Moving Beyond Choice: Addressing How the Food System Affects Obesity in the United States

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Walk into almost any major supermarket these days and you will likely be greeted by colorful displays overflowing with deals on items such as “buy one get two free” boxes of cheese flavored crackers, and “cart busting savings” on family packs of cookies. Shoppers are enticed to “compare & save” on jumbo glazed doughnuts, and “stock up” on soda specials – the cans are often stacked so high they seem endless.

These well-placed and deeply discounted specials rarely include foods that most would deem healthy. If you are trying to eat a diet focused on whole grains, lean protein, and fresh produce then you might just walk by and continue on with your grocery list. With your health (and waistline) in mind you might resist the urge. But for millions of Americans the draw is too powerful. The grocery store, along other places where food is bought, sold, and consumed, has become the frontline in the “battle on obesity.”

For years, public health officials and the food industry have touted personal choice and nutrition education as the solution to America’s bad eating habits. But our growing waistlines, along with skyrocketing rates of diabetes, have proven that approach ineffective. Despite the recent efforts to encourage better eating and reduce obesity, Americans are fatter than ever before, and the most recent
estimates are that 68% of us are overweight or obese.¹

This past Election Day, several cities in California had ballot initiatives aimed at reducing the consumption of one product linked to obesity –soda. Efforts to limit soda consumption by levying taxes or prohibiting the sale of large sizes are the latest in a long line of attempts to change the way Americans eat and join the ranks of ad campaigns such as “Five a Day for Better Health,” changes to the school lunch program, and menu labeling.

More recent projects reimagine the local cornerstore as a healthy option stocked with fresh produce and dairy alongside the usual supply of Cheetos and Gatorade. While we have seen increasingly creative proposed solutions to obesity, these efforts all focus on individual choices to some extent or another. To succeed at changing the way we eat, we have to get to the root of the problem (pun intended), and look at what we grow and produce along with how that food is marketed and sold.

With so many resources being put into efforts to change the way we eat, the time is right to examine how our food system developed in the first place. Only then will we understand how best to address the glaring disconnect between the often heard advice to *make healthy food choices* and the reality of an environment where we seem to never be more than a few feet away from a soda and a bag of

¹ CDC Fact Sheet on Overweight & Obesity. Published August 13, 2012. Available online at: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db82.pdf
chips.

**Brief History of the Food System in the United States:**

For most of human history, the food system consisted of hunting animals and gathering wild plants. Agriculture has only been established for a mere 3% of our history as a species, and the past century brought the most dramatic changes in how we produce and consume food.\(^2\) Early in the 1900’s almost half of the entire country’s population either farmed or lived in rural communities, and farm life required the efforts of the whole family.\(^3\) U.S. farmers grew a variety of crops on farms that included diversified food staples alongside livestock. With the age of industrialization farms saw new machines, greater specialization in what was grown, and increasing consolidation in growing patterns and how crops were marketed and sold. The addition of chemical fertilizers and pesticides resulted in the farm looking more and more like a factory, and with the increasing money required for inputs the main goal turned to high yields and lowering production costs.\(^3\)

Among the first federal policies directed at farms where those that intended to produce more food in response to hunger and undernourishment – major problems of the depression and dust-bowl era. This worked in the short term, but

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\(^3\) John E Ikerd. Sustaining the profitability of agriculture. In: Economist’s Role in the Agricultural Sustainability Paradigm. San Antonio, TX: University of Missouri; 1996.
the market soon became flooded with the output of crops, so the government stepped in to help with what were known then as price support programs, including subsides.³ Basically subsides mean that farmers grow commodity crops (mostly corn, wheat, and soy) and get assurance from the government that despite market fluctuation in both base prices and demand they will turn a profit. These crops are often sold below the cost of production, but the government (through tax dollars) makes up the difference. It is important to note that the framework of the commodity program is based on conditions in the 1930’s, when many families had gardens that supplied more perishable crops like vegetables and fruit.⁴ Subsidy policy focused on what could travel long distances and be stored over lean times. To this day, foods like tomatoes and apples enjoy no such subsidies, as indicated by their status as “specialty crops.”

In the 1970’s, the combination of a major drought and an oil embargo brought sharp increases in food prices. Under the direction of President Nixon, who was eager to retain the support of farmers in his bid for reelection, then Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz gave his famous directive to “get big or get out” as he urged farmers to plant commodity crops like corn "from fencerow to

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As Michael Pollen noted in his best selling book *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, “…these changes in federal policy coincided with the rise of major agribusiness corporations, and the declining financial stability of the small family farm.” The 1970’s also marks the last time that obesity rates were in the single digits.

**Major Players**

The current food system in the United States is dominated by a small group of powerful and profitable companies collectively referred to as “Big Food.” These companies got big by taking the cheap outputs of corn, soy and wheat and turning them into products for the supermarket shelves, or using them to formulate feed for livestock like cattle and chicken. What people eat and drink is increasingly driven by companies with household names like Kraft, General Mills, Dole, Nestle, Coca-Cola and Pepsi. These brands tend to conjure up thoughts of a specific food we might remember from childhood, but a modern food company rarely produces just one item, and the typical corporate food umbrella covers an endless list of products that includes cereals, chips, sports drinks, candy bars, condiments, chicken nuggets, and ice-cream just to name a few.

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Alongside these packaged food processors also grew a group of highly profitable companies that are involved with every step in the process of manufacturing food. They own the patents on seeds like Monsanto and Amgen, produce the chemicals needed to help make them grow like Bayer and Dow, and also include the big meat and poultry processors like Tyson and Cargill. Our food system has seen a remarkable concentration of market power in recent times. In the United States, the ten largest food companies now control over half of all food sales. And due to vertical integration fewer and fewer companies control the production of foods from seed to mouth.

With leftover policies put in place in an era when national priorities were family farm income and food shortages, these companies have been able to reap huge profits thanks to generous subsidies from the U.S. government for basic commodities such as sugar, corn, and soybeans. The amount of money involved truly is astonishing. A recent Cato Institute report shed light on the dollar amounts, reporting that the government spends $10 billion to $30 billion a year subsidizing what are now mainly large-scale farmers. That includes $5 billion in direct

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payments that are delivered regardless of whether farmers even plant a single row of crops. And in the case of corn, the report finds that subsidy for production between 1995 - 2009 resulted in the fact that “every $1 of profits earned by corn-sweetener operation costs consumers $10.”

Even as big food saw profits grow and grow thanks to the popularity of processed foods made from highly subsidized ingredients, the typical farmer has not seen his fortunes increase. The share of the food dollar that returns to the farmer has actually fallen, and the money instead flows to a greater and greater extent to the companies who process, package and market the products that fill our supermarket shelves.

**Back to Obesity…**

The sweeping changes in the food system in the last 40 years have included drastic changes in what we eat, and the impact on health has been unprecedented. Medical doctor and food policy advocate David Wallinga summed up the changes in an article recently published in *Health Affairs*. Among the many startling statistics he reports are that between 1970 and 2007, the average American increased their daily food and beverage intake by 300 calories. Most of the increase was due to additional calories from oils and sugars – especially corn. He

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sites United States Department of Agriculture findings that an average person in the U.S. now takes in 246 calories daily from corn sweetener. This represents a 360% increase since 1970. A large portion of this increase is due to soda consumption, which has risen so dramatically that the average person now consumes 600 cans a year, and soft drinks are the largest single source of calories in the American diet.

Serving sizes have also increased drastically. In the 1950s, when just under 10% percent of Americans were obese a typical soda serving was about 7 ounces. Now, a consumer would be hard pressed to find a small size soda less than 16 ounces, and cups as big as 64 ounces are sold as single servings, forcing car manufactures to redesign cup holders to accommodate expanding portions. These increases in the intake of excess calories mostly in the form of sugars and oils have led to sharp increases in obesity among all segments of the population.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention provides the most recent estimate that two of every three adults in America are now overweight or obese. Since 1980, obesity prevalence among children and adolescents has almost tripled. Related conditions including heart disease, stroke, and type 2 diabetes are now the

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leading causes of preventable death and account for an estimated $147 billion annual expenditure in heath care costs.  

The United States is facing the reality that due to the sharp rise in obesity, today’s generation of young children may be the first ever to live shorter lives than their parents. Reflecting on how closely increases in obesity align with the increased farming, production, and availability of calories from subsided crops helps to counter the idea that we are simply choosing less healthy foods. Clearly, changes in the supply side must be part of the equation that have led to this dire situation. Currently, two thirds of the calories consumed in the U.S. come from just four crops. These crops are corn, soy, wheat and rice, and are the same top four crops that get the greatest dollar amount of government subsidy. Sales and price records show that while the cost of sugars and fats have become cheaper, healthier options like fruits and vegetables have become more expensive, rising almost 40% in the past twenty years. Consumers have reacted to this gap in price by spending more of their food dollar on unhealthy foods, and added sugars and fat now comprise nearly half of daily energy consumption in the U.S. Couple this with the fact only a small percentage of the population is eating the recommended

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amounts of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, and you start to see one way that all the pieces of the obesity puzzle fit together.

**Looking Back - Looking Forward**

In only a few generations we have gone from a time when people were intimately involved in planting, growing, harvesting, and preparing the food they ate, to a point where fast food drive-thrus, microwaves, and delivery are the norm rather than the exception. If Paula Daniels has her way – at least in Los Angeles – things will soon be very different. Daniels is Senior Advisor to the Mayor and head of the Los Angeles Food Policy Council. She recently scored a major food advocacy victory when the City Council unanimously adopted the “Good Food Pledge.” Her approach is to harness regional spending power, and she believes “more consciousness of what it takes to make food and get it to us” will lead to much needed change. The Council members, by adopting the pledge, agreed to action items like “engagement with the food bought and sold in City run venues,” and “knowing where the food came from and how it was grown.” Daniels cites the potential to shift the market by working with large food purchasers like hospitals and universities. At stake she says, is the “the $25 billion spent on food every year in L.A. region alone.”

Daniels works closely with the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health in their efforts to address obesity among the roughly 10 million people who
live within the county lines, where even among the youngest residents, 3-4 year olds, obesity rates are 20%. Lauren Dunning is a legal policy analyst and holds both a law degree and degree in public health. Among her many projects at the Department of Public Health is a four-year long effort to increase access to famers markets among low-income communities. She reflects on how supporting regional farms is helping to change the food system in a larger sense. Dunning underscores the need to “create more demand as a way to convince farmers to produce more healthier foods despite the smaller profit margin.” She also sees potential for famers markets “to change norms in the communities that need to most,” by increasing access and consumption of “highly visible, healthy, and delicious foods.” In light of recent data collected by the Department of Public Health showing 20% of children under age five drink a soda every day, this type of food is something that is sorely lacking in many communities.

The potential for action on the local level to impact the food system broadly is echoed by Michael Roberts, Director of the Center for Food Law & Policy. Mr. Roberts is a food policy lawyer and regularly works at the intersection of the private food business and government regulators. He has a keen understanding of the need for responsible change at the federal level, yet his point of view is that “federal agencies like the FDA are understaffed and using their limited power to

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15 Los Angeles County Dept. of Public Health, Office of Health Assessment and Epidemiology. *Key Indicators of Health by Service Planning Area; June 2009.*
focus on food safety – not preventive measures.” He recognizes the potential in efforts like those undertaken by Daniels and Dunning: “Local food councils are leading the way towards better aligning the food supply with the foods health experts are recommending we should eat.” He also sees community engagement through projects like farmers markets as “approaches that are much more likely to succeed than taxes and other punitive or stigmatizing efforts.” When asked about the chance that the current subsidies for crops that make unhealthy foods so cheap relative to foods like fruits and vegetables would end anytime soon, he just smiles and shakes his head.

**Profit and Priorities**

Major changes in the way food is grown, processed, marketed, and sold have occurred in the last few decades. Despite the mounting evidence that the typical diet filled with highly processed foods and sweetened drinks has led to the parallel rise in obesity, big food still relies on the idea that personal choice dictates all foods can be part of a balanced diet. Clearly, the typical American diet is not balanced if the majority of our calories come from added sugars and fat and two thirds of us carry around excess pounds of body weight. Surely many of us would not choose to continue subsidies to companies that appear to be profiting from sales of products that are linked to huge health costs – both human and capital. Subsidies made sense when farmers made up a significant part of the population
and struggled just to survive and feed their families. Does it make sense now when agriculture is concentrated in just a handful of huge corporations that year after year report profit in the billions? All this says nothing of the environmental, social, and ecological effects of industrial farming both here and around the world – important issues that are part of even larger conversation on the food system.

There is a growing sense of the need to balance personal responsibility with corporate responsibility, and that we can no longer rely on profit margins as a measure of our success when the very future of our country is threatened. With a hopeful eye towards future generations, imagine that government policy on agriculture could be in alignment with public health priorities; imagine that healthy foods could become those most available and affordable throughout our communities. This is imagining a time when we can say with confidence we have real choice.
Appendix 1: References


**Appendix 2:**

**Target Magazine: The Atlantic**

Many articles published in *The Atlantic* are accompanied by info-graphic style illustrations that help clarify and connect complex economic and political concepts as well as document trends. This article would be well suited to such illustrations, and would help the reader get the big picture of trends in food system changes, rises in obesity, and money spent on both subsidy and medical costs.

- Subscribed to by 400,000 readers
- Website with 11 million unique hits per month
- Published ten times a year
- Self described as “primarily aimed at a target audience of thought leaders.”
- Typical articles focus on foreign affairs, politics, the economy & cultural trends