

Diet and Health Research at the USDA's Economic Research Service

Laurian Unnevehr
Director, Food Economics Division
Presentation to NIH Workshop
February 23, 2010

Overview

- What is ERS?
- Data Investments
- Four research questions

What is ERS?

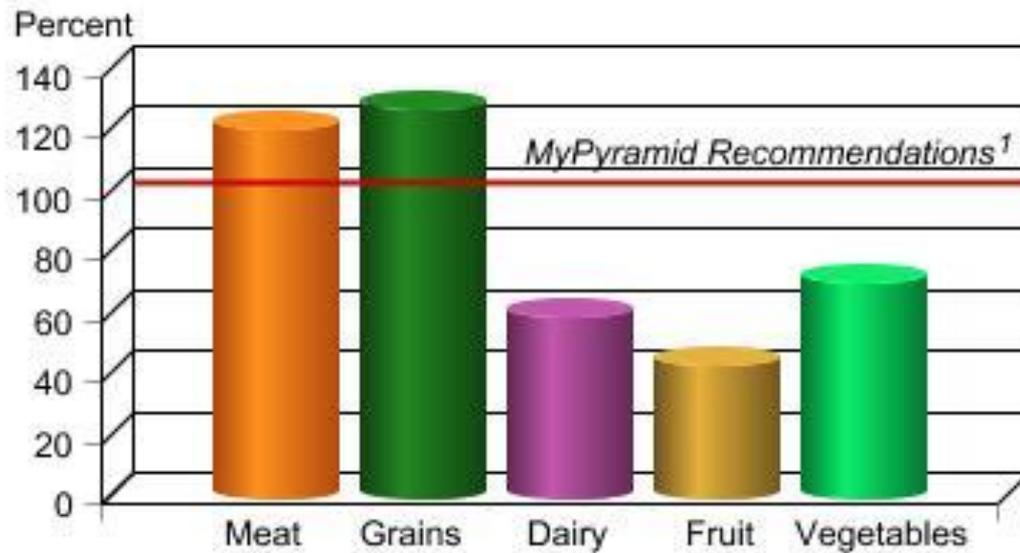
- Part of USDA's Research mission area
- Federal statistical agency
- Mission: ERS conducts a research program to inform public and private decision making on economic and policy issues involving food, farming, natural resources, and rural development.

Consumer Data Investments

- Maintain important data series about food choices and markets
 - Food Availability
 - Retail Prices
 - Food Expenditures
- Invest in new sources of information
 - Time Use
 - Diet Knowledge
 - Retail Purchases

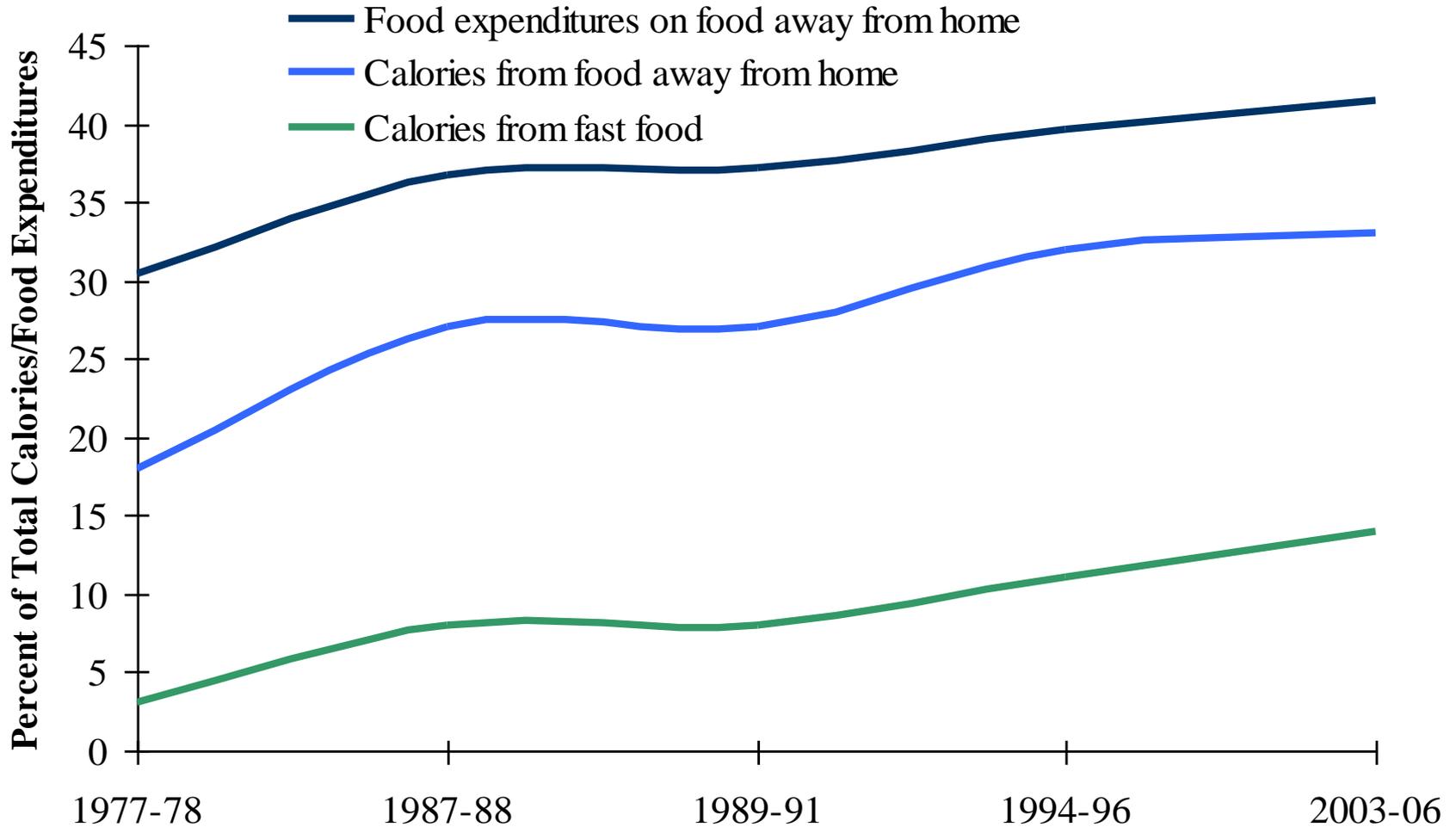
Food Availability and Diet Quality

American diets are out of balance with dietary recommendations



Note: Food availability data serve as proxies for food consumption.
¹2006 data based on a 2,000-calorie diet.
Source: USDA, ERS.

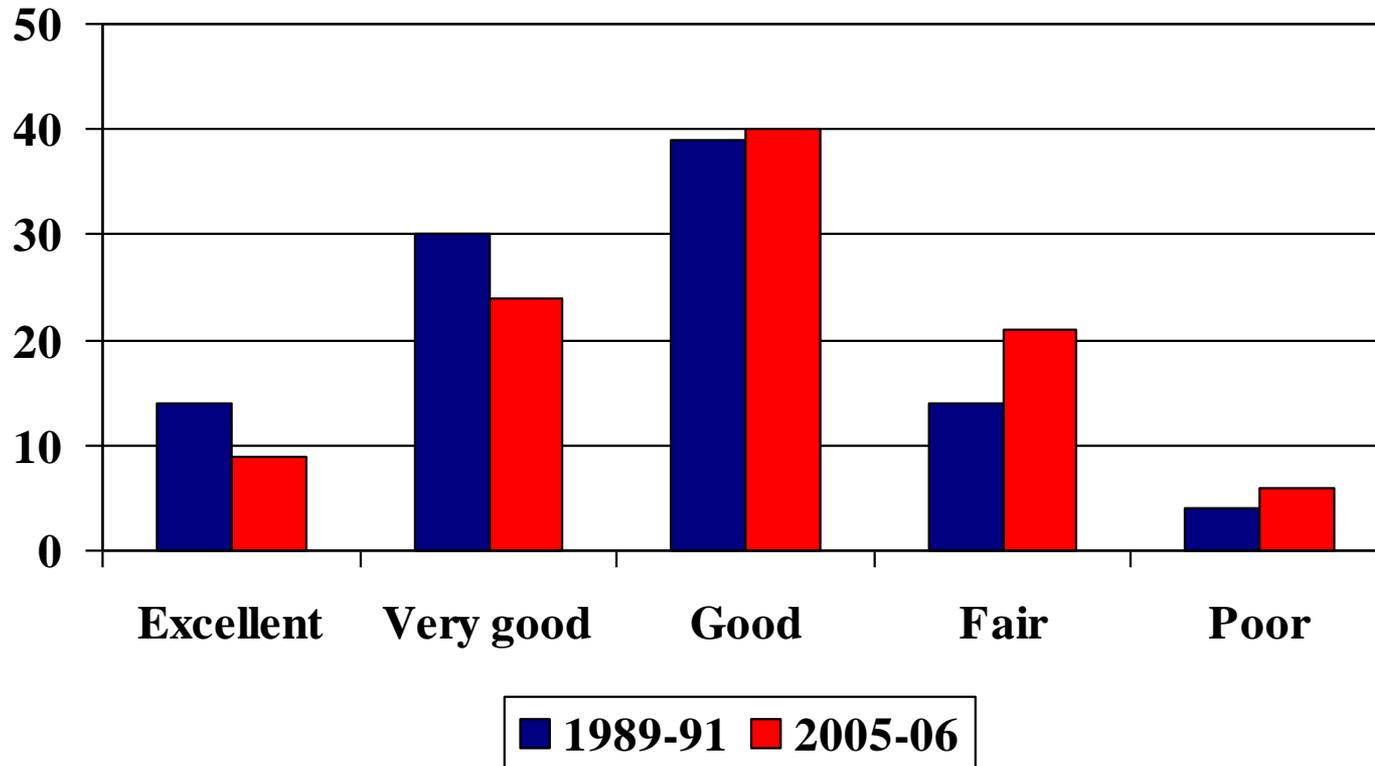
Food Away From Home



Diet Knowledge

**When asked “How healthy is your overall diet?”
fewer Americans rated their diets as excellent or very good**

Percent of adults 20 and older

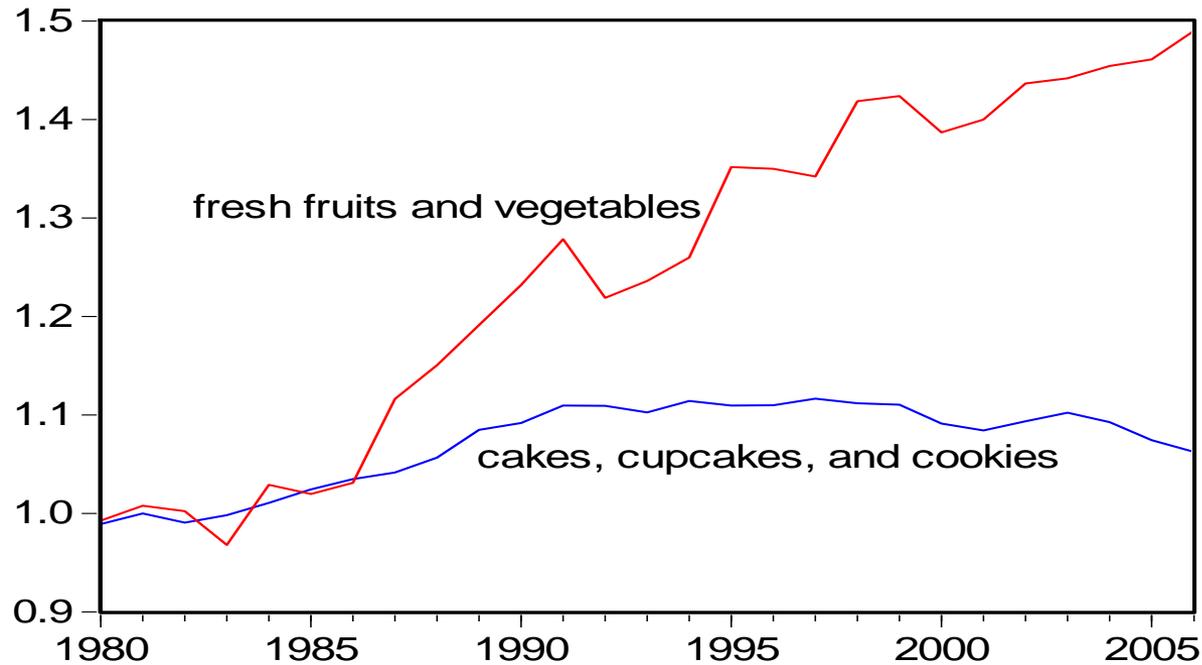


Source: Calculated by USDA, Economic Research Service using data from the 1989-1991 Continuing Survey of Food Intakes by Individuals and the 2005-06 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey.

How do consumers respond to changes in food prices, income, and information?

FOOD PRICES

Consumer price index for fresh fruits and vegetables and for cakes, cupcakes, and cookies (both relative to CPI-U for all items)



Source: BLS Consumer Price Index-All Urban Consumers data.

Fruits and Vegetables

- A 10% decrease in the prices of fruits and vegetables leads to a 2-5% increase in consumption by low income households
- A 10% discount through coupons leads to more frequent purchases and a 2-10% increase in consumption

Sweetened Beverages

- Taxes would cause consumers to substitute non-taxed beverages such as bottled water, juice, and milk
- A 20% tax on caloric-sweetened soft drinks, juice drinks, and sports drinks would reduce consumption by 24%
- It might reduce childhood overweight prevalence from 16.6% to 13.7%

What is the impact of food assistance programs on nutrition and health outcomes and how can these programs be more effective?

FOOD ASSISTANCE

Food Assistance and Obesity

- WIC participation is not associated with the rise in obesity in early childhood, but low income children are at higher risk for obesity
- SNAP is not associated with an increase in BMI or the likelihood of overweight for most participants; but may for women

Nutritional Quality of School Meals

Only 20% of schools meet the guidelines for fat content of lunches. A national survey shows the fat content of school lunches is lower with:



- **Promotion of fresh fruits and vegetables/local foods**
- **Providing lowfat milk only**
- **No french fries or dessert in the meal**
- **Using newer methods of meal planning from the school meal initiative in the 1990s**
- **No a la carte foods available (elementary)**
- **No vending machines (middle/high school)**

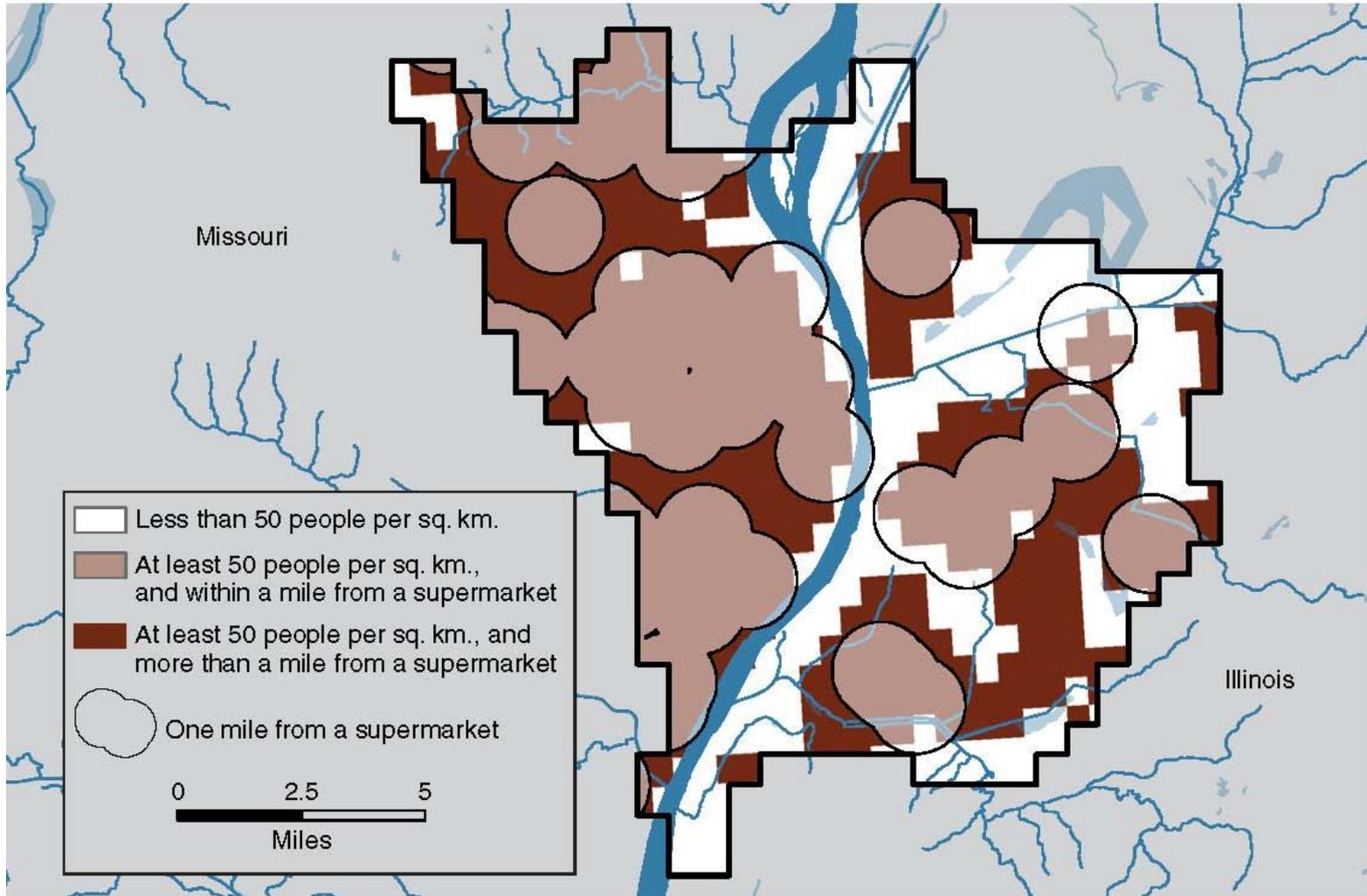
Source: Schools that Meet and Don't Meet USDA Total Fat Requirements for School Lunches; Newman et al. ERR87, 2009.

What is the role of food markets, food access, and the local food environment in food choices and health outcomes?

FOOD MARKETS

Food Deserts

Some densely populated, low-income St. Louis neighborhoods are more than a mile from a supermarket





Your Food Environment Atlas

Get a spatial overview of a community's ability to access healthy food and its success in doing so.

Assemble county-level statistics on:

- ✓ Food choices
- ✓ Health and well-being
- ✓ Community characteristics

[Enter Atlas](#)

 U.S. Department of Agriculture
Economic Research Service



FAFH and Diet Quality

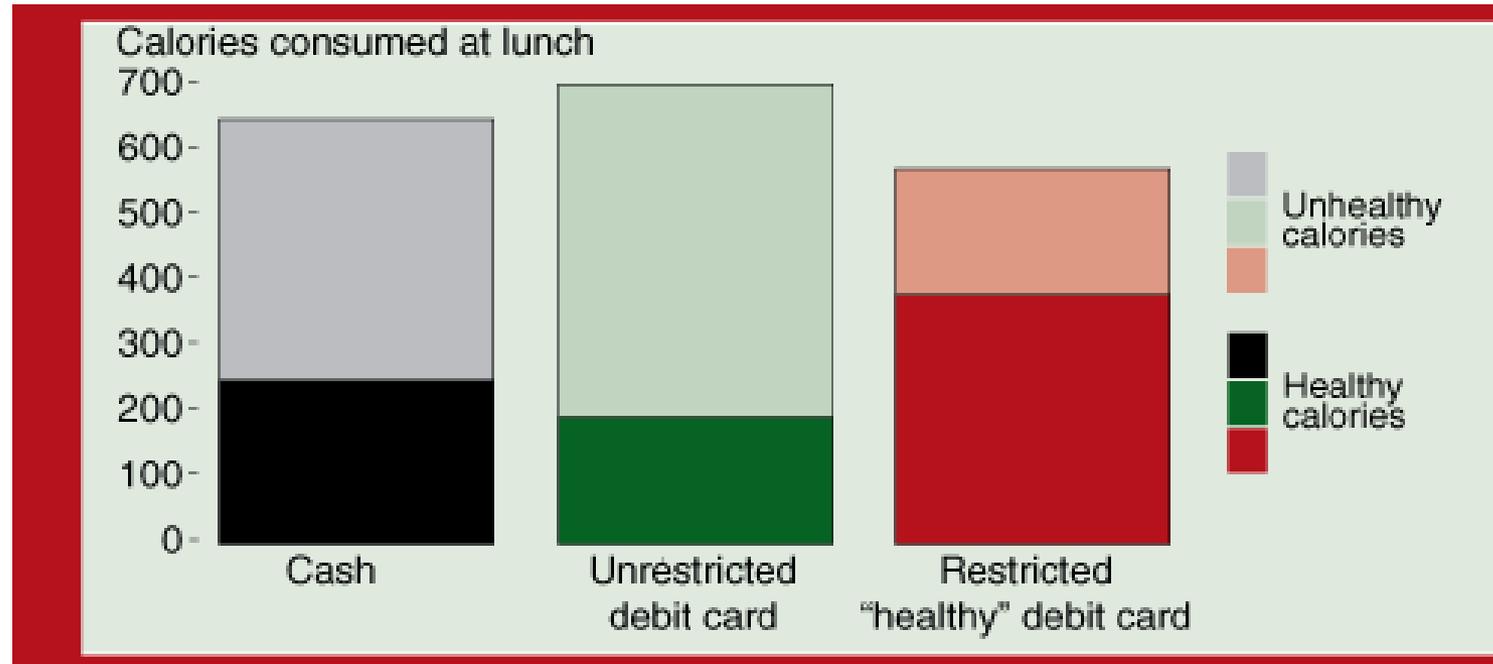
- Eating away from home associated with reduced diet quality and increased calories in many studies
- New data from NHANES support these associations
 - A meal away from home adds about 134 calories
 - Effect is larger for obese individuals

How can behavioral economics help us to understand consumer choices and to improve program and policy effectiveness?

BEHAVIORAL CUES

Using Pre-Commitment to Encourage Healthy Choices

Restricted card users ate fewer total calories, and more calories from healthy foods



Source: USDA, Economic Research Service.

Source: When Nudging in the Lunch Line Might Be a Good Thing, Lisa Mancino And Joanne Guthrie, Amber Waves, March 2009.

Other Behavioral Cues

- Information in restaurants
- Financial incentives for weight loss
- Stress and self-control

Behavioral Economics Workshop

- Incorporating Behavioral Economics into Federal Food and Nutrition Policy, Apr 15-16
 - Early Results: Findings from ERS Supported Behavioral Economics Research on Food Choice and Obesity
 - A Nudge in the Right Direction: Using Behavioral Economics and Targeted Incentives to Improve School Food Choices

THANK YOU!

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

[HTTP://WWW.ERS.USDA.GOV/BRIEFING/DIETQUALITY/](http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/dietquality/)