



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.

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