

Agricultural Policy And Childhood Obesity

Health Affairs

March-April 2010, Vol. 29, No. 3 pp. 405-410

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FROM ABSTRACT:

For thirty-five years, U.S. agriculture has operated under a “cheap food” policy that spurred production of a few commodity crops, not fruit or vegetables, and thus of the calories from them.

A key driver of childhood obesity is the consumption of excess calories, many from inexpensive, nutrient-poor snacks, sweets, and sweetened beverages made with fats and sugars derived from these policy-supported crops.

This paper set forth a series of policy recommendations that could help, including managing commodity crop oversupply and supporting farmers who produce more fruit and vegetables to build a healthier, more balanced agricultural policy.

THIS AUTHOR ALSO NOTES:

Childhood obesity is epidemic.

Treatment of childhood obesity is expensive and often ineffective.

The only long-term solution for the childhood obesity problem is prevention.

Record childhood obesity exists as a consequence of an “environment that discourages activity and encourages consumption of calorie-dense, nutrient-poor food, combined with innate biological mechanisms that appear in many people to confer a propensity to accumulate and conserve energy.”

Obesity is linked to the “consumption of added fats, sugars, and refined grains and of the snacks, sweets, beverages, and fast foods in which they are prominent.”

The prime factor behind soaring obesity rates is a 400-calorie per day jump, from 1985 to 2000, as follows:

23% from added sugars

24% from added fats

46% from added grains

Increases Compared to Year 1970, Per Day

Year	Calories	Corn Grain Calories	Corn Sweeteners Calories	Added Corn Sweetener Calories	Added Other Sugars
2007	+600	+191%	+359%	+246	+14%

[Remember, an extra 3500 calories is converted into 1 pound of fat]

The average child drinks 172 daily calories from sugar-sweetened beverages per day. [A can of soda contains 140 calories]

Since 1970, daily fat calories have increased by 69%, mostly from salad and cooking oils: 70% is from soy oil and 8% is from corn oil.

The United States is the largest producer of corn and soy.

The US produces 21 billion pounds of soy oil per year, and 93% is used domestically.

4.7% of our corn is converted into high-fructose corn syrup.

“What farmers grow is steered by agricultural policy.” In 2001, subsidized payments to farmers exceeded \$20 billion per year.

US agriculture policy favors crops that are easy to produce in large-scale, easy to store, and easy to ship: corn, soy, wheat, cotton, rice. From these subsidized crops we derive sweets and fats. Sweets and fats cost less, while healthier foods cost more. People buy these cheap subsidized foods and become obese.

“Obesity has overtaken hunger as the most prevalent nutritional problem in children—too many calories.”

“Diets rich in fruit and vegetables can help manage weight and can lower risks for cancer and other chronic diseases, especially when they replace calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods. Yet fewer than one in ten Americans meet the levels of fruit and vegetable consumption recommended.”

Because US agriculture policy does not favor fruits and vegetables, our farmers do not grow enough, and most of what we consume is imported from other countries.

“For US farmers to produce more fruit and vegetables nearer to consumers will require an agricultural policy that offers incentives to do so.”

Because of US farm policy, most large US farms only produce corn and soy.

Childhood obesity is growing three times faster than adult obesity.

Yet policy makers have had a blind spot with respect to the links between U.S. farm policy and worsening obesity.

The US spends \$147 billion a year on obesity-related illness, yet policy makers fail to connect this cost with the \$21 billion per year they subsidize farmers for commodity crop production.

US farm policy has led farmers to overproduce commodity crops and underproduce healthy fruit and vegetables. However, any quick change in this policy would endanger farmers' livelihoods and "would exact considerable harm and likely would further erode the already too limited supply of U.S. farmers essential for growing the fruit and vegetables needed for healthier diets in the future."

"If the nation is to get serious about making fruit, vegetables, and other healthy food more accessible, policy makers need to offer at least as much research, financial, and other support to domestic farmers of these crops as has been done for commodity crop growers for decades."

Ironically, subsidized "surplus commodities produced under Farm Bill programs make their way into federal child nutrition programs, such as the National School Lunch and Breakfast Programs, where they often have not conformed to the USDA's own dietary guidelines for healthy eating."

"Agricultural production affects nutrition, obesity, and health. Agricultural policy helps determine not only what farmers grow, but what people eat." Therefore, "We need a Healthy Food, Healthy Farm Bill."

KEY POINTS FROM DAN MURPHY

- 1) Childhood obesity is epidemic.
- 2) Record childhood obesity exists as a consequence of an "environment that discourages activity and encourages consumption of calorie-dense, nutrient-poor food, combined with innate biological mechanisms that appear in many people to confer a propensity to accumulate and conserve energy."
- 3) Obesity is linked to the "consumption of added fats, sugars, and refined grains and of the snacks, sweets, beverages, and fast foods in which they are prominent."
- 4) Treatment of childhood obesity is expensive and often ineffective.
- 5) The only long-term solution for the childhood obesity problem is prevention.
- 6) A key driver of childhood obesity is the consumption of excess calories from inexpensive, nutrient-poor snacks, sweets, and sweetened beverages made with fats and sugars derived from US Farm Policy subsidized crops.

- 7) The first upstream step in the prevention of obesity is to not subsidize corn, soy, wheat, and rice to a point of overproduction, and to start supporting farmers who produce more fruit and vegetables to build a healthier, more balanced agricultural policy.
- 8) Since 1970, average daily calories have increased by 600 calories per day. This increase is primarily from consuming the crops subsidized by US farm policy: grains (corn, soy, wheat), fats (soy and corn oil), and processed sugars (high fructose corn syrup). **[Remember, an extra 3500 calories is converted into 1 pound of fat; this would add 62 pounds onto a person in a year]**
- 9) "What farmers grow is steered by agricultural policy." In 2001, subsidized payments to farmers exceeded \$20 billion per year.
- 10) US agriculture policy favors crops that are easy to produce in large-scale, easy to store, and easy to ship: corn, soy, wheat, rice. From these subsidized crops we derive sweets and fats. Sweets and fats cost less, while healthier foods cost more. People buy these cheap subsidized foods and become obese.
- 11) Because US agriculture policy does not favor fruits and vegetables, our farmers do not grow enough, and most of what we consume is imported from other countries.
- 12) "For US farmers to produce more fruit and vegetables nearer to consumers will require an agricultural policy that offers incentives to do so."
- 13) "Diets rich in fruit and vegetables can help manage weight and can lower risks for cancer and other chronic diseases, especially when they replace calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods. Yet fewer than one in ten Americans meet the levels of fruit and vegetable consumption recommended."
- 14) Because of US farm policy, most large US farms only produce corn and soy.
- 15) Policy makers have had a blind spot with respect to the links between U.S. farm policy and worsening obesity. The US spends \$147 billion a year on obesity-related illness, yet policy makers fail to connect this cost with the \$21 billion per year they subsidize farmers for commodity crop production.
- 16) "If the nation is to get serious about making fruit, vegetables, and other healthy food more accessible, policy makers need to offer at least as much research, financial, and other support to domestic farmers of these crops as has been done for commodity crop growers for decades."
- 17) "Agricultural production affects nutrition, obesity, and health. Agricultural policy helps determine not only what farmers grow, but what people eat." Therefore, "We need a Healthy Food, Healthy Farm Bill."