

Are National Food Policies Helping or Hurting Obesity Prevention?

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Health advocates increasingly recognize that national food policies are essential for reversing current trends in obesity prevalence. In 2000, Michael Jacobson and I argued in *Public Health Reports* that then-current recommendations for preventing obesity invariably focused on the need for educating individuals to decrease energy intake and increase energy expenditure but failed to consider the many factors in society and in the food environment that acted as barriers to individual actions. Those factors included, and still include, cultural, social, and economic aspects of current food systems that make high-calorie, inexpensive food available for consumption everywhere, at all times of day, and in very large portions.

We noted that although the deleterious health effects of obesity had been observed since the mid-1950s, national action plans to reverse its increasing prevalence had consisted mostly of wishful thinking and admonitions to individuals rather than well-thought-out public health strategies to promote more healthful dietary choices. Our article suggested a broad range of policies in education, food labeling, food marketing, health care, and transportation to make it easier for individuals to eat more healthfully and to be more active. To pay for such policies, we suggested small taxes on food items that provide "empty" calories, such as soft drinks, or on products that reduce physical activity, such as automobiles.

Even so, we were not the first to invoke the need for policy approaches aimed at obesity prevention, as well as educational strategies aimed at individuals. In the late 1970s, Albert J. Stunkard made similar suggestions, but these were ignored in favor of views of obesity and its health consequences as matters of personal responsibility. But the sharp increase in obesity prevalence in the years just prior to 2000 was enough to convince us and others that attempts to change individual behavior were ineffective; furthermore, they could only be effective if accompanied by supportive changes in the food environment.

Benefits of Obesity Prevention Policies

As the high personal and economic cost of obesity to individuals and to society became more evident, health advocates increasingly called on governments to enact policies to improve the environment of food choice. By now, local and state governments, and even the federal government, have enacted one or more of a broad range of policies aimed at preventing obesity in children and adults, especially those of low income, or at restricting the production or marketing practices of food companies. Table 95.1 lists examples of policies that have been tried, implemented, or are under serious consideration by advocates.

Several observations argue in favor of policy approaches. Educating individuals is demonstrably ineffective. Policies that have been implemented tend to show benefits. And the degree of food industry opposition to anti-obesity measures strongly suggests that these measures are likely to work. The evidence in favor of policy interventions is substantial. Studies show that teaching children about healthy eating improves their attitude toward eating healthier foods, especially when accompanied by garden programs. Children in schools serving healthier meals tend to have healthier weights. Removing

TABLE 95.1. Policy Interventions to Reduce the Prevalence of Obesity

Children

- School gardens
- Nutrition education
- Nutrition standards for school and child care meals
- Elimination of sodas from fast-food meals
- Restrictions on toys with fast-food meals
- Restrictions on television advertising of unhealthful foods
- Restrictions on junk food sales near schools
- Nutrition standards for food marketing

Adults

- Community garden projects
- Fruit and vegetable incentive programs
- Nutrition education
- Calorie labels on fast-food items ("menu" labels)
- Restrictions on misleading health claims
- Nutrition standards for federal food assistance programs
- Warning labels on unhealthful foods

Food companies

- Incentives for healthier food retail environments
- Nutrition standards for foods served in public institutions
- Nutrition standards for product reformulation
- Size caps on unhealthful foods
- Taxes on unhealthful foods
- Elimination of tax deduction for business expenses related to marketing unhealthful foods to children

The political system

- Incentives for corporate social goals, as well as growth
- Restrictions on corporate contributions to election campaigns (repeal *Citizens United*)

toys from fast-food meals decreases children's desire for those meals. The less time children spend watching television, the less likely they are to be overweight. Supporting the purchase of fruits and vegetables in low-income communities increases the supply and purchase of those foods.

Although most studies of calorie labels on fast-food meals show small, if any, effects on purchase patterns, the effects are greater among the subset of customers who pay attention to the postings. Like trans-fat labeling, menu labeling has induced food manufacturers to reformulate their products with healthier ingredients. The most impressive evidence of policy efficacy derives from studies of taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages. In its first 6 months, the Mexican tax was associated with a 6% reduction in soda sales. In its first month, the Berkeley, California, tax decreased sales while generating more than \$100,000 to be used for child health programs. A more recent analysis documented a 21% decrease in soda consumption in Berkeley's low-income communities. Taxes do modify dietary choices and their benefits are even greater in low-income groups most at risk for chronic disease.

Food Industry Opposition

Preventing obesity requires people to eat less, move more, or both, but eating less reduces food industry profits. Thus, no anti-obesity measure that might decrease purchases of foods and beverages should be expected to be free of political opposition. Indeed, the greater the likelihood that an intervention will succeed in reducing purchases, the more strongly the food industry is likely to oppose it. Within each of its sections, Table 95.1 lists policies roughly in order of political expediency. Although on principle they oppose every measure that might reduce sales, companies making food products targeted by "eat less" messages are especially vigorous in doing everything they can to delay, weaken, or eliminate measures that might restrict their ability to market to children, cap portion sizes, or tax their products.

Marketing to children is the food industry's line in the sand. Although major food and beverage companies have voluntarily agreed not to advertise unhealthful products to children under the age of 12, they forcefully oppose government attempts to set nutrition standards for marketing food products to children, even when such standards are voluntary. When an Interagency Working Group (IWG) representing four government agencies attempted to set voluntary standards for food marketing to children, food trade associations complained to Congress. In response, Congress required the IWG to conduct a cost-benefit analysis, thereby killing this *voluntary* measure.

Food companies opposing the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) school nutrition standards also used Congress to get what they wanted. The potato and pizza industries, for example, were affected by the new standards. They induced Congress to use the appropriations process to overturn two regulations, one restricting the number of times potatoes could be served in school lunches during a week and the other affecting the volume of tomato paste used on pizza.

In 2015, the food industry succeeded in getting Congress to use the appropriations process again, this time to delay implementation of menu labeling in chain restaurants for a year. The industry also induced Congress to use the appropriations process to block the USDA from allowing federal dietary guidelines to say anything about the environmental impact and unsustainability of diets high in meat.

Drawing on lessons learned from the tobacco industry, beverage companies use every trick in that industry's "playbook" to oppose nutrition standards for food assistance programs, warning labels, size caps, and taxes. The playbook involves casting doubt on the science, discrediting critics, framing government interventions as indications of nanny-statism, coopting community and health professional groups, and, of course, lobbying and contributing to election campaigns; these last playbook items were made easier by recent Supreme Court decisions. Use of the playbook was especially visible in New York City's attempt to remove sodas from eligibility for purchase with benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps). Antihunger organizations funded by soda companies publicly opposed the city's attempt, even though the prevalence of obesity is higher among SNAP recipients than in other low-income groups. To oppose the city's proposed soda cap rule, which would restrict the size of sugary drinks sold in places under city jurisdiction to 16 ounces or less, soda companies and their trade association funded "front" groups and community organizations to oppose the measure, took the city to court, and eventually won. The soda industry has contributed tens of millions of dollars to front groups to fight soda taxes, successfully, with two exceptions to date: Berkeley, California, which framed the debate as "Berkeley vs. Big Soda," and Philadelphia, which framed the tax as a method to generate revenues to support prekindergarten programs.

Future Directions for Policy Advocacy

Although it is well established that to be effective, policies must lead to environmental changes that support healthier food choices, not one of the policies listed in Table 95.1 can reverse obesity prevalence on its own. All of them are needed to support a vision of obesity not so much as a matter of personal responsibility but as a personal consequence of a food system focused far more on selling products than on promoting nutrition and public health. Because the purpose of food companies is to sell products and generate profits for stockholders, changing this environment comes up against corporate business imperatives and is only possible through government intervention. In this situation, governments need to establish a level playing field for food industry marketing, so that restrictions apply equally to all companies. A key part of a vision for obesity prevention is to align agricultural policies with health policies, so that the kinds of foods that receive subsidies, for example, are those that best promote health. The goal of all policy interventions must be to make the healthful choice the easy choice and, even better, to make it the *preferred* choice.

How do we get from here to there in the current political climate? Despite the need for substantive improvements in the food environment, existing obesity prevention policies tend to be fragmented, uncoordinated, and lacking in overall vision. This is understandable given the level of food industry opposition to any measure that might reduce demand, decrease availability, or increase prices. Therefore, changing the food environment requires an understanding that obesity prevention is both a political and a health goal. Health advocates must engage the political system and use it to promote health for individuals and for society.

* Engagement means learning how the political system works: how bills are passed, how elections are funded, and how lobbying is accomplished. It means visiting local, state, and federal representatives and talking to them about how healthier food environments

will benefit constituents and society. It means educating and organizing communities to support public health interventions, recruiting allies, and developing evidence-based arguments to counter those of critics. It means writing opinion pieces and letters to editors as well as editorials in professional journals. For many health professionals, political engagement seems remote from the day-to-day demands of helping overweight patients deal with our current, toxic food environment.

But detoxifying this environment can only be accomplished by advocates willing to take on the challenges of reducing the impact of money on politics. The goal must be to elect political representatives who are more responsive to concerns about the health of the citizens they represent than to the food corporations that, as part of the normal course of doing business, put profits over public health.

Suggested Reading

- Center for Science in the Public Interest. (2015). *Congressional catering: How big food and agricultural special interests wield influence in Congress and undermine public health*. Washington, DC: Center for Science in the Public Interest.—Analyzes food industry lobbying methods and expenditures to oppose dietary guidelines, school nutrition standards, restrictions on trans fat, and sodium reduction.
- Falbe, J., Thompson H. R., Becker, C. M., Rojas, N., McCulloch, C. E., & Madsen, K. A. (2016). Impact of the Berkeley excise tax on sugar-sweetened beverage consumption. *American Journal of Public Health* [Epub ahead of print].—Pre- and posttax surveys document a 21% decline in soda consumption in Berkeley's low-income communities as compared to a 4% increase in neighboring cities without soda taxes.
- Gortmaker, S. L., Long, M. W., Resch, S. C., Ward, Z. J., Craddock, A. L., Barrett, J. L., et al. (2015). Cost effectiveness of childhood obesity interventions: Evidence and methods for CHOICES. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 49(1), 102–111.—Demonstrates substantial cost savings from excise taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages, elimination of tax subsidies on television advertising to children, educational initiatives, and efforts to promote physical activity.
- Hawkes, C., Smith, T. G., Jewell, J., Wardle, J., Hammond, R. A., Friel, S., et al. (2015). Smart food policies for obesity prevention. *Lancet*, 385, 2410–2421.—Describes the principal components of policies effective in improving the food environment and choices of individuals.
- Huang, T. T.-K., Cawley, J. H., Ashe, M., Costa, S. A., Frerichs, L. M., Zwicker, L., et al. (2015). Mobilisation of public support for policy actions to prevent obesity. *Lancet*, 385, 2422–2431.—Focuses on the need to mobilize popular support for obesity prevention policies; calls on the public health community to make community engagement a priority.
- Mozaffarian, D., Afshin, A., Benowitz, N. L., Bittner, V., Daniels, S. R., Franch, H. A., et al. (2012). Population approaches to improve diet, physical activity, and smoking habits a scientific statement from the American Heart Association. *Circulation*, 126(12), 1514–1563.—Describes policies that have achieved some success in promoting healthier weights.
- Nestle, M. (2015). *Soda politics: Taking on big soda (and winning)*. New York: Oxford University Press.—Documents the methods used by health advocates in the United States and internationally to reduce consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages and to counter the marketing practices of companies that make them.
- Nestle, M., & Jacobson, M. F. (2000). Halting the obesity epidemic: A public health policy approach. *Public Health Reports*, 115, 12–24.—Reviews history and suggests broad range of policy approaches to obesity prevention.
- Roberto, C. A., Swinburn, B., Hawkes, C., Huang, T. T.-K., Costa, S. A., Ashe, M., et al. (2015). Patchy progress on obesity prevention: Emerging examples, entrenched barriers, and new

thinking. *Lancet*, 385, 2400–2409.—Suggests the need for policies to address and counter environmental influences on the food choices of individuals.

Stunkard, A. J. (1980). The social environment and the control of obesity. In A. J. Stunkard (Ed.), *Obesity* (pp. 438–462). Philadelphia: Saunders.—Early in the rise in prevalence of obesity, Stunkard recognized the critical need for policy interventions to improve the environment of food choice.

Thow, A. M., Downs, S., & Jan, S. (2014). A systematic review of the effectiveness of food taxes and subsidies to improve diets: Understanding the recent evidence. *Nutrition Reviews*, 72(9), 551–565.—Reviews 43 studies; concludes that tax strategies are effective in reducing intake of targeted products over a broad range of rates.

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