# “Is Junk Food Really Cheaper?”

## By Mark Bittman

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The “fact” that junk food is cheaper than real food has become a reflexive part of how we explain why so many Americans are overweight, particularly those with lower incomes. I frequently read confident statements like, “when a bag of chips is cheaper than a head of broccoli ...” or “it’s more affordable to feed a family of four at McDonald’s than to cook a healthy meal for them at home.”

This is just plain wrong. In fact it isn’t cheaper to eat highly processed food: a typical order for a family of four — for example, two Big Macs, a cheeseburger, six chicken McNuggets, two medium and two small fries, and two medium and two small sodas — costs, at the McDonald’s a hundred steps from where I write, about $28. In general, hyperprocessed food remains more expensive than food cooked at home. You can serve a roasted chicken with vegetables along with a simple salad and milk for about $14, and feed four or even six people. If that’s too much money, substitute a meal of rice and canned beans with bacon, green peppers and onions; it’s easily enough for four people and costs about $9.

The fact is that most people can afford real food. Even the nearly 50 million Americans who are enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps) receive about $5 per person per day, which is far from ideal but enough to survive. The core problem is that cooking is defined as work, and fast food is both a pleasure and a crutch. “People really are stressed out with all that they have to do, and they don’t want to cook,” says Julie Guthman, associate professor of community studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. “Their reaction is, ‘Let me enjoy what I want to eat, and stop telling me what to do.’ And it’s one of the few things that less well-off people have: they don’t have to cook.”

To make widespread changes we need action both cultural and political. The cultural lies in celebrating real food; raising our children in homes that don’t program them for fast-produced, eaten-on-the-run, high-calorie, low-nutrition junk; giving them the gift of appreciating the pleasures of nourishing one another and enjoying that nourishment together. Political action would mean recognizing that advertising for fast food is not the exercise of free speech but behavior manipulation of addictive substances; and making certain that real food is affordable and available to everyone. The political challenge is the more difficult one, but it cannot be ignored. What’s easier is to cook at every opportunity, to demonstrate to family and neighbors that the real way is the better way.