

Urban Action Lab

Building a Healthier Codman Square

Spring 2023

In the early 1900s, Codman Square was a multi-religious neighborhood with a growing business district and bustling streets. Mixed-used buildings lined the streets with lively storefronts on the ground floor and one-story apartments above. The creation of the Southeast Expressway in 1959 gave people easy access to the suburbs, so many Codman Square residents migrated outwards. As a result, the community was left to contend with disinvestment through the 1980s. Many of Codman Square's vacant historic buildings were burned down by arsonists, which accelerated urban blight. Fortunately, the Codman Square Health Center, established in 1979, and the Codman Square Neighborhood Development Corporation, founded in 1981, encouraged community reinvestment. While the community still faces a range of issues, there are now organizations actively working to elevate the standard of living for the residents.

The Boston College Urban Action Lab, in conjunction with the BOLD teens, has conducted research and suggested methods for increasing access to healthy food in Codman Square. The Codman Square Business District currently has multiple fast-food restaurants and bodega-style restaurants lining the main street. There are two grocery stores, both of which provide relatively affordable options for healthy food and produce. Residents of Codman Square have expressed interest in more dine-in restaurants and other shops where people can convene. It is critical that we increase awareness of existing healthy food options and include new policy suggestions to increase access to healthy food in Codman Square.

In 2019, Mayor Wu introduced an ordinance regarding good food purchasing standards in Boston, in which she outlined specific requirements and standards for food production and distribution. The requirements included supporting producers who eliminate or reduce pesticides, fertilizers, and genetic engineering; conserve water; protect biodiversity; and reduce energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. The city of Boston recognizes the inequities in food access, and city officials are dedicated to improving the city's food operations and ensuring humane and healthy practices. The Bold Teens want to translate that progress to a local level.

Research

Observational / Experimental Studies on Healthy Food Consumption

We have analyzed peer-reviewed studies that explore the efficacy of different health-based initiatives to craft effective policies that will improve health outcomes in the Codman Square community. Information from these studies and input from the BOLD Teens will guide our courses of action to promote healthy food consumption. This report focuses on three secondary sources and their corresponding studies.

The first source is from Mayne et al. and serves as a review of 37 experiments on diet and physical activity carried out between 2005 and 2013. Eighteen of these experiments focus on nutrition and diet, eight of which evaluate the effectiveness of nutrition labels in reducing high-calorie food consumption. Six of these eight studies found nutrition labeling to have no substantial impact on food purchasing. The ten remaining studies concluded that regulatory measures such as trans fat bans and decreased availability of sugary drinks effectively reduce caloric intake at restaurants and within schools. The studies regarding increased physical activity indicated that improving local infrastructure is the most effective intervention strategy. For example, schools with recently renovated playgrounds had higher rates of physical exertion among students than schools with dated recreation spaces. Furthermore, at the community level, constructing safe and functional bike lanes increased physical activity among residents.

The second study, at two Coles Supermarkets in Melbourne, collected quantitative data from shoppers to determine the efficacy of skill-building and price-reduction interventions. The study used four randomly assigned test groups, including a control group. They found that the skill-building intervention, which included education on the advantages of healthy food and goal-setting for increased consumption of fruits and vegetables, did not affect shoppers' buying patterns. The price-reduction intervention, which gave shoppers a 20% discount on fruits, vegetables, and low-calorie drinks, significantly increased the purchase of fruits and vegetables. This increase, however, did not persist after the conclusion of the discount period and was paired with an increase in high-calorie soft drink purchases. The researchers surmised the ineffectiveness of the interventions to be a result of the advertising power of soft-drink corporations and the short duration of the study.

The third and final study, done in Forsyth County, NC, collected qualitative data from African-American and Latina women regarding their grocery shopping habits. The study discovered that most participants shop outside their communities at superstores because they have lower prices and access to goods other than food. It is important to note, however, that among the Latina women, there was a substantial subgroup that shopped at *tiendas* (local specialty grocers). A notable difference between the Latina and African-American participants was that the former often purchased fresh, whole fruits and vegetables, while the latter typically bought canned/frozen fruits and vegetables. Neither population spoke favorably of farmer's

markets. Both demographics complained that farmer's markets are often too far away, not transparent about how their product is handled, and do not accept SNAP or other food vouchers.

Examples of Policies that Promote Healthy Food Consumption

The Urban Action team plans on collaborating with existing businesses and organizations to encourage their participation in our mission toward creating a healthier Codman Square. Codman Square is a unified and supportive community, so proper communication with the existing businesses has the potential to produce tremendous benefits. There are many vacant and desolate lots on the main street of the Codman Square business district which could be redeveloped into healthy restaurants.

The organizations that would have the most significant impact would be the two grocery stores. In 2015, a 16-week study called the Healthy Checkout Counter (HCC) was conducted in the Netherlands. The first half of the study was a control period, and the second half was an intervention period. Typically, candy, chocolate, and gum are displayed near check-out registers, so this study replaced unhealthy foods with more nutritious options, such as pre-packed snack tomatoes and nut and cereal bars. Of the intervention customers, 41% noticed the HCC and 80% were satisfied or very satisfied with the intervention. The supermarket headquarters placed the HCCs in the most disadvantaged areas within the four major cities in the Netherlands. The experiment had very positive results, which indicates its potential success in Codman Square. Pre-packed tomatoes may not be the most popular option in Codman Square, but a questionnaire could be distributed to determine the healthier options people prefer most. Healthy alternatives could include fruits, vegetables, Nutri-grain bars, protein bars, or even just a sugar-reduced version of the chocolates and candies already there. For example, the brand Unreal Snacks serves as a healthier alternative to Reese's.

The second study, the Kick The Can campaign, created policy changes beginning with education. The residents of California consumed soda at an extreme rate, so this campaign sought to educate them on its harmful effects using a database displaying the sugary drink policy. Researchers achieved four policy changes in the form of senate bills: sugary drinks out of CA K-12 schools ([SB 677](#) and [SB 965](#)), milk and water as the default beverage options in restaurant kid's meals ([SB 1192](#)), the introduction of statewide soda tax bills (e.g., [SB 1520](#)), and the introduction of sugary drink warning label bills. (e.g., [SB 1000](#)). These policies increased regulations of sugary beverages and advanced the movement to tax sugary drinks. John Snow Incorporated (JSI) is an organization whose mission is to improve the health of underserved communities. The Boston Foundation (TBF) is another organization that seeks to improve obesity prevention, social determinants of health, and stress. Collaboration with other organizations, such as these, is vital because their support and the data they can provide will facilitate substantial and potentially long-term change.

Effectiveness of Fast Food Bans

The Urban Action team reviewed a study done in the city of Los Angeles to evaluate if fast food bans are an effective way of increasing healthy food consumption in Codman Square. In 2008, a fast food ban was introduced by Councilwoman Jan Perry that prohibited the construction of new fast-food restaurants in an area inhabited by a minimum of 500,000 low-income people. This ban targeted specific commercial districts of L.A. and restricted fast food restaurants to selected areas of Los Angeles. The ban aimed to undo decades of spot zoning and neglect in planning these communities and simultaneously address obesity and poverty. Government officials acknowledged that fast food is the only option for the low-income community because of its low cost. The City Council is attempting to attract more affordable healthy food choices such as sit-down restaurants, full-service grocery stores, and nutritious alternatives; however, the City Council's ambiguous definition of "fast-food restaurant" made it difficult for many places to open. The ban was passed unanimously, but it received opposition from the food industry and the public. Opponents claimed that this ban was unnecessary, a broad application of government authority, and that the government should not regulate where people choose to eat.

While other cities and towns have zoned restaurants for economic, environmental, or aesthetic reasons, L.A. appears to be the first to do it for health reasons. Author William Saletan wrote an article about the fast food ban, arguing that this was the beginning of food zoning. Saletan even contended that the government depicts poor people as incapable of free choice. Food apartheid is a system that divides people with abundant access to nutritious food and those who have been unjustly denied access to that healthy food. Saletan suggests that food apartheid is a serious issue in L.A., and he asserts that fast food franchises are only opened in the "white part of town" under the assumption that poor, minority communities are disproportionately vulnerable. Saletan argues that the helplessness attributed to the poor is exaggerated and that issuing a fast-food ban is a paternalistic way of solving the problem. On the contrary, a press release issued a week before the article reported that this ban helped develop diverse food choices.

Since the fast food ban was issued in South L.A. in 2008, new research has evaluated the effects of the food ban on the community. There are no significant differences in the share of new fast-food chain outlets, other chain restaurants, or large food markets. Approximately 10% of food outlets are new since the regulation, but there is little evidence that the overarching composition has changed significantly across the city. Data from the California Health Interview Survey shows that fast food consumption and obesity rates have increased from 2007 to 2012 in all areas. One positive development is a drop in soft drink consumption since 2007, however, that drop is of similar magnitude in all areas. This example of the L.A. fast food ban development is crucial to understand that banning fast food restaurants in Codman Square is most likely ineffective in promoting healthy food consumption.

Policy Suggestions for Codman Square

The nationwide obesity epidemic and the Bold Teens' concern about healthy food access are serious issues. To initiate significant, long-term change, we have to alter the mindsets of the citizens. The lack of healthy food options in Codman Square is a factor that inhibits the community's potential for improvement, so our proposal seeks to encourage healthy diets while also stimulating economic growth. With the needs and preferences of the Bold Teens and residents in mind and an understanding of effective and ineffective healthy food policies, the Urban Action Lab is proposing recommendations that incentivize healthy eating and increase access to nutritious food in Codman Square. Our policy suggestions include placing healthy foods on display at grocery store checkout counters, providing tax abatements for entrepreneurs to create *tiendas* or healthy food stores, revising and enhancing the farmer's markets, and marketing the events and food options in Codman Square through social media.

Placing healthy food options in Codman Square's checkout lines can significantly contribute to improving the community's health outcomes. By collaborating with local grocery stores and learning from successful initiatives like the Healthy Checkout Counter (HCC) study in the Netherlands, the Codman Square community can replace unhealthy snacks with a diverse range of healthy snacks that cater to different tastes and preferences. These may include fresh fruits such as apples, bananas, or grapes; pre-cut and packaged vegetables like carrot sticks, celery, or cucumber slices; whole-grain crackers or rice cakes; low-sugar yogurt cups or yogurt-covered raisins; trail mix or mixed nuts; dried fruit or fruit leather; and low-sugar, high-protein snack bars, such as KIND bars, CLIF bars, or RXBARs. A tailored approach based on community preferences can ensure the success of this intervention. Zoning regulations can be implemented to require all grocery and convenience stores to dedicate a percentage of checkout space to healthy food options.

Given the qualitative data provided by the Forsyth County study and Mayor Wu's pledge to improve healthy food access for those in underfunded communities, the team believes there is an opportunity to encourage the establishment of *tiendas* and community-member-owned restaurants through the use of tax abatements and subsidies for new establishments that provide fresh, healthy food. Codman Square has a substantial Caribbean population, so cultural influences will attract residents, create a healthier Codman Square, and provide much-needed economic stimulation. Another entrepreneurial initiative that residents in Codman Square could take is co-op establishments. In co-op establishments, various business owners decide to start their own small business, like a restaurant, as a team and split the profits, lowering the cost of leasing and maintaining the establishment.

Revising and enhancing the existing farmer's markets will increase access to healthy foods and enhance economic growth in Codman Square. Farmer's markets provide a venue for communities to socialize, support downtown districts, and help educate people to make healthier food choices. Locally grown food creates significant economic opportunities, provides health

benefits, and helps to reduce environmental impacts, but organic food prices are very discouraging to low-income families. Codman Square will strive for affordable prices at farmer's markets; however, they will also allow vouchers to be used to purchase goods, making these markets accessible and fiscally possible. Additionally, advertising these farmer's markets will attract more customers and incentivize healthy food consumption.

Codman Squares' diverse population offers a unique opportunity to host a range of social and cultural events that honor ethnic traditions, and social media can be used to publicize these events. Social media, specifically Facebook, Instagram, Tiktok, and Twitter can increase brand awareness, attract neighborhood residents and people from outside communities, and drive sales. Additionally, social media appeals to a younger demographic, bringing new innovative minds into the neighborhood. Social media has become one of the most essential methods of food marketing because it promotes the brand and product extensively and effectively to such a large and diverse audience. Marketing often advertises unhealthy products to select demographic groups, so taking marketing in the opposite direction and using social media to promote current and future healthy food options throughout the neighborhood will incentivize healthy eating and support small businesses.

Conclusion

The Boston College Urban Action Lab has partnered with the Bold Teens and done extensive research to discover the most effective policies to increase access to healthy food and encourage nutritious diets in the Codman Square Business District. The Urban Action team evaluated studies nationwide to determine which policies would be most compatible with the Codman Square Community's needs and preferences. We concluded that fast food bans and nutrition labeling were ineffective; however, more encouraging policies such as health food subsidies and healthy checkout counter substitutions successfully incentivized healthy eating patterns. The team will implement these practices by placing healthy foods at checkout counters in grocery stores, providing tax abatements for entrepreneurs to create tiendas or healthy food restaurants, enhancing the farmer's markets, and using social media for marketing the events and food options in Codman Square. These policies align with the goals of the Bold Teens and will cultivate economic growth in the Codman Square Business District.

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