



Research report

Who is to blame for the rise in obesity?

Jayson L. Lusk^{a,*}, Brenna Ellison^b^a Oklahoma State University, 411 Ag Hall, Stillwater, OK 74078, United States^b University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 321 Mumford Hall, 1301 W. Gregory Dr., Urbana, IL 61801, United States

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 8 January 2013

Received in revised form 23 March 2013

Accepted 2 April 2013

Available online 8 April 2013

Keywords:

Obesity

Public opinion

Ideology

ABSTRACT

We sought to determine who the public perceives as most contributing to the rise in obesity and to identify the determinants of such perceptions. A nationwide survey was conducted among 800 US individuals. Respondents were asked to place each of seven entities (food manufacturers, grocery stores, restaurants, government policies, farmers, individuals, and parents) into three categories: primarily, somewhat, and not to blame for the rise in obesity. Eighty percent said individuals were primarily to blame for the rise in obesity. Parents were the next-most blameworthy group, with 59% ascribing primary blame. Responses fell along three dimensions related to individual responsibility, agribusiness responsibility, and government-farm policy. A number of individual-specific factors were associated with perceptions of blame. For example, individuals with a more statist score on the economic political ideology scale were more likely to blame the government and agribusiness for obesity.

© 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Although the evidence clearly reveals that a larger proportion of Americans are now overweight and obese compared to two decades ago, consensus on the causes and implications of the trend has been difficult to reach (Casazza et al., 2013; Keith et al., 2006). Within the public health community, the rise in obesity has been heralded as an epidemic, and there is a pervasive view that government action is urgently and badly needed. Such calls, however, have not produced much headway in terms of actual large-scale policy initiatives. Even among the policy alternatives that have been aggressively pursued (such as re-structuring school lunches, mandating caloric labeling on menus in chain restaurants, and implementing soda/snack taxes), the resulting behavioral changes have been modest at best (Harnack & French, 2008; Swartz, Braxton, & Viera, 2011; Thow, Jan, Leeder, & Swinburn, 2010). Thus, despite the rise in obesity, the American public has been relatively unresponsive to those policies designed to reduce obesity and improve health. One possible explanation for this disconnect could be that the general public (whose opinions constrain and inform public policy) interprets the causes of obesity differently than public health professionals. Interestingly, one study in England showed that doctors (general practitioners) were more likely to indicate individual factors (such as eating too much and not enough exercise) as a cause of obesity than was the general

public, although both groups thought individual factors were the primary blame (Ogden & Flanagan, 2008).

Oliver and Lee (2005) identified three potential causes for the rise in obesity: (1) genetic factors (i.e., obesity is inherited from parents, born that way), (2) environmental factors (such as poor food offered in restaurants), and (3) personal factors (i.e., lack of willpower, self-control). In a phone survey conducted in 2001, individuals were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that each of these three factors could explain the prevalence in obesity. Results of the study revealed that individuals viewed obesity as a consequence of personal factors (i.e., individual failure) more so than of genetic or environmental factors (Oliver & Lee, 2005).

Consumer activist groups and many public health professionals, on the other hand, have repeatedly argued that individuals are powerless to stop the rising tide of obesity; that forces outside their control (in other words, environmental factors) are to blame and are in need of constraint. The following quotations are illustrative of this viewpoint:

- “The obesity crisis would not be solved by treating it as a personal failing on the part of those who weigh too much... We must realize that our predicament cannot be solved through individual action alone.” David Satcher, 16th Surgeon General of the United States (Levi, Segal, & St. Laurent, 2011).
- “Obesity is not merely a matter of individual responsibility. Such suggestions are naive and simplistic.” Bruce Silverglade, Center for Science in the Public Interest (Silverglade, 2004).
- “We’ve got to move beyond personal responsibility.” Margo Wootan, Center for Science in the Public Interest (Balko, 2004).

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: jayson.lusk@okstate.edu (J.L. Lusk), brennae@illinois.edu (B. Ellison).

- “If only it were that simple. The harsh reality is that millions of Americans can’t be trusted to look after their own well-being.” David Lazarus, consumer columnist, Los Angeles Times (Lazarus, 2012).
- “Everyone talks about personal responsibility, and that won’t work here... These are things that have to be done at a governmental level, and government has to get off its ass.” Robert Lustig, pediatric endocrinologist, University of California at San Francisco (Allday, 2012).

That the “food environment” rather than individual responsibility is to blame for the increase in obesity may, of course, be true. Whether the general public actually *believes* it to be true is, however, an altogether different matter. Moreover, it may be the case that the causes of obesity are multifaceted and genetic and environmental factors may interact with personal factors in causing obesity outcomes.

As will be discussed more fully in the next section, it is important to note that public opinion is, at least partially, influenced by the manner in which obesity issues are framed in the public discourse. As such, different entities have vested interests in framing the debate in one way or another (Kwan, 2009). As Kwan (2009, p. 45) put it, “Obesity is not an unambiguous medical fact. It is a social fact that various cultural producers vie to define.” As noted, many public health professionals have actively promoted a “toxic food environment” frame that tends to blame the rise in obesity on “Big Food” and ill-conceived social policies. Not surprisingly, food manufacturers, seeking to avoid new regulations, have an interest in promoting a “personal responsibility” frame. For example, the food industry-funded *Center for Consumer Freedom* regularly writes editorials and blog posts including statements such as: “Only by building up people’s personal responsibility and guiding it towards the correct – albeit difficult – path can dieters improve their health.”

Despite some prior evidence suggesting the American public does not necessarily subscribe to blaming the food environment for the rise in obesity, recent developments may have caused a change in public opinion. In the last decade, obesity has become a focal point in the media, the medical community, academia, and in Washington DC Americans have seen a revamped National School Lunch Program, two upgrades for the Food Guide Pyramid (first MyPyramid then MyPlate), calorie labels added to many restaurant menus, and taxes added to soft drinks and snacks in some locales. Additionally, they have witnessed criticisms of McDonald’s (and other fast-food restaurants) and farm policies accused of exacerbating America’s obesity problem via supersizing and the production of high fructose corn syrup. Finally, the public has been exposed to messages from many sources arguing that the obesity epidemic is not their fault (see previous quotations). In light of these changes and the heightened attention on obesity in recent years, it is possible the general public has adjusted its opinion regarding the causal factor(s) of obesity. The purpose of this paper is to re-examine the “who’s to blame” question from the citizenry’s point of view while providing a wider range of potential entities potentially affecting weight outcomes and exploring, in more detail, the determinants of perceptions of blame.

Background

There are a variety of theories regarding the drivers of public opinion. The classical view is that public opinion is largely driven by fundamental underlying values or attitudes that are relatively stable. By contrast, Zaller (1992) argued that public opinion is largely driven by exposure to communication among the elites. According to Zaller (1992), an individual’s willingness to receive or adopt the opinions of the elite depends on the extent to which

they pay attention to such discourse and the extent to which the message is consistent with prior attitudes (which are more rigidly fixed among the more politically aware).

In the context of body weight, it is likely the case that many Americans have strong pre-determined attitudes that impact their beliefs about obese-culpability. For example, compared to virtually every other country in the world, Hofstede, Hofstede, and Minko (2010) has shown that Americans tend to be among the most individualistic. Thus, regardless of elite communication, there are likely to be strong cultural factors pre-disposing Americans toward viewing obesity as a result of individual decisions. Indeed, this appears to be what much of the previous research shows. For example, Harris, Milici, Sarda, and Schwartz (2012) found parents ascribed 60% of the blame for childhood obesity to personal responsibility and 40% to the food environment. As another example, Wang and Coups (2010) reported that 72% of survey respondents indicated that factors related to personal responsibility (i.e., overeating and not exercising) had “a lot to do” with causing obesity, whereas only 19% felt genetics had “a lot to do” with causing obesity.

However, as the prevalence of obesity has risen, so too has elite discourse about the issue, and as such, it is possible that these new messages may also affect public opinion. Research from more than a decade ago showed relatively little relationship between partisan affiliation and ideology and support for government policies related to obesity (Oliver & Lee, 2005). However, obesity has become a much more discussed and politicized issue, and as more recent surveys suggest, ideology and political affiliation are now significant predictors of support for public policy interventions related to body weight (Barry, Brescoll, Brownell, & Schlesinger, 2009). Moreover, Barry et al. (2009) also showed that agreement with different obesity metaphors influences support for public policy, with those believing that obesity is a result of sinful behavior (arguably a result of individual responsibility) being less likely to support redistributive and compensatory obesity policies than those who see obesity as a result of disability, industry manipulation, or a toxic food environment.

Barry et al. (2009) conceptualized support for public policy as dependent on beliefs about the causes for obesity; however, they devoted less time discussing the determinants of the causal beliefs. Zaller’s (1992) model would suggest that political ideology and affiliation are likely to have an independent effect on culpability-beliefs above and beyond the effects they have on support for government policies. In fact, Crandall (1994) has shown that ideology and party affiliation are associated with perceptions of whether obesity is caused by a lack of willpower, with conservatives and Republicans being more likely to perceive overweightness as resulting from a lack of willpower than liberals and Democrats.

Researchers have been interested in the public’s beliefs about the causes for the rise in obesity insofar as it affects attitudes toward the obese. A criticism of the personal-responsibility perspective is that it can potentially lead to the stigmatization of the obese and result in depression and other psychological and physical problems (Friedman et al., 2005; Puhl & Heuer, 2010). Empirical evidence of the link between perceptions of personal responsibility and stigmatization was noted by Crandall (1994), who showed that negative attitudes toward overweight individuals were positively correlated with perceptions of overweightness being caused by a lack of individual will power. Nevertheless, some experts have argued that public policy should promote stigmatization to reduce the prevalence of obesity (Callahan, 2013).

Interestingly, however, body weight does not appear to be a strong predictor of support or opposition to obesity policies (Barry et al., 2009). Moreover, obese adults seeking treatment appear to have more negative attitudes about overweight individuals and have higher beliefs about weight controllability than non-obese college students (Friedman et al., 2005). Likewise, the overweight

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7310768>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7310768>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)