Traditional diets consumed by Congolese refugees are healthier than those consumed by Americans. A typical Congolese meal consists of vegetables, meat or fish, and rice with spices. Their traditional diet is made up of these fresh foods that they cook themselves rather than processed foods or take-out. As would be predicted, Congolese refugees quickly adopt more fast and processed foods as they become acculturated in the US. The purpose of my research was to find out what foods Congolese refugees initially buy when they come to the US and how and why their food selection gradually changes. From the results of the research, food guidelines will be constructed to encourage refugees to preserve healthy aspects of their traditional diets and to navigate US supermarkets in such a way as to purchase foods of high nutritional value.

My methodology has involved accompanying Congolese families on trips to the supermarket and discussing shopping choices and methods of food preparation. I often meet them first in their homes so that I am also able to observe what they have in their kitchens. Between interviews, trips to the supermarket and social time with the participants, the research was both time consuming and rewarding.

Findings so far have indicated the following trends:
(1) Children have a major influence on the processed foods that parents purchase. Children are rapidly integrated into the schools where they are exposed to the junk foods that other kids bring for lunch.
(2) Some packaged food is more expensive in Congo than here and thus considered high status food at home, making it more attractive to new immigrant refugees.
(3) Immigrants have difficulty distinguishing real fruit juices from imitation juices made largely from sugar and artificial flavoring.
(4) It appears that refugees trust processed foods sold in Congo as nutritionally sound, for example candies, soft drinks and chips, while many are suspicious of packaged foods not sold in their home country such as TV dinners and canned foods.
(5) The longer refugee families live in the US, the more they depart from traditional diets prepared from fresh foods.

Food is essential for identity and social bonding. In addition to educating refugees about value of popular American foods, it will be important to encourage traditional food selection and preparation as well as communal events that celebrate their indigenous recipes.