

Are school meals too sweet? Results from a photovoice project in San Joaquin Valley

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools provided “grab & go” meals. In November 2020, parents from 7 school districts in California’s San Joaquin Valley (SJV), a rural region home to many Latino farmworkers, photographed the school meals they picked up for one week. In focus group discussions, **parents expressed concern** that meals were “full of sugar.”¹

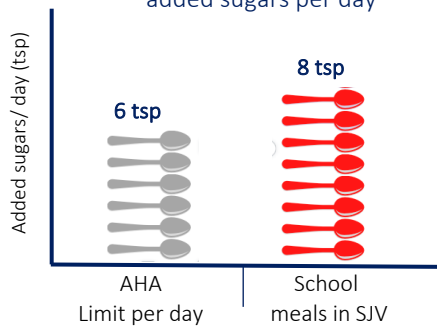
Aim: To leverage a photo documentation project to estimate the added sugar* in pandemic school meals.

Methods: We coded and quantified the added sugar content in all foods and beverages from the photographs the SJV school parents provided. We estimated the average amount of added sugar per day from school meals. We also identified the top sources of added sugars in school meals.

Results: Parents are correct- school meals are too sweet

- School meals contained **8 teaspoons (33 g)** of added sugar per day—two teaspoons more than the American Heart Association (AHA) recommended daily limit.
- **2 out of 3 days, school meals exceeded the AHA limit for added sugar per day.**
- The top sources of added sugars were breakfast items such as sweetened dried cranberries, pastries and bread, breakfast bars, pancakes, cold cereal, yogurt, and flavored milk.

SJV school meals contained, on average, **8 teaspoons** of added sugars per day



This SJV breakfast had **4 teaspoons more** added sugar than the AHA daily limit.



Cranberries: **5.5**

Muffin: **4.5**

Total **10 tsp (40 g)**

AHA daily limit

Background

School meals are high in added sugar

The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010 strengthened nutrition standards for school meals with limits on salt, fat, and calories, as well as other requirements. Yet, **no limit was placed on added sugar in meals.**

The AHA recommends limiting added sugar intake to **less than 6 teaspoons (25 grams)** per day for school-age children. The 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) recommends limiting added sugar intake to **less than 10% of total calories per day.**

A nationally-representative US study found that **9 out of 10 schools at breakfast and 2 out of 3 schools at lunch exceed the DGA recommended limit for added sugar.**²

Why is too much added sugar a concern?

School meals serve nearly **30 million children**, and the majority are from food-insecure households.

In the US, 35% of children and adolescents have **overweight or obesity.**³ Children living in households with food insecurity are five times more likely to have obesity.⁴

High intake of **added sugar** is associated with **excess weight gain, dental caries, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases.**⁵

School meals are a primary food source for food-insecure children. Thus, reducing added sugar in **school meals** represents a unique opportunity to improve diet quality and reduce health disparities in a vulnerable population

Policy Recommendation:

USDA should develop a standard for added sugars in school meals that aligns with the DGA guidelines or that limits added sugars to a weekly average of less than 10% of total calories per day, whichever is stricter.

- **Added sugars** are sugars and syrups put in foods during preparation or processing.
- **1 teaspoon**= 4.2 grams of added sugar

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References

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