

EDITORIAL: Limiting fast-food joints isn't cure for obesity

With obesity and the diseases it spawns increasingly recognized as major public health problems, policymakers have been searching for solutions to the epidemic.

But the results of a new study on fast-food consumption and obesity in Los Angeles demonstrate how complex the problem is and how difficult it is going to be to solve.

The study examined the effect of a 2008 city ordinance that sought to stop the opening of new stand-alone fast-food restaurants in the low-income communities of South Los Angeles.

The policy was based on the fact that obesity rates are higher in low-income neighborhoods than in more affluent communities. And fast-food restaurants tend to be more concentrated in those same low-income communities.

If only we could limit those unhealthy choices, the theory went, people would eat healthier food and be less likely to gain excess weight.

It hasn't worked out that way, according to the study by the RAND Corporation funded by the National Institutes of Health.

Researchers found that rates of obesity and being overweight increased citywide after 2008, and the increases were significantly higher in the communities targeted by the fast-food ordinance. Fast-food consumption also increased citywide, at statistically similar rates throughout Los Angeles.

Proponents of the ban might say it didn't go far enough. While the ordinance blocked the opening of new stand-alone fast-food restaurants, it allowed new outlets in strip malls and other locations. As a result, fast-food opportunities continued to increase even after the ordinance took effect.

But the problem likely goes deeper than that. People eat fast food because it is convenient and relatively cheap.

For low-income people, time and money are at a premium. They might be working multiple jobs, crossing town on public transportation, and dealing with the hassle of picking up kids at school and getting them to after-school activities. Being able to feed a family quickly and at minimal cost is crucial to survival in such an environment.

That's why similar initiatives to get more fresh produce into neighborhood markets also largely fail to change eating habits. People still will eat fast food or drive to a big grocery to buy low-cost, easy-to-store and easily prepared processed foods.

The link between obesity and income is real, and the link between fast food and obesity is probably real as well.

The truth is, to lose weight, people must reduce their calories, increase their activity — or, preferably, do both. Meaning: Personal initiative trumps government intervention. Policymakers should keep this in mind.