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Cultural influences on public school nutrition along the US-Mexico border

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Statement of the Problem: Childhood obesity is a rampant and ever-present concern within the Hispanic community. Environmental, lifestyle, and cultural factors contribute to this concerning issue amongst adolescents. The long-term effects on children and adolescents contribute to increased risk of future cardiovascular, metabolic, and orthopedic disorders. The purpose of this study is to analyze the nutritional options and content provided to students amongst the largest high-, middle-, and elementary-school cafeterias along the Texas-Mexico border. In addition, this study aims to identify the discrepancy between healthy options offered by school cafeterias and students' preferences.

Methodology & Theoretical Orientation: The most popular meals were identified within the five largest high, middle, and elementary schools in El Paso county. The nutritional content was broken down into macro- and micro-nutrients and compared to the USDA daily nutritional requirements for children and adolescents. The discrepancy between students' choice and national nutritional guidelines was evaluated and analyzed.

Findings: The macronutrient profiles of the most common lunches in El Paso county public schools are largely consistent with USDA guidelines, but many academic institutions are lacking in micronutrient requirements. Furthermore, the most purchased meals among students were not the most nutritious options demonstrating the gap between students' choice and necessary nutritional needs.

Conclusion & Significance: Although the macronutrient profiles of El Paso public school lunch menus are largely congruent with accepted guidelines, most lunch menus lack acceptable micronutrients. Moreover, the study found that the most popular lunch items tended to be the unhealthiest. These findings are significant considering the child obesity epidemic, with Hispanic children being disproportionately affected. It is imperative to consider the effect of cultural and environmental influences on students' meal choices, and being a large border town with 79.5% of the population self-identifying as Hispanic, El Paso offers unique insight into such influences. Equipping students to make healthy choices and have healthy options available to them will prevent the development of future health concerns and disorders.

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