

Exploring the Dietary Behaviors and Perceptions of African Immigrants:

A Qualitative Study of Nigerian and Congolese Immigrants

Oluwatosin Akingbule^{1,6}, Margarita Teran-Garcia^{2,3,4,6}, Olive Panumpabi^{5,6}, Reginald Alston^{1,6}

¹Department of Kinesiology and Community Health, ²Division of Nutritional Sciences, ³University of Illinois Extension, ⁴Department of Biomedical and Translational Sciences, Carle Illinois College of Medicine, ⁵Department of Psychology, ⁶University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL



Summary

African immigrants in the U.S. develop worse cardiometabolic risk profiles as they stay longer in the U.S. This change has been attributed to dietary acculturation. This study explores contextual factors associated with changes in dietary behaviors of recent immigrant families using focus groups interviews. Participants were recent Nigerian and Congolese immigrant adults. They discussed diet, meal preparation, and physical activity practices for their families. Thematic analysis of focus groups data showed that participants preferred and mostly consumed foods they were familiar with before migration (including African traditional meals), had the perception of “American food” as unhealthy, and reported that their school-age kids preferred Americanized over the traditional African meals. The findings will assist in development of culturally tailored nutrition interventions for African immigrants.

Objective

To explore contextual factors associated with changes in dietary behaviors of recent immigrant families from Nigeria and Congo.

Methods

- 5 online focus groups (3 in English and 2 with French Interpreter)
- Conducted September 2020- January 2021
- Participants (N=20; 95% female, mean age= 41 years) were Nigerian and Congolese immigrants (see Fig. 1)
- Recruitment was done from churches and through community leaders in Central and West Central Illinois
- Interview questions were partly adapted from previous study, reviewed by community stakeholders, and focused on dietary practices in the family
- Thematic analysis was conducted using NVivo version 12

Results

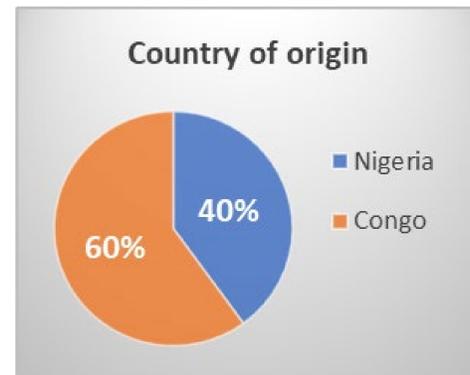


Fig 1: Country of origin of participants

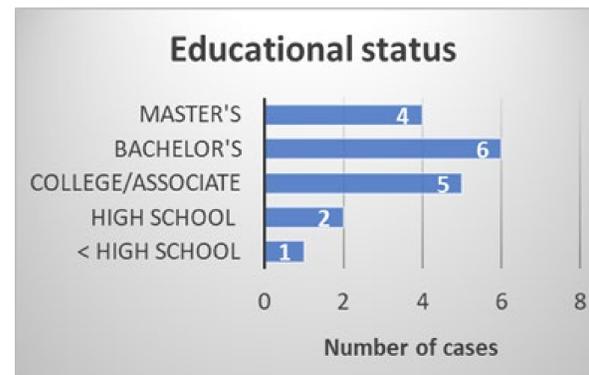


Fig 2: Educational status of participants

Key themes

Preference for African foods

Perception of “American food” as unhealthy

Kids’ preference for western diet

Preference for organic food products

Example quotes

“And with my husband... sometimes, when we talk, we say to each other, we have to keep our food,...we have to keep our diet.”

“Food here is too sugary and too salty. If you haven't bought something that's too sweet, be sure it will be too salty.”

“Sometimes we mix. The children are used to the food over here. They have even begun to sabotage the food of our home. So, to not leave them hungry, we are obliged to mix.”

“I get organic fruits. Even though it costs more, it's good... it has some taste, and I can trust it more.”

Conclusion

Key findings:

- African immigrants have a high level of awareness of the impact of diet practices on their health.
- The unique meal preferences of African immigrants suggest that nutrition education information and programming targeting African immigrants need to be culturally tailored.
- Kids’ preference for western diet could be a source of dietary acculturation for the family.

The findings will assist in the cultural tailoring of nutrition education intervention aimed at preventing obesity and related diseases among African Immigrants.

References

1. Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (2020) Mortality in the United States, 2018 retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/products/databriefs/db355.htm>
2. Commodore-Mensah, Y., Ukonu, N., Obisesan, O., Aboagye, J. K., Agyemang, C., Reilly, C. M., ... & Okosun, I. S. (2016). Length of residence in the United States is associated with a higher prevalence of cardiometabolic risk factors in immigrants: a contemporary analysis of the National Health Interview Survey. *Journal of the American Heart Association*, 5(11), e004059. doi: 10.1161/JAHA.116.004059.
3. Commodore-Mensah, Y., Ukonu, N., Cooper, L. A., Agyemang, C., & Himmelfarb, C. D. (2018). The association between acculturation and cardiovascular disease risk in Ghanaian and Nigerian-born African immigrants in the United States: the Afro-Cardiac Study. *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 20(5), 1137-1146. DOI: 10.1007/s10903-017-0644-y
4. Paxton, A., Pillai, A., Phelan, K. P., Cevette, N., Bah, F., & Akabas, S. (2016). Dietary acculturation of recent immigrants from West Africa to New York City. *Face à face. Regards sur la santé*, (13). . <http://faceaface.revues.org/1023>
5. Hammons, A. J., Villegas, E., Olvera, N., Greder, K., Fiese, B., & Teran-Garcia, M. (2020). The evolving family mealtime: Findings from focus group interviews with Hispanic mothers. *JMIR Pediatrics and Parenting*, 3(2), e18292. doi: 10.2196/18292

Acknowledgements

The “Abriendo Caminos” Research Team at University of Illinois Urbana Champaign. This study was partially supported by the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture, Hatch Project #ILLU-793-374 (to M. Teran-Garcia). Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

For more information, please contact
Oluwatosin Akingbule at oao3@illinois.edu