



One man's meat is another man's poison: street food in Cape Town

Street food is a major source of income for many vendors and their families. Indeed, strong evidence suggests that street food vending is one of the main livelihoods of those in the informal sector of South Africa. *Zandile Mchiza* et al. investigate what people buy on the streets of Cape Town and surrounding areas.

Until recently, there has been little or no information on the business and nutritional value of food sold on the streets of South Africa, despite the fact that these foods have an important socio-economic role in the country.

Street food provides a good livelihood for poorer and unemployed South Africans

Street food provides a good livelihood for poorer and unemployed South Africans. It also represents a significant part of the food which millions of poorer South Africans eat since it is relatively inexpensive. Previous research revealed that 54.7% of black South Africans frequently ate street food as opposed to white and Indian South Africans – the population groups with the majority of affluent people.

This research also highlighted differences between provinces in how often their inhabitants ate street food. Limpopo reported the highest amount of street food consumers (20.6%) followed by the North West (19.9%) and Gauteng (18.9%).

The first South African National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (SANHANES-1, 2012) corroborated these results by showing that almost half (48.0%) of South Africans, 15 years and older, ate outside their homes, with the majority doing so monthly (28.7%) and weekly (28.3%). The highest percentage of South Africans (52.8%) who ate outside their homes seemed to be among the younger age group (15-24 years). This practice seemed to also be higher in urban formal settings (57.3%) than in rural formal settings (36.4%).

Of concern is that many types of South African street foods appear to be unhealthy since they are high in saturated fats, trans fats, salt and sugar. Furthermore, street food is energy dense, meaning it is rich in calories and may contribute to the high prevalence of obesity and related diseases, such as diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.

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Findings in brief

The survey showed that the majority of street food vendors had more than one food item for sale, with some specialising in popular cultural dishes – meat cuisines, staple foods like samp and beans, and vetkoek (Figures 2a-c).

Food items most commonly sold were snacks, such as crisps, candy bars and biscuits (45%); cooked foods (28%); fruits and vegetables (26%); sweetened beverages or flavoured water (6%); raw foods (4%); and tea and coffee (1%).

With the exception of fruit and vegetables, the majority of the street foods were classified as being unhealthy (i.e. energy dense), and prepared and sold under poor hygienic conditions with a lack of adequate sanitation facilities, poor storage facilities, and inadequate serving procedures.

The majority of vendors depended on their businesses for survival. While 75% of the vendors made an average income less than R1 000 each week, 25% created an income that ranged between R1 000 and R30 000 a week. Those vendors who operated around the transport interchange areas generated more income. Moreover, the type and number of food items sold determined the revenue generated by the vendors.

The value of this study lies, among others, in providing a reasonable way to address the challenge of unemployment, and to change the food environment to improve the nutritional status and health of poorer South Africans.

Figure 2a. An example of a high-fat meal sold on the streets of Cape Town. The full plate costs R25.00.



Source: Mchiza, Hill and Steyn (2014)

Figure 2b. An example of vetkoek (plain doughnut / fatcake) with filling sold on the streets of Cape Town. It costs R9.00.



Source: Mchiza, Hill and Steyn (2014)

Figure 2c. Pan-fried sheep liver sold on the streets of Cape Town. It costs R10.



Source: Mchiza, Hill and Steyn (2014)

Talking policy

It is recommended that the government intensifies its food environmental guidelines directed at improving conditions under which street food is prepared and sold, strengthening food quality control capabilities of the local authorities to improve overall quality of both the raw material and the processed food.

Further research on the following aspects of the street food sector has merit: the socio-economic impact; legislative framework; hygienic and nutritional improvements; and improving vendors' knowledge about sanitation, food hygiene and nutritional value of street food through education and training. ■

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