Government Intervention Will Not Solve Our Obesity Problem

*Should the Government Regulate What People Eat?, 2014*

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With rising obesity and related health problems, many have called for the government regulation of the American diet. Unfortunately, past regulations have been ineffective. Worse, these "solutions" often cause other problems. The only real solution is to allow Americans to decide which diet and health products they wish to buy on the free market.

It is clear the United States is facing a rising obesity problem. But the challenge remains: We have yet to determine a successful way to tackle it. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the prevalence of obesity among adults more than doubled from 13.4 percent in 1960 to 34.3 percent in 2008. A new report released this month by the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* predicts that by 2030, 42 percent of Americans will be obese and 11 percent will be severely obese, or 100 pounds overweight.

Despite the myriad of studies showing American obesity is increasing, research does not clearly support that government can solve this complex problem. And yet, government solutions that provide information the public already knows—weight gain occurs when we eat too much and exercise too little—have been the focus to eliminate this epidemic.

Not only is this method not solving the problem, we may actually be increasing the social stigma associated with weight gain. Rather than pursuing a one-size-fits-all solution, we need to push back against government intervention, and allow people to find the solution that best meets their needs.

One popular government solution requires restaurant chains to post calorie counts on their menus to prevent citizens from underestimating their caloric intakes. A recent study examined the impact of New York City’s 2008 law requiring restaurant chains to post calorie counts. While 28 percent of patrons said the information influenced their choices, researchers could not detect a change in calories purchased after the law. A different study in Seattle found similar evidence that their mandatory menu labeling did little to change fast food purchasing behavior.

Another government favorite, taxing sugary drinks, does more to shore up government coffers than to reduce obesity. A few studies examined the impact of increasing sugary drinks taxes by 20 percent or more. They find that higher taxes do reduce obesity, but the effect is rather limited. Interestingly, soda taxes mostly cause people without weight problems to cut back their consumption, even though they are not the intended targets of the policy. Meanwhile, frequent soda drinkers buy lower-priced soda, engage in bulk discounted purchases, and brew more sweetened ice tea.
Beyond being ineffective, there are serious harms from these state interventionist polices. Government policies are subject to intense lobbying by well-heeled interest groups, which can lead to results that are counterproductive to the problems they are trying to solve. In one case, Congress effectively declared pizza a vegetable under the intense pressure from agricultural business lobby. This allowed Congress to block attempts by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to replace pizza, which is classified as a vegetable because it contains tomato paste, with more vegetables.

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Government policies may also lead to unintended consequences. Since the 1970s, Department of Agriculture dietary guidelines have urged Americans to eat low fat diets to reduce their risk of coronary heart disease and obesity. Americans heeded the government’s advice to switch to foods with less fat content. But because they were eating healthier foods, they ate more. Thus, while the share of calories coming from fat decreased between 1970 and 2000, the actual amount of fat calories in their diet increased, because of an increase in overall calories.

The solutions that seem to work the best—the ones that allow individuals to tailor a plan that meets their unique needs—are given short shrift by advocates of government intervention. The growing market for diet books, health foods, weight loss centers, exercise equipment, and athletic clubs is clear evidence that people are concerned about their weight. Unlike government policies, weight loss products and ideas are tested by consumers and failures are replaced by products that really help people control their weight. Consumers will not continue to buy products that don't work.

Unfortunately, citizens have little choice but to pay higher taxes and obey bans when laws are passed. One can expect further tax hikes and bans as policymakers conclude that their well-intentioned policies failed simply because they were not harsh enough, but pushing more stringent, failed policies will not improve public health. Instead of wasting resources on inadequate solutions, consumers should return to the market for the innovative solutions, like healthy foods, gyms, and nutrition centers.

Further Readings

Books


**Periodicals and Internet Sources**


- Julie Gunlock "Big Brother at Your Table," *National Review*, May 20, 2013.


- Jacob Sullum "The Peril of Palatability: A Former FDA Chief Sounds the Alarm About Dangerously


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