

## The food environment in Latin America: a systematic review with a focus on environments relevant to obesity and related chronic diseases

Food environments may be contributing to the rapid increase in the prevalence of obesity occurring in most Latin American countries. Recognising that the food environment has more than one dimension, this study uses a framework adapted from The International Network for Food and Obesity/non communicable diseases Research Monitoring and Action Support (INFORMAS). The adapted framework includes the following dimensions of the food environment: food retail, food provision, food labelling, food marketing, food price and food composition. The framework is used to examine and characterise research studies on the food environment in Latin America, with the aim to inform public health policy and identify areas where further research is required.

81 studies were included in the systematic review: Brazil (60%), Mexico (18%) and Guatemala (8%). Other countries in South America contributed one in three studies to the review. Most studies (77.7%) focused on urban areas. The systematic review found that people had a diet of better quality with greater availability of healthy foods or healthy food outlets in their area. There was no evidence found of a link between the availability of convenience stores and fast food outlets with low quality diets or body weight. For marketing, a high prevalence of strategies were found to be aimed at children. Unhealthy products were more likely to be advertised than healthy regardless of TV channel or country. In instance where labelling was mandatory, some studies found countries (eg. Brazil) compliance with labelling laws to be low or mediocre. Even if labelling did comply with law, its impact on dietary choice depended on the design and readability.

Five opportunities were identified to better inform public health policy in the region: 1) more policy evaluations should be carried out, 2) study designs require improvement, 3) better exploration on role of food price is required, 4) more evidence on the effect of digital marketing and 5) more research on the role of worksite food environments for health.

Overall, the authors conclude that evidence is strong enough to inform policy regarding the marketing of unhealthy food to children and inadequate health claims. Nevertheless, research gaps remain, so increased research funding should be allocated to address poor diets, non communicable diseases and obesity.

Reference: Pérez-Ferrer C, Auchincloss AH, de Menezes MC, Kroker-Lobos MF, Cardoso LDO, Barrientos-Gutierrez T. The food environment in Latin America: A systematic review with a focus on environments relevant to obesity and related chronic diseases. *Public Health Nutrition*. 2019;22(18):3447-3464. [doi:10.1017/S1368980019002891](https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980019002891)