

Rural and urban teenagers differ in food choices and food perceptions

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Little is known of dietary patterns in rural Australia, and even less of food perceptions. We report here comparative data on these issues for urban and rural Tasmanian teenagers.

The data derive from a statewide survey (1) of students in years 7-10, that included 1189 'urban' and 893 'rural' students. 'Urban', in this context, means attending schools in the metropolitan areas of Hobart, Launceston, Burnie and Devonport (populations greater than 20 000); 'rural' means attending schools located in smaller centres (populations less than 10 000). The urban and rural samples were similar in gender and school-year distribution.

On a printed questionnaire, they reported their frequency of usage (as days per week) of 22 foods from different food groups, and also (using five-point scales) their perceptions of these foods, ie liking, healthfulness, parental usage frequency, friends' usage frequency. Statistical comparisons used t-tests, with $P < 0.01$ as the criterion of significance.

Rural students differed significantly from urban in average frequency of consumption of 13 of the 22 foods studied, with (inter alia) more frequent consumption of meat pies, hot chips and soft drinks and less frequent consumption of apples, orange juice, tomatoes and low-fat milks.

They had a significantly more optimistic view of the healthfulness of six foods (hot chips, meat pies, soft drinks, cheese, full-cream milk and non-polyunsaturated margarine). Perceived parental consumption frequency differed significantly between rural and urban students for 15 foods, mostly paralleling urban-rural differences among the respondents. Urban-rural differences were fewer for liking (four foods) and perceived consumption frequency of friends (three foods).

Multiple regression analysis showed that, among urban students, significant predictors of usage frequency were liking (22 foods), parental usage (22 foods), friends' usage (nine foods), healthfulness (six foods). Among rural students, significant predictors were liking (22 foods), parental usage (19 foods), friends' usage (four foods), healthfulness (only one food).

Our data suggest areas of concern among rural teenagers. They have less healthy food choices, apparently mirroring the adult behaviour they observe. They have less accurate perceptions of foods' healthfulness, but give little weight to health consideration in food choice. It is also noteworthy that their food choices seem less influenced by peer models.

1. Woodward DR, Ball PJ, Cumming FJ, Williams HM, Hornsby H, Boon JA. Adolescent usage of selected foods in relation to their perceptions and social norms for those foods. *Appetite* 1996;(in press).