

Immigrant kids' diet is different, less nutritious than mom's

January 12 2016

The diet of Mexican immigrant children in the U.S. is different from what their mothers eat, according to Penn State sociologists, and that may mean kids are trading in the generally healthy diet of their moms for less nutritious American fare.

This change in children's diets may be related to other research that shows high obesity prevalence among children of Mexican [immigrants](#), said Molly Dondero, a postdoctoral fellow at the Population Research Institute.

"Children in immigrant families are growing up in very different nutritional environments and very different social environments than their parents," said Dondero, who worked with Jennifer Van Hook, professor of sociology and demography and director of the Population Research Institute. "Mexican diets, for example, are based much less on processed foods, although this, too, is starting to change."

The typical American diet, on the other hand, includes more processed foods and less fresh foods, as well as a reliance on fast food dishes such as hamburgers and pizza.

According to the researchers, who present their findings in the February issue of *Social Science and Medicine*, currently available online, the [dietary quality](#) of first generation youth is worse than expected compared to their mothers' dietary quality.

Parents typically play an important role in shaping their children's diet.

"There are primarily two ways that parents can influence a child's diet," said Dondero. "The first is through modeling—the children see what the parents are eating and take after them—and the second is through control, which can include what the parents prepare or permit their children to eat and even what they buy for the household."

However, the drift from their mother's diet suggests that other factors are influencing the change. One theory is that children of Mexican immigrants are trying to fit into their new culture and eating is one way to express this new cultural identity.

The researchers also found that the dietary quality of children of immigrants who live in enclaves—areas where many immigrants live—remain more similar to that of their mothers.

"Food is a big marker of identity, so perhaps children of immigrants feel pressured to fit in," said Dondero. "Determining why children are eating differently from their parents would be the next step in this research."

Dondero said the findings suggest that health education professionals may want to examine the audiences for their programs. Most healthy-[diet](#) programs for children are aimed at the [parents](#).

"Our findings suggest that typical obesity interventions and healthy eating initiatives, which tend to be parent-focused, may be less effective for Mexican immigrant families, or they may need to be better tailored to meet the needs of these families," she said. "Program developers may want to focus these initiatives on [children](#)."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Immigrant kids' diet is different, less nutritious than mom's (2016, January 12)
retrieved 5 May 2024 from
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-01-immigrant-kids-diet-nutritious-mom.html>

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