping, it is vital to target shopping behaviors as early as kindergarten when shopping patterns are being developed. Additional research is needed into the shopping patterns of these very young consumers and the role of older siblings.

Second, most youth shop at corner stores to buy snacks and drinks. Whereas some youth reported shopping at stores because they were hungry or to buy food for their families, others reported buying something small as a treat. Several students commented on purchasing food in corner stores as a backup to school meals if they do not like what is being served. Youth also reported shopping at stores to visit with their friends as a social outlet. Some schools are banning students from bringing unhealthy food and drinks into school by developing “no junk food policies”^{21,22} that may help to impede students from consuming foods purchased at the corner stores in place of school meals. Efforts to ensure that the meals offered in schools are as desirable as possible, that positive marketing is employed, and that nutrition education programs educate students on healthy snack and drink purchases may help to alter corner store shopping patterns.²³ Similarly, efforts to increase the availability of healthy snacks and drinks in corner stores; marketing these healthier items, including the use of discounts and subsidies; and providing nutrition education on making healthy snack choices may also lead to improved dietary choices.^{16,18}

Third, the most important factor in youth's store selection is the specific items stores sell, followed by location and price. It is not surprising that, especially among low-income youth, price plays a significant factor in youth's purchases (mentioned in six focus groups). Focus group participants made decisions where to shop based largely on product availability and price. Youth reported that as little as \$0.10 can sway their decision of what to buy and where to shop. Although fresh fruit and vegetables and other healthy foods may cost more than candy and packaged snacks, youth suggested it is important for corner store interventions to ensure that healthier foods are available and comparably priced with less healthy foods whenever possible. The marketing of healthier food and beverages can also play a role in encouraging youth to buy healthier products.^{16,18}

Fourth, youth reported that parents gave their children money to purchase food at corner stores on a regular basis, but seldom advised them what to purchase.¹² Corner store interventions provide a unique opportunity to provide parents with information on what their children typically purchase at these stores and to encourage them to provide guidance on the consumption of meals at home and at school, in lieu of the commonly purchased chips and sugar-sweetened beverages from corner stores. There is a paucity of studies on parents' views toward their children's corner store purchases. Parental knowledge and attitudes about youth's corner store shopping, reasons parents do not offer advice on what to purchase, and the potential effect of providing guidance on youth purchases are potential areas for study.

Fifth, when asked about their dream store, a majority of youth said they wanted healthier options. Most youth comments referred to the appeal of having a mix of healthy foods along with less-healthy ones. Whereas this may have been a socially desirable answer, youth seemed to genuinely express a wish to have healthy choices at the stores. Because most stores offer both healthy and unhealthy products, marketing strategies are key components of interventions targeting youth.¹⁸ Increasing the shelf space of healthier items and placing them with fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy snacks at the front of the store, along with pricing

and promotional strategies, may help address youth's spoken desire for healthy items in corner stores. Youth also expressed an interest in having healthier foods available for their families. They were keenly aware of their family's food needs and reported wanting a variety of healthier foods in addition to their usual snack food purchases.

Limitations to our study included the small sample size and use of convenience sampling. The sample size, narrow grade band, sex imbalance, and specific urban setting may limit generalizability of the findings. Future research should include additional grade bands, varied geographic settings, and a larger sample size, and equal sex representation. Direct observation of corner store shopping patterns would also increase our study's validity.

CONCLUSIONS

To our knowledge, this is the first study to assess youth's perceptions about the corner store experience. It was conducted among low-income, high-minority youth with a high degree of exposure to nearby urban corner stores. Low-income and minority youth have disproportionately high rates of obesity, making improving their food environment an important component of obesity prevention. Understanding the nature of youth's corner store shopping behaviors, the age at which most youth start shopping, and the role of older siblings can help inform interventions designed to improve youth's purchasing and the corner store environment. Attention to marketing healthier corner store food and beverages, working with schools to ensure that school meals are as desirable as possible, and providing parents with information so they are better able to guide their children's corner store purchases are topics for future research to promote healthier food choices.

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STATEMENT OF POTENTIAL CONFLICT OF INTEREST

During the study, G. D. Foster served on the scientific advisory board for Con Agra Foods, Tate and Lyle, and United Health Group; currently, he is employed by Weight Watchers International, Inc. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the other authors.

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