

Default Beverage Offerings with Kids' Meals across Online Ordering Platforms for Fast-Food and Full-Service Restaurants in New Orleans and Baton Rouge, Louisiana

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Key Findings

- Prior to the implementation of a New Orleans, Louisiana, ordinance requiring healthy beverage defaults with kids' meals, this study found that only 46% of online ordering menus for fast-food restaurants and 16% of those for full-service restaurants were in compliance with policy provisions.
- More fast-food than full-service restaurants met the requirements of the ordinance on restaurant websites/applications (62% versus 22%), Uber Eats (47% versus 9%), and DoorDash (31% versus 9%), although rates were similar on Grubhub (24-36%).
- Milk was consistently the most common default offering across restaurant types and online platforms (64-75%). By contrast, there was substantial variation in how frequently bottled water (19-70%) and soda (33-66%) were offered as defaults.

Introduction

As of 2021, food away from home represented 55% of U.S. food spending, of which 35% went to fast-food and 35% went to full-service restaurants.¹ Restaurants represent a key source of dietary intake for children and adolescents: in 2015-2018, 36.3% of children and adolescents consumed fast food on a given day, with fast food contributing 13.8% of their calories on a given day, on average.² This is of concern as eating at both fast-food and full-service restaurants is associated with higher intake of total energy, regular soda and sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) more generally, and sugar among children

and adolescents.³ Indeed, the majority of kids' meals offered at leading fast-food and full-service restaurants in 2014 failed to meet nutritional criteria,⁴ and SSBs consistently constituted 80% of children's beverages in chain fast-food and full-service restaurants from 2012-2015.⁵ This is particularly problematic as 65% of children and adolescents exceeded dietary guidelines for added sugars intake as of 2015-2016, with SSBs representing the top source of added sugars.⁶

In response to concerns about the nutritional quality of kids' meals, several voluntary programs such as the National Restaurant Association's Kids LiveWell initiative⁷ have been introduced, with mixed results for their impact.^{5,8-12} A number of jurisdictions have also implemented policies requiring default beverages offered with kids' meals to meet specific criteria.¹³ Studies evaluating jurisdictional policies have also found mixed results,¹⁴⁻¹⁸ with no study finding improvements or more than 54% of menus in compliance on online ordering platforms.¹⁵⁻¹⁸ Most of these evaluation studies focused solely on fast-food restaurants; only one of these included full-service restaurants¹⁴ and that one did not provide separate compliance estimates for fast-food and full-service restaurants. Another previous study that examined pre-policy data prior to implementation of a state policy also only included aggregated data from fast-food and full-service restaurants.¹⁹

Since January 1, 2023, restaurants in New Orleans, Louisiana, are required by ordinance to provide healthy beverage defaults (HBD; water, milk, or 100% juice) with kids' meals, with implementation of this requirement complemented by educational outreach to restaurants and the public.²⁰ Specifically, any restaurant that sells a kids' meal is required to make the default beverage with the meal one or more of the following: water (unflavored, uncarbonated); 1% or nonfat milk or nondairy alternative with no added sweeteners or flavorings containing no more than 130 calories/serving; or 100% juice (which may be diluted with water) with no added sweeteners up to 6.75 oz in volume. The current brief is based on baseline data collected from restaurant online ordering platforms as part of a larger evaluation of the New Orleans HBD ordinance. Specifically, this brief examines default beverages offered with kids' meals at fast-food and full-service restaurants across online ordering platforms.

Methods

Data were collected on online kids' meal offerings for restaurants sampled in New Orleans, the intervention site, and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, the comparison site, as part of the larger evaluation study of the New Orleans HBD ordinance. For the larger study, the sampling frame consisted of all licensed restaurants in New Orleans and Baton Rouge. A total of 343 potentially eligible restaurants were identified, including 153 in New Orleans and 190 in Baton Rouge. Eligibility criteria included operating in New Orleans or Baton Rouge and offering a kids' meal. Of these, a number were excluded through a pre-screening process prior to online data collection: 18 did not offer kids' meals on online menus, 111 did not include a beverage with the kids' meal, 11 were determined to not offer any online ordering platform under consideration in pre-screening, one was determined to be a duplicate listing of an already counted restaurant, two were field testing sites for data collection protocols, and one was located within a larger network of fee-based parks and a specific location for which to collect data could not be identified. This left 75 eligible restaurants in New Orleans and 124 in Baton Rouge. During online data collection and coding, another 61 restaurants were determined not to offer kids' meals with beverages through any online ordering platform under consideration or were duplicates of another restaurant on our list, and one could not be coded because it only included a vague mention of the drink included with the kids' meal. Compliance could not be determined on any platform due to missing milk or juice characteristics for another 9 restaurants. Finally, some restaurants did not offer online ordering through a restaurant website/

application (n=12), Grubhub (n=34), Uber Eats (n=27), or DoorDash (n=22), and compliance could not be determined for 5, 26, 18, and 28 restaurants on the respective platforms. The final sample included 79 fast-food and 32 full-service restaurants for analyses of restaurant websites/applications, 47 fast-food and 21 full-service restaurants for analyses of Grubhub, 60 fast-food and 23 full-service restaurants for analyses of Uber Eats, and 55 fast-food and 23 full-service restaurants for analyses of DoorDash. Restaurant type (fast-food versus full-service) was defined following NEMS-R criteria, with the exception that fast-food and fast-casual restaurants were combined for analysis following classification.²¹

Online kids' menu offerings were collected in December 2022 and coded using the Food Policy Program Fast-food Restaurant Kids' Meal (FPP-FFKM) audit tool, which provides highly reliable measures of kids' meal default beverage offerings (average percent agreement of 0.99 and average kappa statistic of 0.96 for online platforms).²² Default offerings were defined as those that were shown without any additional action required on the part of the consumer (i.e., not counting offerings shown after the consumer actively requests to see additional beverages). Default beverage offerings were coded into 18 mutually exclusive categories (e.g., milk, lemonade) and the compliance of default offerings with the New Orleans HBD ordinance was determined based on beverage category as well as milk flavoring, fat percentage, and calories and juice 100% status and size, where applicable. Differences in compliance by restaurant type were tested using Pearson's chi-squared test. All analyses were conducted in Stata/MP 18.0.

Results

Table 1 shows rates of compliance of fast-food and full-service restaurant kids' meal beverage offerings with the provisions of the New Orleans HBD ordinance prior to that ordinance taking effect. Compliance was more common for fast-food compared to full-service restaurants on restaurant websites/applications (62% versus 22%, $p<.001$), Uber Eats (47% versus 9%, $p=.001$), and DoorDash (31% versus 9%, $p=.04$), although it was comparable on Grubhub (36% versus 24%, $p=.31$). With the exception of fast-food restaurant websites/applications, it was notable that across all platforms and both restaurant types, fewer than 50% of restaurants complied with ordinance provisions prior to them taking effect.

TABLE 1 Overall Compliance of Kids' Meal Default Beverage Offerings with the Provisions of the New Orleans, Louisiana, Healthy Beverage Default Ordinance Prior to Implementation, by Online Ordering Platform and Restaurant Type

ONLINE PLATFORM	FAST-FOOD	FULL-SERVICE
OVERALL (n=241, 99)	46%	16%
Restaurant Website/Application (n=79, 32)	62%	22%
Grubhub (n=47, 21)	36%	24%
Uber Eats (n=60, 23)	47%	9%
DoorDash (n=55, 23)	31%	9%

Sample sizes for each row (in terms of numbers of restaurants across the sample in New Orleans and Baton Rouge, Louisiana) shown separated by commas. Differences in compliance by restaurant type (fast-food versus full-service) were statistically significant based on Pearson's chi-squared test for overall differences across platforms ($p<.001$), restaurant website/application ($p<.001$), Uber Eats ($p=.001$), and DoorDash ($p=.04$), although not Grubhub ($p=.31$).

Table 2 shows the prevalence of specific beverages offered as defaults with kids' meals by fast-food and full-service restaurants. Across online ordering platforms, milk (including both compliant and non-compliant milk; separate estimates for compliant and non-compliant milk were not computed due to small sample sizes) was commonly offered on both fast-food and full-service restaurant menus (prevalence of 64-75%). Juice (again, including both compliant and non-compliant juice) was also commonly offered across restaurant types and ordering platforms (48-72%). While bottled water was commonly offered in

fast-food restaurants (41-70%), it was not a typical offering in full-service restaurants (19-26%). Soda was offered in 48-66% of restaurants across restaurant types and ordering platforms, except for fast-food restaurant websites/applications, where soda was offered in 33% of restaurants. Tea/iced tea and regular lemonade were also commonly offered, with prevalence rates of 23-48% and 22-43%, respectively. Other beverages (e.g., artificially sweetened juice, combination drinks) were offered in 29-53% of restaurants.

TABLE 2 Types of Beverages Offered as Defaults with Restaurant Kids' Meals in New Orleans and Baton Rouge, Louisiana, by Online Ordering Platform and Restaurant Type

	Restaurant Website/Application		Grubhub		Uber Eats		DoorDash	
	FAST-FOOD	FULL-SERVICE	FAST-FOOD	FULL-SERVICE	FAST-FOOD	FULL-SERVICE	FAST-FOOD	FULL-SERVICE
Bottled Water	41%	19%	70%	24%	50%	22%	53%	26%
Milk^a	66%	66%	72%	67%	75%	74%	64%	65%
Juice^b	57%	59%	64%	48%	72%	57%	64%	48%
Soda	33%	66%	62%	48%	48%	61%	64%	65%
Regular lemonade	25%	38%	30%	33%	22%	43%	33%	39%
Sports Drink	8%	9%	4%	5%	5%	0%	5%	9%
Energy Drink	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Tea/Iced Tea	27%	38%	34%	29%	23%	48%	36%	30%
Other^c	29%	31%	49%	29%	40%	48%	53%	35%

N=79 fast-food and 32 full-service restaurants for restaurant website/application, 47 fast-food and 21 full-service restaurants for Grubhub, 60 fast-food and 23 full-service restaurants for Uber Eats, and 55 fast-food and 23 full-service restaurants for DoorDash, except where noted.

a Separate estimates for compliant and non-compliant milk not shown due to small sample sizes.

b Separate estimates for compliant and non-compliant juice not shown due to small sample sizes.

c Other beverages included artificially sweetened lemonade and juice, unsweetened tea or iced tea, black tea, tea and lemonade mixtures, sweetened and unsweetened tea mixtures, non-alcoholic mixed drinks (e.g., Shirley Temple, Roy Rogers), beverages of unknown brand (Mountain Blast), limeade, slushes, and frozen drinks.

Conclusion

This study shows that prior to implementation of the New Orleans HBD ordinance, baseline levels of compliance of online menu offerings of New Orleans and Baton Rouge restaurants were low, with less than half of restaurants meeting policy requirements across restaurant types and ordering platforms. The only exception was observed for fast-food restaurant menus posted on their own ordering websites/applications, where more than three-fifths of restaurants met policy requirements. Overall, across the

four online platforms, the proportion of full-service restaurants that met policy requirements was lower than the proportion of fast-food restaurants that did so. These results highlight the importance of future work examining factors that can improve kids' meal beverage offerings in restaurants, including online platforms, and the need for comprehensive evaluations that assess not only fast-food but also full-service restaurants.

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