

Analyzing the Prevalence of Ultra-Processed Products Sold À la Carte Among Elementary Schools in Houston, Texas

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Background

The USDA National School Lunch Program and School Breakfast Program provide nutritionally balanced meals to millions of children each year. Foods sold outside these meals ("competitive foods") must comply with USDA Smart Snacks standards. However, these standards do not address food processing or added sugars, allowing many ultra-processed foods (UPFs) to remain available in schools. UPFs have been associated with poor diet quality and chronic disease risk among children. This study examined the prevalence of UPFs and foods high in nutrients of concern among competitive foods sold in Houston elementary schools.

Methods

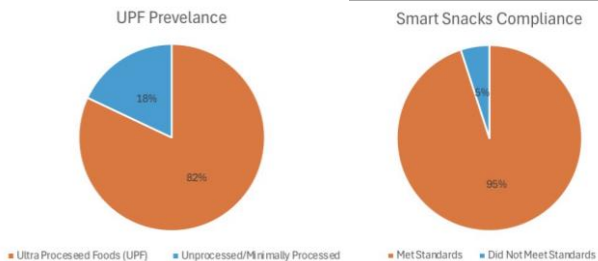
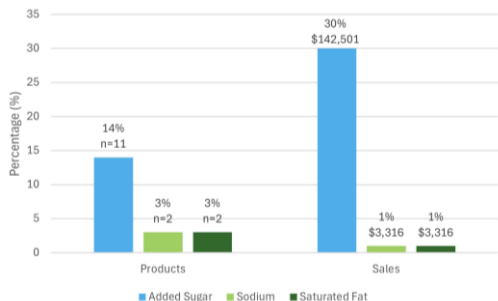
Analyzed 2024–2025 à la carte sales from the 50 largest Houston ISD elementary schools. Created a dataset of 78 food and beverage products using FOIA sales records and nutrition information from manufacturer databases, USDA FoodData Central, and other product sources.

Products were classified using:
NOVA Category 4 for ultra-processed foods
USDA Smart Snacks nutrient standards
FDA proposed "High" thresholds for added sugar, sodium, and saturated fat
Calculated the percentage of products and total sales within each classification.

Results

Among 78 à la carte foods and beverages analyzed, 82% were ultra-processed, accounting for 99% of total sales. Most products (95%, n=74) met USDA Smart Snacks standards; however, four products (5%) did not meet the standards. Added sugar was the most common nutrient of concern, with 14% of products exceeding the proposed FDA "High" threshold.

Data Visualization



Implications

Ultra-processed foods dominated à la carte offerings, accounting for 82% of products and 99% of sales, despite 95% meeting USDA Smart Snacks standards. This suggests current standards may not fully capture the degree of food processing.

Four products did not meet federally required Smart Snacks standards, highlighting a potential gap in compliance monitoring. Added sugar was the primary nutrient of concern, with 14% of products exceeding the proposed FDA "High" threshold. School nutrition standards could be strengthened by addressing food processing and added sugars.

Future research should examine whether these patterns occur in other U.S. school districts.

Acknowledgements

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References

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