

Advocacy Common Core Lesson – Articles for Student Use

The Battle Against Fast Food Begins At Home

By Daniel Weintraub -- Bee Columnist

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A public health group called last week for Gov. Gray Davis to declare childhood obesity a state emergency and take immediate steps to reduce it. But while the California Center for Public Health Advocacy proposes some worthy ideas, the foundation might be aiming at the wrong target.

Parents, not state government, are in the best position to fight the epidemic of overweight children in our schools.

It is parents -- not the government, not the fast-food companies, not the video-game manufacturers -- who are responsible for teaching kids healthy eating and exercise habits. Can they use some help? Sure. But they are the ones who need to step up to the plate, so to speak.

Child fitness is getting more and more attention these days, and rightly so. But the danger in well-meaning studies and, even more, in lawsuits against the fast-food industry, is that they send a message to parents and kids alike that obesity is somebody else's fault.

It's not. It's the fault of parents who let their kids eat unhealthy foods and sit in front of the television or computer for hours at a time. The sooner we face up to that fact as a society, the sooner we are going to be able to do something about it.

Last week's report from the Center for Public Health Advocacy took data already published by the state Department of Education and crunched it to make it more relevant to politicians. The center presented the data by state Assembly district, so that members of the Legislature could see where their communities ranked on the fat index.

Statewide, the center said, 26 percent of schoolchildren are overweight. The numbers ranged from a low of 17 percent in a wealthy Orange County Assembly district to a high of 36.8 percent in an inner-city Los Angeles district. More boys (32 percent) than girls (21 percent) were overweight. And more minorities than white children were overweight, though the study's authors said the data didn't allow them to draw any conclusions as to why that was so.

The center blamed the problem on the increasing consumption of fast food and soft drinks, larger portion sizes in restaurants, the availability of junk food on campus, advertising of junk food to children and their families, and the lack of consistent physical education programs in the schools.

The authors recommended that the state enforce an existing law requiring an average of at least 20 minutes per day of physical education, implement a state law outlining nutritional standards for elementary schools, and ensure that water fountains are present and working on every campus.

Many of the report's long-term recommendations focused on the fast-food industry: hearings to examine the impact of advertising on kids; a study to examine the prevalence of fast-food restaurants and convenience stores near schools; and incentives for communities that ban fast food outlets near schools or that ban advertising for junk food on campus.

Of the 20 recommendations put forward by the center, only one focused on parents. The authors suggest that schools be required to provide parents with fitness test results on their children and information about the

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importance of daily physical activity for learning and lifelong good health.

But none of the center's other ideas are likely to do much good until parents understand and accept their role in fighting the problem. We have laws against parents' leaving a loaded weapon where their children can find it and use it to hurt themselves or others. But no one seems to want to tell parents that they need to protect their children from unhealthy foods and from sloth.

It's not easy, especially when both parents are working, or there is only one parent in the home. Fast food is fast. It can also seem cheap, at least before you start adding the fries and sodas and desserts. And a television or video game can be like an opiate that quiets a restless child so a weary parent can get some rest of his own.

My own home is by no means a fast-food-free zone or a shrine to physical fitness. But we've tried to take a few modest steps to give our kids a fighting chance. We don't stock soda in the kitchen or serve it regularly at home; it's a treat saved for special occasions.

We try to cook as many meals at home as possible on the theory that even the least-healthy home-cooked meal is probably better for our children than the healthiest fast-food serving. We limit television time and encourage our boys to get out of the house, either to participate in organized sports or to ride their bikes, skateboards or roller blades.

If the health-care foundations did more to encourage these kinds of simple policies in the home, they might make some progress against the purveyors of fat and cholesterol, whether they are pushing their wares on the street a block from the school, in the cafeteria or even in the classroom. Before we start talking about banning fast food, let's do more to encourage personal responsibility.

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It's portion distortion that makes America fat

The Sacramento Bee, Sunday, Jan. 5, 2003

By Shannon Brownlee

It was probably inevitable that one day people would start suing McDonald's for making them fat. That day came last summer, when New York lawyer Samuel Hirsch filed several lawsuits against McDonald's, as well as four other fast-food companies, on the grounds that they had failed to adequately disclose the bad health effects of their menus.

One of the suits involves a Bronx teenager who tips the scale at 400 pounds and whose mother, in papers filed in U.S. District Court in Manhattan, said, "I always believed McDonald's food was healthy for my son."

Uh-huh. And the tooth fairy really put that dollar under his pillow. But once you've stopped sniggering at our litigious society, remember that it once seemed equally ludicrous that smokers could successfully sue tobacco companies for their addiction to cigarettes.

And while nobody is claiming that Big Macs are addictive – at least not yet – the restaurant industry and food packagers have clearly helped give many Americans the roly-poly shape they have today. This is not to say that the folks in the food industry want us to be fat. But make no mistake: When they do well economically, we gain weight.

It wasn't always thus. Readers of a certain age can remember a time when a trip to McDonald's seemed like a treat and when a small bag of French fries, a plain burger and a 12-ounce Coke seemed like a full meal. Fast food wasn't any healthier back then; we simply ate a lot less of it.

How did today's oversized appetites become the norm? It didn't happen by accident or some inevitable evolutionary process. It was to a large degree the result of consumer manipulation. Fast food's marketing strategies, which make perfect sense from a business perspective, succeed only when they induce a substantial number of us to overeat. To see how this all came about, let's go back to 1983, when John Martin became CEO of the ailing Taco Bell franchise and met a young marketing whiz named Elliott Bloom.

Using so-called "smart research," a then-new kind of in-depth consumer survey, Bloom had figured out that fast-food franchises were sustained largely by a core group of "heavy users," mostly young, single males, who ate at such restaurants as often as 20 times a month. In fact, 30 percent of Taco Bell's customers accounted for 70 percent of its sales.

Through his surveys, Bloom learned what might seem obvious now but wasn't at all clear 20 years ago – these guys ate at fast-food joints because they had absolutely no interest in cooking for themselves and didn't give a rip about the nutritional quality of the food. They didn't even care much about the taste. All that mattered was that it was fast and cheap. Martin figured Taco Bell could capture a bigger share of these hard-core customers by streamlining the food production and pricing main menu items at 49, 59 and 69 cents – well below its competitors.

It worked. Taco Bell saw a dramatic increase in patrons, with no drop in revenue per customer. As Martin told Greg Critser, author of "Fat Land: How Americans Became the Fattest People in the World," when Taco Bell ran a test of its new pricing in Texas, "within seven days of initiating the test, the average check was right back to where it was before – it was just four instead of three items."

In other words, cheap food induced people to eat more. Taco Bell's rising sales figures – up 14 percent by 1989 and 12 percent more the next year – forced other fast-food franchises to wake up and smell the burritos. By the late '80s, everybody from Burger King to Wendy's was cutting prices and seeing an increase in customers – including bargain-seeking Americans who weren't part of that original hard-core group.

If marketing strategy had stopped there, we might not be the nation of fatties that we are today. But the imperatives of the market place are growth and rising profits, and once everybody had slashed prices to the bone, the franchises had to look for a new way to satisfy investors.

And what they found was ...super-sizing.

Portion sizes had already been creeping upward. As early as 1972, for example, McDonald's introduced its large-size fries (large being a relative term, since at 3.5 ounces the '72 "large" was smaller than a medium serving today). But McDonald's increased portions only reluctantly, because the company's founder, Ray Kroc, didn't like the image of lowbrow, cheap food. If people wanted more French fries, he would say, "they can buy two bags." But price competition had grown so fierce that the only way to keep profits up was to offer

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bigger and bigger portions. By 1988, McDonald's had introduced a 32-ounce "super size" soda and "super size" fries.

The deal with all these enhanced portions is that the customer gets a lot more food for a relatively small increase in price. So just how does that translate into bigger profits? Because the actual food in a fast-food meal is incredibly cheap. For every dollar a quick-service franchiser spends to produce a food item, only 20 cents, on average, goes toward food. The rest is eaten up by expenses such as salaries, packaging, electric bills, insurance, and of course, the ubiquitous advertising that got you in the door or to the drive-through lane in the first place.

Here's how it works. Let's say a \$1.25 bag of French fries costs \$1 to produce. The potatoes, oil and salt account for only 20 cents of the cost. The other 80 cents goes toward all the other expenses. If you add half again as many French fries to the bag and sell it for \$1.50, the non-food expenses stay pretty much constant, while the extra food costs the franchise only 10 more pennies. The fast-food joint makes an extra 15 cents pure profit, and the customer thinks he's getting a good deal. And he would be, if he actually needed the extra food, which he doesn't because the nation is awash in excess calories.

That 20 percent rule, by the way, applies to all food products, whether it's a bag of potato chips, the 2,178-calorie mountain of fried seafood at Red Lobster or the 710-calorie slab of dessert at the Cheesecake Factory. Some foods are even less expensive to make. The flakes of your kid's breakfast cereal, for example, account for only 5 percent of the total amount Nabisco or General Mills spent to make and sell them.

Soda costs less to produce than any drink except tap water (which nobody seems to drink anymore), thanks to a 1970s invention that cut the expense of making high-fructose corn syrup. There used to be real sugar in Coke; when Coca-Cola and other bottlers switched to high-fructose corn syrup in 1984, they slashed sweetener costs by 20 percent. That's why 7-Eleven can sell the 64-ounce Double Gulp – half a gallon of soda and nearly 600 calories – for only 37 cents more than the 16-ounce, 89-cent regular Gulp. You'd feel ripped off if you bought the smaller size. Who wouldn't?

The final step in the fattening of America was the "up sell," a stroke of genius whose origins are buried somewhere in the annals of marketing. You're already at the counter, you've ordered a cheese burger value meal for \$3.74, and your server says, "Would you like to super-size that for only \$4.47?" Such a deal. The chain extracts an extra 73 cents from the customer, and the customer gets an extra 400 calories – bringing the total calorie count to 1,550, more than half the recommended intake for an adult man for an entire day.

When confronted with their contribution to America's expanding waistline, restaurateurs and food packagers reply that eating less is a matter of individual responsibility. But that's not how the human stomach works. If you put more food in front of people, they eat more, as studies have consistently shown over the last decade.

My personal favorite: The researcher gave moviegoers either a half-gallon or a gallon bucket of popcorn before the show (it was "Payback," with Mel Gibson) and then measured how much they ate when they returned what was left in the containers afterward. Nobody could polish off the entire thing, but subjects ate 44 percent more when given the bigger bucket.

The downside, of course, is that 20 years of Big Food has trained us to think that oceanic drinks and gargantuan portions are normal. Indeed, once fast food discovered that big meals meant big profits, everybody from Heineken to Olive Garden to Frito Lay followed suit. Today, says Lisa Young, a nutritionist at New York University, super-sizing has pervaded every segment of the food industry. For her PhD, Young documented the changes in portion sizes for dozens of foods over the past several decades.

M&M/Mars, for example, has increased the size of candy bars such as Milky Way and Snickers four times since 1970, Starbucks introduced the 20-ounce "venti" size in 1999 and discontinued its "short" 8-ounce cup. When 22-ounce Heinekens were introduced, Young reported, the company sold 24 million of them the first year, and attributed the sales to the "big-bottle gimmick."

Even Lean Cuisine and Weight Watchers now advertise "Hearty Portions" of their diet meals. Everything from plates and muffin tins to restaurant chairs and the cut of our Levi's has expanded to match our growing appetites, and the wonder of it all is not that 60 percent of Americans are overweight or obese, but rather that 40 percent of us are not.

Where does it end? Marketers and restaurateurs may scoff at lawsuits like the ones brought this summer against fast food companies, and they have a point: Adults are ultimately responsible for what they put in their own mouths.

But maybe there's hope for us yet, because it looks as if fast-food companies "Omnipresence" – the McDonald's strategy of beating out competitors by opening new stores, sometimes as many as 1,000 a year – "has proved costly and self-cannibalizing," say author Critser. With 13,000 McDonald's units alone, most of America is so saturated with fast food there's practically no place left to put a drive-through lane. Now, fast-food companies are killing each other in a new price war they can't possibly sustain, and McDonald's just suffered its first quarterly loss since the company went public 47 years ago.

The obvious direction to go is down, toward what nutritional policymakers are calling "smart-sizing." Or at least it should be obvious, if food purveyors cared as much about helping Americans slim down as they would have us believe. Instead of urging Americans to "Get Active, Stay Active" – Pepsi Cola's new criticism-deflecting slogan – how about bringing back the 6.5 ounce sodas of the '40s and '50s? Or, imagine, as Critser does, the day when McDonald's advertises Le Petit Mac, made with high-grade beef, a delicious whole-grain bun and hawked by, say, Serena Williams.

One way or another, as Americans wake up to the fact that obesity is killing nearly as many citizens as cigarettes are, jumbo burgers and super-size fries will seem like less of a bargain.

If You Pitch It, They Will Eat

By DAVID BARBOZA

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THE McDonald's Corporation wants to be everywhere that children are.

So besides operating 13,602 restaurants in the United States, it has plastered its golden arches on Barbie dolls, video games, book jackets and even theme parks.

McDonald's calls this promotion and brand extension. But, a growing number of nutritionists call it a blitzkrieg that perverts children's eating habits and sets them on a path to obesity.

Marketing fast food, snacks and beverages to children is at least as old as Ronald McDonald himself. What's new, critics say, is the scope and intensity of the assault. Big food makers like McDonald's and Kraft Foods Inc. are finding every imaginable way to put their names in front of children. And they're spending more than ever -- \$15 billion last year, compared with \$12.5 billion in 1998, according to research conducted at Texas A&M University in College Station.

"What really changed over the last decade is the proliferation of electronic media," says Susan Linn, a psychologist who studies children's marketing at Harvard's Judge Baker Children's Center. "It used to just be Saturday-morning television. Now it's Nickelodeon, movies, video games, the Internet and even marketing in schools."

Product tie-ins are everywhere. There are SpongeBob SquarePants Popsicles, Oreo Cookie preschool counting books and Keebler's Scooby Doo Cookies. There is even a Play-Doh Lunchables play set.

While the companies view these as harmless promotional pitches, lawyers are threatening a wave of obesity-related class-action lawsuits. Legislators are pressing to lock food companies out of school cafeterias. And, some of the fiercest critics are calling for an outright ban on all food advertising aimed at children.

"The problem of obesity is so staggering, so out of control, that we have to do something," says Walter Willett, a professor of nutrition at the Harvard School of Public Health. "The vast majority of what they sell is junk," Mr. Willett says of the big food makers. "How often do you see fruits and vegetables marketed?"

The increase in food marketing to children has closely tracked their increase in weight. Since 1980, the number of obese children, has more than doubled to 16 percent, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

School districts in New York and Los Angeles have responded by banning the sale of sugary beverages and snacks in school vending machines.

Most big food companies, despite some promises to offer healthier foods and in some cases to limit marketing in schools, deny that they are to blame for the epidemic of excess weight. They insist that sedentary behavior, a lack of exercise and poor supervision and eating habits are responsible.

Food companies say their commercials don't encourage overeating, that the foods they advertise are meant to be "part of a balanced diet," and that some foods are meant to be only occasional treats.

"We talk about offering carrot sticks," says Karlin Linhardt, the director of youth marketing at McDonald's. "And we have parents come in and say, 'We offer them carrot sticks at home. When we come to McDonald's we want a treat, french fries.'"

Why would companies take aim at children so energetically? Because they, increasingly, are where the money is.

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"It's the largest market there is," says James McNeal, a professor of marketing at Texas A & M and an authority on marketing to children. "Kids 4 to 12 spend on their own wants and needs about \$30 billion a year. But their influence on what their parents spend is \$600 billion. That's blue sky."

In toy stores, children can become accustomed to food brands early by buying a Hostess bake set, Barbie's Pizza Hut play set or Fisher-Price's Oreo Matchin' Middles game. And, for budding math whizzes, there is a series of books from Hershey's Kisses on addition, subtraction and fractions.

Schools are also a major marketing site. With many school districts facing budget shortfalls, a quick solution has come from offering more profitable fast food from outlets like McDonald's, KFC and Pizza Hut.

SOME schools have contracts to sell fast food; others have special days allotted for fast food.

The Skinner Montessori school in Vancouver, Wash., for instance, has "McDonald's Wednesdays" and "KFC Fridays."

There are McDonald's McTeacher's Nights in Jefferson City, Mo., and Pizza Hut Days in Garden City, Kan.

"It's awesome. They love it," Tracy Johnson, director of nutrition for the 7,500-student school district in Garden City, Kan., says of the Pizza Hut food. "We also serve vegetables. We try to make it into a healthy meal."

According to a survey by the C.D.C., about 20 percent of the nation's schools now offer brand-name fast food.

Vending machines now dominate school corridors. Coca-Cola and PepsiCo have "pouring rights" contracts in hundreds of schools nationwide.

Lawyers and consumer advocates have harshly criticized educators for "commercializing the schools" and sending poor dietary messages to children.

"It seems very clear it's a breach of duty," says John Banzhaf, a professor of law at George Washington University in Washington and one of the lawyers pressing for class-action lawsuits against big food companies. "Schools get paid a kickback for every sugary soft drink or burger sold."

Some food companies heatedly defend their promotions, and their products. "I think our communication with children is appropriate; we're not shoving it down their throat," says Ken Barun, director of healthy lifestyles at McDonald's, adding, "To make a general statement that McDonald's food is unhealthy is wrong."

Industry officials concur. "These foods and beverages are safe, and consumers -- in some cases parents -- have to be the one to make the decisions about how much should be eaten," says Gene Grabowski, a spokesman for the Grocery Manufacturers of America, which represents the nation's biggest food companies. "The industry is trying very hard to be responsible in the way it markets these foods."

Still, legislators and school districts are rethinking school marketing. There are more than 30 bills before state legislatures around the country proposing to ban certain snacks and beverages from school vending machines, according to the Commercialism in Education Research Unit at Arizona State University in Tempe.

TELEVISION, of course, remains the most powerful medium for selling to children. These days there is no shortage of advertising opportunities with the emergence of the Walt Disney Company's Disney Channel, Nickelodeon, which is owned by Viacom, and the Cartoon Network, a unit of AOL Time Warner's Turner Broadcasting.

Marketers know that children love animals and cartoon characters, and industry observers say they have used that knowledge not just to create new shows, but to produce a new generation of animated pitchmen.

Some critics say children often can't differentiate the programs from the commercials and that food companies

and producers of children's shows have helped blur the line by creating characters that leap back and forth, from pitchman to program character.

SpongeBob SquarePants has his own show. But he also sells Kraft Macaroni & Cheese, Popsicles, Kleenex, DVD's, skateboards, fruit snacks and dozens of other products.

In fact, a series of big marketing alliances has bound food companies and television show producers like never before. Disney, for instance, has teamed up with McDonald's on movies and product tie-ins. Disney and Kellogg collaborate on a line of cereals that includes Disney Chocolate Mud & Bugs. And Nickelodeon has struck marketing deals with the Quaker Oats Company and General Mills Inc.

"The programs have become advertising for the food, and the food has become advertising for the programs," says Professor Linn of Harvard.

During Nickelodeon's "SpongeBob SquarePants" 30-minute cartoon last week, more than half the commercials were about food. The spots showed that children who consume "Go-gurt," the new yogurt-on-the-go, loved skateboards and danced on the walls.

A child who poured milk on his Post Honey Comb cereal was transformed into the raffish Honey Comb monster named the Craver. Children walked into walls after seeing other youngsters' tongues tattooed with Betty Crocker's Fruit Roll-Ups. And two others reveled in having so much sugar on their Kellogg's Cinammon Krunchers cereal that even the tidal wave of milk that washed over their treehouse couldn't wipe off the sugary flavor.

But do these commercials really resonate with children? Marketing experts say yes; the children do, too.

Nicky Greenberg, who is 6 and lives with her parents in Lower Manhattan, often spends her afternoons watching Nickelodeon. She can sing the theme song from "SpongeBob SquarePants," and she says her parents buy her Kellogg's Cinnamon Toast Crunch because she loves the commercials.

"On the commercial," she says, "there's a captain that goes on a submarine, and there's an octopus, and three kids. And then the girl says, 'Just taste this pirate.' And the pirate says, 'Ayyy, Yummy!'"

The reaction was no different last week at a supermarket on the South Side of Chicago.

Tatanisha Roberson, who is 8, was riding on the front of a shopping cart pushed by her mother, Erica, 24, heading toward the cereal aisle.

The question was posed: What kind of food is Tatanisha interested in? "Anything that comes on the TV, she'll get," her mother said, rolling her eyes. "Rugrats Fruit Snacks; Scooby Doo Fruit Snacks; Flintstone's Jell-O."

In private, some company executives complain that when parents go to the grocery store they don't buy the healthy products that are offered. Professor McNeal at Texas A & M says the companies are a scapegoat.

"I don't think they should be singled out," he says. "Mom blames everyone but herself. There's an abdication of the parents' role. You've got 70 percent of moms who are working, so when they're home they try to please their kids."

The big food companies say they follow a set of guidelines for television advertising enforced by the Children's Advertising Review Unit, which was set up and financed by advertisers to regulate themselves.

The companies say their ads don't show overeating or make false health claims.

Officials at the Children's Advertising Review Unit acknowledge that they don't look at the collective message food companies send to children. "We're not nutritionists," says Elizabeth Lascoutx, a spokeswoman for the

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unit. "We're not in the position to say this food item cannot be part of a healthy diet."

Sensing a backlash to advertising and promotion, especially in schools, Kraft said last month that it would end all in-school marketing efforts. And General Mills, the maker of Cheerios, says that in-school marketing is wrong.

"We just view it as inappropriate," says Tom Forsythe, a spokesman for General Mills. "There's no gatekeeper; they're a captive audience."

Some marketing deals have come under pressure. For example, last week, the British Broadcasting Corporation said it would no longer allow its children's television characters to be used in fast-food sponsorships with companies like McDonald's after consumer groups criticized the public broadcaster for helping promote junk food.

Some companies deny that they even market to children. Both Coke and Pepsi insist that they direct their products only to teenagers and adults. And Yum Brands, which operates KFC, Pizza Hut and Taco Bell, says it does not market to children or have operations in schools.

But sometimes the evidence would seem to contradict those statements. Coke signed a multimillion-dollar global marketing deal tied to the Harry Potter character in 2001, and many schools, like the one in Garden City, Kan., have contracts to serve food from Pizza Hut.

Amy Sherwood, a spokeswoman for Yum Brands, says, "That must be a local deal with the franchisees and those schools because we don't do that on a national level."

Kari Bjorhus, a spokeswoman at Coke, said: "We absolutely don't market to children. Our feeling with Harry Potter is it really appeals to the whole family."

YET with regulators, lawmakers and others mounting campaigns that seek to make big food companies look like big tobacco companies, which have been sued over marketing campaigns geared toward youths, something is bound to change, industry experts say. The World Health Organization and even Wall Street analysts are calling on big food companies to rein in their marketing campaigns and change the way they do business.

"The food industry will have to review its marketing practices and transform itself, in our view, regardless of potential regulation or litigation," Arnaud Langlois, an analyst at J. P. Morgan, wrote in a report last April.

There is a need to set specific standards on what is marketed to children, according to Professor Willett at Harvard. "We don't sell children guns, alcohol or drugs, but we do allow them to be exploited by food companies."

Even some influential marketing experts are beginning to think their clients might come around.

Dan Acuff, a leading children's marketing consultant, says that when profits are at stake, companies listen.

"If it's going to hit the bottom line, they'll listen," he says. "You'd like them to have a conscience, but conscience and bottom line are not in the same paradigm in the corporate world."

How the Food Industry Eats Your Kid's Lunch

By LUCY KOMISAR

An increasingly cozy alliance between companies that manufacture processed foods and companies that serve the meals is making students — a captive market — fat and sick while pulling in hundreds of millions of dollars in profits. At a time of fiscal austerity, these companies are seducing school administrators with promises to cut costs through privatization. Parents who want healthier meals, meanwhile, are outgunned.

Each day, 32 million children in the United States get lunch at schools that participate in the National School Lunch Program, which uses agricultural surplus to feed children. About 21 million of these students eat free or reduced-price meals, a number that has surged since the recession. The program, which also provides breakfast, costs \$13.3 billion a year.

Sadly, it is being mismanaged and exploited. About a quarter of the school nutrition program has been privatized, much of it outsourced to food service management giants like Aramark, based in Philadelphia; Sodexo, based in France; and the Chartwells division of the Compass Group, based in Britain. They work in tandem with food manufacturers like the chicken producers Tyson and Pilgrim's, all of which profit when good food is turned to bad.

Here's one way it works. The Agriculture Department pays about \$1 billion a year for commodities like fresh apples and sweet potatoes, chickens and turkeys. Schools get the food free; some cook it on site, but more and more pay processors to turn these healthy ingredients into fried chicken nuggets, fruit pastries, pizza and the like. Some \$445 million worth of commodities are sent for processing each year, a nearly 50 percent increase since 2006.

The Agriculture Department doesn't track spending to process the food, but school authorities do. The Michigan Department of Education, for example, gets free raw chicken worth \$11.40 a case and sends it for processing into nuggets at \$33.45 a case. The schools in San Bernardino, Calif., spend \$14.75 to make French fries out of \$5.95 worth of potatoes.

The money is ill spent. The [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#) has warned that sending food to be processed often means lower nutritional value and noted that "many schools continue to exceed the standards for fat, saturated fat and sodium." A 2008 [study by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#) found that by the time many healthier commodities reach students, "they have about the same nutritional value as junk foods."

Monica Zimmer, a Sodexo spokeswoman, said that "much has changed" since those studies, pointing to the company's support for "nutrition education to encourage young students to eat more fruits and vegetables."

[Roland Zullo](#), a researcher at the [University of Michigan](#), found in 2008 that Michigan schools that hired private food-service management firms spent less on labor and food but more on fees and supplies, yielding "no substantive economic savings." Alarmingly, he even found that privatization was associated with lower test scores, hypothesizing that the high-fat and high-sugar foods served by the companies might be the cause. In a later study, in 2010, [Dr. Zullo found that Chartwells was able to trim costs](#) by cutting benefits for workers in Ann Arbor schools, but that the schools didn't end up realizing any savings.

Why is this allowed to happen? Part of it is that school authorities don't want the trouble of overseeing real kitchens. Part of it is that the management companies are saving money by not having to pay skilled kitchen workers.

In addition, the management companies have a cozy relationship with food processors, which routinely pay the

companies rebates (typically around 14 percent) in return for contracts. The rebates have generally been kept secret from schools, which are charged the full price.

Last year, Andrew M. Cuomo, then the New York State attorney general, won a \$20 million settlement over Sodexo's pocketing of such rebates. Other states are following New York and looking into the rebates; the [Agriculture Department began its own inquiry in August](#).

With the crackdown on these rebates, food service companies have turned to another accounting trick. I found evidence that the rebate abuses are continuing, now under the name of "prompt payment discounts," under an Agriculture Department loophole. These discounts, for payments that are often not prompt at all, are really rebates under another name. New York State requires rebates to be returned to schools, but the Sodexo settlement shows how unevenly the ban has been enforced.

The food service companies I spoke with denied any impropriety. "Our culinary philosophy, as a company, is to promote scratch cooking where possible and encourage variety and nutritionally balanced meals," said Ayde Lyons, a Chartwells spokeswoman. "We use minimally processed foods whenever possible."

There are economic and nutritional consequences to privatization. School kitchen workers are generally unionized, with benefits; they are also typically local residents who have children in public schools and care about their well-being. Laid-off school workers become an economic drain instead of a positive force. And the rebate deals with national food manufacturers cut out local farmers and small producers like bakers, who could offer fresh, healthy food and help the local economy.

Children pay the price. Dr. Zullo found that privately managed school cafeterias offered meals that were higher in sugar and fats and made unhealthy snack items — soda, cookies, potato chips — more readily available. The companies were also less likely to use reduced-sugar recipes. Linda Hugle, a retired school principal in Three Rivers, Ore., told me that when her district switched to Sodexo, "the savings were paltry." She added, "You pay a little less and your kids get strawberry milk, frozen French fries and artificial shortening."

Advocates who fight for better food face an uphill battle. Dorothy Brayley, executive director of Kids First, a nutrition advocacy group in Pawtucket, R.I., told me she encountered resistance in trying to persuade Sodexo to buy from local farmers. (Sodexo says it does buy some local produce and has opened salad bars in many schools.) Donna D. Walsh, a former school board president in Westchester County, N.Y., told me she worked with a supportive superintendent to get Aramark to stop deep-frying food and to open a salad bar. But after a new superintendent came in, she said, the company went back to profit-driven menus of pizza and bagels.

The federal government could intervene. The Agriculture Department [proposed new rules](#) this year that would set maximum calories for school meals; require more fruits, vegetables and whole grains; and limit [trans fats](#).

Not surprisingly, the most committed foes of the rules are the same corporations that make money supplying bad food. Aramark, Sodexo and Chartwells, as well as food processing companies like ConAgra, wrote letters arguing, among other things, that children may not want to eat healthier food.

Any increase in fruit and vegetables might result in "plate waste," wrote Sodexo. A protein requirement at breakfast, Aramark said, would hamper efforts to offer "popular breakfast items." Their lobbying persuaded members of Congress to block a once-a-week limit on starchy vegetables and to continue to allow a few tablespoons of tomato sauce on pizza to count as a vegetable serving. Thanks to that cave-in, children will continue to get their vegetables in the form of potatoes for breakfast and pizza for lunch.

One-third of children from the ages of 6 to 19 are overweight or obese. These children could see their life expectancies shortened because of their vulnerability to diabetes, heart disease and cancer. Unfortunately, profit, not health, is the priority of the food service management companies, food processors and even elected officials. Until more parents demand reform of the school lunch system, children will continue to suffer.

Lucy Komisar is an investigative [reporter](#) and author, who received support from the Investigative Fund, a project of the Nation Institute, for the reporting of this essay.

A TV Show and Congress Tackle School Lunches

By [KIM SEVERSON](#)

IT'S been an unusually tough month for the people who make school lunches.

Friday night, more than seven million viewers watched the premiere of “Jamie Oliver’s Food Revolution,” an ABC reality series in which the British chef storms the kitchens of Huntington, W.Va., to improve the town’s collective [diet](#).

That only the [N.C.A.A.](#) Division I men’s basketball tournament pulled in more viewers signals that the nation has an appetite for the kind of wholesale food reform Mr. Oliver is pushing.

To the chagrin of cafeteria workers everywhere, his star villains are the town’s lunch ladies — or the “lovely girls” as he calls them. They ended up looking so bad that the national School Nutrition Association followed up with a press release in their defense.

That wasn’t the only recent public thrashing for the people who make school food. Students in Chicago showed up at a Board of Education meeting to protest the quality of their midday meals. And members of the national news media discovered the “Fed Up with Lunch” blog, written by an anonymous school employee in the Midwest who is spending a year eating and publishing photos of awful-looking food at her school cafeteria.

In Washington, where [Michelle Obama](#)’s anti-[obesity](#) campaign continues to point a finger at the school lunch line, a Senate committee on March 24 cut by more than half a proposal by [President Obama](#) to spend a record \$10 billion more on child nutrition programs over 10 years, including school food.

Although school food directors and the growing ranks of those seeking to improve what is served in the lunchroom are disappointed with the numbers coming out of Washington, people who have been working with the Agriculture Department and Congress to improve school food say the bill’s \$4.5-billion increase is an historic improvement.

“We’d all like to do more and we’re going to try, but we’ve got to get started,” said Senator [Blanche Lincoln](#), Democrat of Arkansas, the chairwoman of the Senate committee on agriculture and the architect of the bill. The legislation proposes the first real increase over inflation that the school food program has had in several decades. And, she said, in the current economic climate, any money is a victory.

The Child Nutrition Act comes up for financing every five years. It pays for school food and other nutrition programs for lower-income children. It’s also the mechanism legislators can use to change the rules that govern those programs. The bill headed to the Senate floor would increase by about 6 cents the \$2.68 that schools can get for each lunch — far less than the \$1-a-lunch increase that a coalition of groups seeking to change school food programs have been campaigning for.

Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy for the [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#), an advocacy group, said the bill was still worth supporting.

“This is the strongest child nutrition reauthorization bill I have ever seen,” said Ms. Wootan, who has worked to improve school nutrition standards for 17 years. “We can’t go from candy bars to apples in one fell swoop.”

In addition to the increase in financing, Agriculture Department staff members said a number of less obvious changes in nutritional rules and financing for special programs will improve what is served in schools as soon as
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next year.

For example, milk is the biggest single source of [saturated fat](#) on the lunch line. The bill would allow only skim and 1 percent milk to be offered, banning whole and 2 percent milk. And schools will be required to ensure that children have water with their meals.

At least \$40 million would be spent on farm-to-school programs and school gardens. Another \$10 million would go toward adding [organic food](#). And millions more have been included to train cafeteria workers.

One of the biggest changes involves food sold in places other than the cafeteria, like vending machines, sporting events and hallway fund-raisers. The law would give the Agriculture Department power to set limits on nutrients like sodium and fat in all food sold on campus, and it would set limits on the number of bake sales and other food-based fund-raisers.

“We want to make sure there’s consistency,” Senator Lincoln said. “This is not only about providing nutritional food for our children but teaching them good life skills and what the right choices are.”

The Agriculture Department is also overhauling all school nutritional guidelines in an effort that is separate from the Child Nutrition Act, but which is intended to work in concert with the changes it will bring about.

The meal standards, which haven’t been changed for 15 years, are now being updated by the Agriculture Department. Based on a report from the Institutes of Medicine, the new standards will require more fruits, vegetables and whole grains and, for the first time, limit the amount of [calories](#) in each meal.

“Look at the regulations now,” said Renee Hanks, food service director for the South Colonie School District in Albany. “The U.S.D.A. requires so many [carbohydrates](#) that we’re throwing whole-wheat bread at them. We’re throwing extra crackers at them. If they aren’t out and active, they can’t handle all those calories.”

But, she warned, adding new requirements for more expensive foods like fresh fruit must come with more money.

Changes to the bureaucratic process might free up some money in school budgets, analysts said. For example, the amount of paperwork needed to assure that some lower-income children qualify for a free lunch will be reduced, and the cost of a meal for children who pay full price will likely increase. Extra training money should also help school kitchens operate more efficiently.

Whether more money will be added before the final bill is approved later this year is in question. Even if more money for the bill does appear, it will likely go toward the parts of the act that pay for hunger programs, not school lunch, Agriculture Department officials and overhaul advocates agree.

That doesn’t mean the conversation is necessarily over, said Rochelle Davis, the founding executive director of the Healthy Schools Campaign, a national nonprofit organization. The new nutritional requirements mean nothing if school districts cannot pay for them. Accepting the small increase in school food financing and calling it a victory lets Congress off the hook, she said.

“Look at the agony our country is going through over health care and the struggle to handle a sick nation,” she said. “We just have to connect the dots and get people eating right and get people moving. Healthy school food is a logical part of that.”

An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to the varieties of milk that would be allowed in school cafeterias under legislation in the Senate. Skim and 1 percent milk would be available, not just skim milk.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 7, 2010 An article last Wednesday about school nutrition legislation now in the Senate omitted one type of milk the bill would allow in cafeterias. Besides skim, 1 percent milk could be sold.

MARCH 13, 2012, 8:30 PM
The Human Cost of Animal Suffering

By **MARK BITTMAN**

Until a couple of years ago I believed that the primary reasons to eat less meat were environment- and health-related, and there's no question that those are valid reasons. But animal welfare has since become a large part of my thinking as well. And I say this as someone not known to his friends as an animal-lover.

If we want a not-too-damaged planet to live on, and we want to live here in a way that's also not too damaged, we're better off eating less meat. But if we also want a not-too-damaged psyche, we have to look at how we treat animals and begin to change it.

We can start by owning up to the fact that our system is industrialized. And as horrible as that word - "industrialized" - seems when applied to what was once called animal husbandry, it is *precisely* the correct term. Those who haven't seen this, or believe it to be a myth perpetrated by PETA, might consider reading "[Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight](#)," recently published by Timothy Pachirat. (This isn't a review, but the book is superbly written, especially given the grimness of the subject.)

You might think that "every 12 seconds" refers to the frequency with which we kill animals, but in a moment you'll realize that that's impossible: we process more than nine billion animals each year - hundreds per second. No, 12 seconds is the frequency with which the Omaha slaughterhouse where Pachirat worked for five months killed cattle, a total of around 2,500 per day. Pachirat, whom I interviewed by phone earlier this week, took the job not as an animal rights activist but as a doctoral candidate in political science seeking to understand the normalization of violence. Like others, he concluded that our isolation from killing allows us to tolerate unimaginably cruel practices simply because we don't see them. But Pachirat emphasizes that it's not only we - consumers - who are isolated from the killing, but workers: at his plant only seven people out of 800 were directly involved with live cattle, and only four with killing.

Not that the other workers have it easy: "Every Twelve Seconds" shatters any belief you might have about the system treating animals with a shred of decency. "The sheer volume, scale and rate of killing," Pachirat told me, "the way the animals form a continuous stream rather than individual creatures, makes it clear the animals are seen as raw material. The cattle are called 'beef' even while they're alive - and that not only protects people from acknowledging what they're doing and that they're doing it to sentient beings, it's also accurate, a reflection of the process itself."

Our assertion of our right to treat animals as we do iron or lumber or car doors - to treat them as widgets - is not cannibalism, but it's hardly consistent with our keeping of adored pets.

Meat-eaters may assert that this is somehow justifiable, because we "need" to eat meat - just not cats or dogs or goldfish - to live. And even though we don't (in fact, there's increasing evidence that too much of it is [harmful](#); more on that later this week), we have more than two million years of tradition to point to, we have bodies that process meat well and even thrive on it in limited amounts and we have a love of eating animal flesh that for most of us may not go away any time soon.

None of which justifies egregious maltreatment. (Yes, vegan friends, I get that killing animals, period, is maltreatment. This ambivalence, or hypocrisy if you prefer, is for every ambivalent or hypocritical omnivore or flexitarian a puzzle, and scale is an issue.) That maltreatment must first be acknowledged in order for us to alleviate it.

And that acknowledgment is forthcoming. The allure - and habit! - of meat-eating may be too strong for most of us to give it up, but recognizing its consequences is a move toward a middle ground: a place where we continue to eat animals but exchange that privilege (that's what it is) for a system in which we eat less and treat them

better, one that allows our children to make more humane decisions. Because once we accept that farm animals are capable of suffering (80 percent of Americans believe this to be true), we might well wonder what they've done to deserve such punishment.

The most publicized stories about industrial agriculture represent the exceptions that prove the rule: the uncommon torture of animals by perverse individuals in rogue operations. But torture is inherent in the routine treatment of animals as widgets, and the system itself is perverse. What makes "Every Twelve Seconds" different from (for example) a Mercy for Animals exposé is, says Pachirat, "that the day-in and day-out experience produces invisibility. Industrialized agriculture perpetuates concealment at every level of the process, and rather than focusing on the shocking examples we should be focusing on the system itself."

At that point we might finally acknowledge that raising, killing and eating animals must be done differently. When omnivores recognize that our way of producing and eating meat reduces not only slaughterhouse workers but all of us to a warped state, we'll be able to bring about the kind of changes that will reduce both meat consumption and our collective guilt.

Pachirat says he has changed as a result of his experience, becoming increasingly interested in what he calls "distancing and concealment." He now intends to work on those issues as they relate to imprisonment, war, torture, deployment of drones and other sophisticated weaponry that allow impersonal killing. And it's because these connections make so much sense that we should look more carefully at how we raise and kill animals.

"I didn't get into this to focus on animal issues," he told me, "but my own relationship to eating meat has been transformed, and I now forgo it altogether. It's just not worth the pleasure when you know the system."

When we all know the system, we'll be even more eager to change it.

Studies Question the Pairing of Food Deserts and Obesity

By **GINA KOLATA**

It has become an article of faith among some policy makers and advocates, including [Michelle Obama](#), that poor urban neighborhoods are food deserts, bereft of fresh fruits and vegetables.

But two new studies have found something unexpected. Such neighborhoods not only have more fast food restaurants and convenience stores than more affluent ones, but more grocery stores, supermarkets and full-service restaurants, too. And there is no relationship between the type of food being sold in a neighborhood and obesity among its children and adolescents.

Within a couple of miles of almost any urban neighborhood, “you can get basically any type of food,” said Roland Sturm of the RAND Corporation, lead author of one of the studies. “Maybe we should call it a food swamp rather than a desert,” he said.

Some experts say these new findings raise questions about the effectiveness of efforts to combat the obesity epidemic simply by improving access to healthy foods. Despite campaigns to get Americans to exercise more and eat healthier foods, obesity rates have not budged over the past decade, according to recently released federal data.

“It is always easy to advocate for more grocery stores,” said Kelly D. Brownell, director of Yale University’s Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity, who was not involved in the studies. “But if you are looking for what you hope will change obesity, healthy food access is probably just wishful thinking.”

Advocates have long called for more supermarkets in poor neighborhoods and questioned the quality of the food that is available. And Mrs. Obama has made elimination of food deserts an element of her broader campaign against childhood obesity, Let’s Move, winning praise from Democrats and even some Republicans, and denunciations from conservative commentators and bloggers who have cited it as yet another example of the nanny state.

Speaking in October on the South Side of Chicago, [she said](#) that in too many neighborhoods “if people want to buy a head of lettuce or salad or some fruit for their kid’s lunch, they have to take two or three buses, maybe pay for a taxicab, in order to do it.”

Mrs. Obama has also advocated getting schools to serve healthier lunches and communities to build more playgrounds.

Her office referred questions about the food deserts issue to the Department of Agriculture. A spokesman there, Justin DeJong, said by e-mail that fighting obesity requires “a comprehensive response.” The federal effort, he added, includes not just improving access to healthy foods but also improving food in schools, increasing physical education time, and educating people on the importance of healthy diets.

Some researchers and advocates say that further investigation is still needed on whether grocery stores and chain supermarkets in poor neighborhoods are selling produce that is too costly and of poor quality. “Not all grocery stores are equal,” said John Weidman, deputy executive director of the Food Trust, an advocacy group in Philadelphia.

It was difficult to design a study that could rigorously answer the questions: Do poor urban neighborhoods lack places to buy fresh produce and is that contributing to obesity? But Helen Lee of the Public Policy Institute of California, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization, found a way. For data on where children lived and

went to school and how much they weighed, she used a federal study of 8,000 children. For data on the location of food establishments, she used a data set that compiled all the businesses in the nation and included their sizes and locations.

“I knew where the children lived, so let’s take the middle of that neighborhood,” Dr. Lee said. “What is the nearest grocery store? What is the nearest convenience store?”

She used census tracts to define neighborhoods because they tend to have economically homogeneous populations. Poor neighborhoods, Dr. Lee found, had nearly twice as many fast food restaurants and convenience stores as wealthier ones, and they had more than three times as many corner stores per square mile. But they also had nearly twice as many supermarkets and large-scale grocers per square mile. Her study, financed by the institute, was published in the March issue of *Social Science and Medicine*.

Dr. Sturm’s study, published in February in *The American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, had a different design. With financing from the National Institutes of Health, he used data on the self-reported heights, weights, and diets of more than 13,000 California children and teenagers in the California Health Interview Survey. The survey included the students’ addresses and the addresses of their schools. He used a different data set to see what food outlets were nearby. Dr. Sturm found no relationship between what type of food students said they ate, what they weighed, and the type of food within a mile and a half of their homes.

He has also completed a national study of middle school students, with the same result — no consistent relationship between what the students ate and the type of food nearby. Living close to supermarkets or grocers did not make students thin and living close to fast food outlets did not make them fat. The study will be published soon in *Public Health*.

It is unclear how the idea took hold that poor urban neighborhoods were food deserts but it had immediate appeal. There is even an Agriculture Department “[food desert locator](#)” and a “National Food Desert Awareness Month” supported by the National Center for Public Research, a charitable foundation.

But, Dr. Lee said, studies lending support to the idea tended to be limited by methodological difficulties.

For example, some researchers looked at neighborhood food outlets but did not have data on how fat residents were. Others examined small areas, like part of a single city and extrapolated to the entire nation. Others had a different problem. They looked at much bigger areas like ZIP codes, which include people of diverse incomes, making it hard to know what happened in pockets of poverty within those regions.

Some researchers counted only fast food restaurants and large supermarkets, missing small grocers who sold produce. Some tallied food outlets per 1,000 residents, which made densely populated urban areas appear to have fewer places per person to buy food. A more meaningful measure, Dr. Lee said, is the distance to the nearest stores.

In one neighborhood in Camden, N.J., where 80 percent of children are eligible for a free school lunch, children bought empanadas, sodas and candy at a grocer, while adults said they had no trouble finding produce. Wedged in among fast food restaurants, convenience stores, sit-down restaurants, take-out Chinese and pizza parlors were three places with abundant produce: Pathmark and Save-A-Lot supermarkets and a produce stand.

U.S. Seeks New Limits on Food Ads for Children

By **WILLIAM NEUMAN**

Will Toucan Sam go the way of Joe Camel?

The federal government proposed [sweeping new guidelines](#) on Thursday that could push the food industry to overhaul how it advertises cereal, soda pop, snacks, restaurant meals and other foods to children.

Citing an epidemic of childhood [obesity](#), regulators are taking aim at a range of tactics used to market foods high in sugar, fat or salt to children, including the use of cartoon characters like Toucan Sam, the brightly colored Froot Loops pitchman, who appears in television commercials and online games as well as on cereal boxes.

Regulators are asking food makers and restaurant companies to make a choice: make your products healthier or stop advertising them to youngsters.

“Toucan Sam can sell healthy food or junk food,” said Dale Kunkel, a communications professor at the [University of Arizona](#) who studies the marketing of children’s food. “This forces Toucan Sam to be associated with healthier products.”

The guidelines, released by the Federal Trade Commission, encompass a broad range of marketing efforts, including television and print ads, Web sites, online games that act as camouflaged advertisements, social media, product placements in movies, the use of movie characters in cross-promotions and fast-food children’s meals. The inclusion of digital media, such as product-based games, represents one of the government’s strongest efforts so far to address the extension of children’s advertising into the online world, [which children’s health advocates say is a growing problem](#).

The guidelines are meant to be voluntary, but companies are likely to face heavy pressure to adopt them. Companies that choose to take part would have five to 10 years to bring their products and marketing into compliance.

“There’s clearly a demand hidden behind the velvet glove of the voluntary language,” said Dan Jaffe, an executive vice president of the [Association of National Advertisers](#), a trade group that represents marketers like Kraft Foods and Campbell Soup.

By explicitly tying advertising to childhood obesity, the government is suggesting there is a darker side to cuddly figures like Cap’n Crunch, the Keebler elves, Ronald McDonald and the movie and television characters used to promote food. It also raises the question of whether they might ultimately share the fate of Joe Camel, the cartoon figure used to promote Camel [cigarettes](#) that was phased out amid allegations that it was meant to entice children to smoke.

“Our proposal really covers all forms of marketing to kids, and the product packaging and the images and themes on the cereal boxes have tremendous appeal to kids,” said Michelle K. Rusk, a lawyer with the trade commission. “The goal is to encourage children to eat more healthy foods because obesity is a huge health crisis.”

The F.T.C. said that in 2006, food companies spent nearly \$2.3 billion to advertise to children.

The food industry immediately criticized the proposal, saying that it had already taken significant steps to improve recipes and change the way it advertises to children.

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Kellogg, the company that makes Froot Loops, said in a statement that it would review the proposal and that it was committed to improving “the [nutrition credentials](#)” of its products. “We have very specific criteria, based on a broad review of scientific reports, that determine how and what products we market to children,” the company said. The company has already reduced sugar and added whole grains in many cereals.

Scott Faber, a vice president of the Grocery Manufacturers Association, a group that represents food makers, said that ads for packaged foods on television shows aimed at children 2 to 11 had dropped significantly since 2004, and that the ads more often showed healthier types of foods. He said companies had also changed many recipes to reduce salt, sugar and fat and add healthful ingredients like whole grains. “The rate of reformulation is going to increase, not as a result of the principles that were announced today but because consumers are demanding changes in the marketplace,” Mr. Faber said.

Many food companies participate in an [industry-led effort](#), the Children’s Food and Beverage Advertising Initiative, to restrict some marketing activities. But each company that takes part is allowed to set its own nutritional criteria, which critics say undermine the program’s effectiveness.

Regulators said it was important for the entire industry to adhere to a uniform set of standards.

The guidelines were created at the request of Congress and written by the commission, the [Food and Drug Administration](#), the Agriculture Department and the [Centers for Disease Control](#). Regulators said they would take comments and consider changes before submitting a final report to Congress.

The guidelines call for foods that are advertised to children to meet two basic requirements. They would have to include certain healthful ingredients, like whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables, or low-fat milk. And they could not contain unhealthful amounts of sugar, [saturated fat](#), [trans fat](#) and salt.

The sugar requirement would limit cereals to eight grams of added sugar a serving, far less than many popular cereals have today. Froot Loops and Cap’n Crunch, for example, contain 12 grams of sugar a serving.

The salt restrictions are particularly stringent, and many packaged foods on the shelves today would have a hard time meeting them. In an initial phase-in period, the guidelines call for many foods to have no more than 210 milligrams of sodium a serving, while main dishes and meals, including both restaurant food and packaged food, could have no more than 450 milligrams. Today, a 15-ounce can of Chef Boyardee beef ravioli has two servings, with 750 milligrams of sodium per serving. The sodium restrictions would get tougher over time.

The federal agencies acknowledged that a “large percentage of food products currently in the marketplace would not meet the principles.”

The guidelines would apply to both young children and teenagers. The industry has said it should have greater leeway for teenagers, and Ms. Rusk said the agencies would consider those arguments.

Margo Wootan, director of nutrition policy for the [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#), an advocacy group, predicted that the guidelines would force many companies to accept great restrictions and improve recipes.

“With all the concern about childhood obesity, I think there’s a lot of pressure on companies to do the right thing and follow these standards,” she said.

Jeffrey Chester, executive director for the Center for Digital Democracy, a group that focuses on Internet marketing to children, said the F.T.C. proposal had broader implications. “The youth obesity issue has placed

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all digital marketing in the regulatory cross hairs,” Mr. Chester said.

Matt Richtel contributed reporting.

What if we regulated junk food the way we do alcohol?

By Rosie Mestel

Los Angeles Times

1:46 PM PDT, August 14, 2012

Junk food is everywhere. We're eating way too much of it. And we're getting fat. Most of us know what we're doing and yet we do it anyway.

So here's a suggestion offered by two researchers at the Rand Corp.: Why not take a lesson from alcohol control policies and apply them to where food is sold and how it's displayed?

"Many policy measures to control the obesity epidemic assume that people consciously and rationally choose what and how much they eat and therefore focus on providing information and more access to healthier foods," note Dr. Deborah A. Cohen and Lila Rabinovich of Rand. (Yes, and tell that to the Wheat Thins box in my kitchen trash, emptied last night in a feeding frenzy.)

"In contrast," the authors continue, "many regulations that do not assume people make rational choices have been successfully applied to control alcohol, a substance -- like food -- of which immoderate consumption leads to serious health problems."

The paper, published in the CDC's "Preventing Chronic Disease," references studies of people's behavior with food and alcohol and results of alcohol restrictions, then lists five regulations that the authors think might be promising if applied to junk foods. Among them:

Density restrictions: licenses to sell alcohol aren't handed out willy nilly to all comers but are allotted based on the number of places in an area that already sell alcohol. These make alcohol less easy to get and reduce the number of psychological cues to drink that people encounter as they go about their lives.

In a similar way, the authors say, being presented with junky food stimulates our desire to eat it. So why not limit the density of food outlets, particularly ones that sell food rich in empty calories? And why not limit sale of food in places that aren't primarily food stores (think chocolate bars at checkout counters in places like bookstores and hardware stores.)

Display and sales restrictions: California has a rule prohibiting alcohol displays too near the cash registers in gas stations, the authors write, and in most places you can't buy alcohol at drive-through facilities. At supermarkets, food companies pay to have their wares in places where they are easily seen. One could banish junky food to the back of the store and behind counters and ban them from the shelves at checkout lines, currently heavy on candy bars and potato chips and other snack items. Prohibit drive-throughs. You'd have to get out of your car to go get the fries and burgers and shakes.

The other measures are to restrict portion sizes, to tax and prohibit special price deals for junk foods; and to place warning labels on the products.

Measures like these can work, the authors argue, and point to the Temperance movement of the 19th century as

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an example. The movement attacked drinking through an array of measures: reduced numbers of taverns serving alcohol, subsidization of alcohol-free taverns, discouraging alcohol in the workplace and passing out lots of information about the evils of the demon drink. Alcohol consumption dropped in half between 1830 and 1840.

That's alcohol. But *food*? “Compared with mortality attributed to alcohol consumption, death rates attributable to overconsumption of food and poor diet are considerably higher,” the authors write.

Don't Blame the Eater

By David Zinczenko

Published: November 23, 2002

If ever there were a newspaper headline custom-made for Jay Leno's monologue, this was it. Kids taking on McDonald's this week, suing the company for making them fat. Isn't that like middle-aged men suing Porsche for making them get speeding tickets? Whatever happened to personal responsibility?

I tend to sympathize with these portly fast-food patrons, though. Maybe that's because I used to be one of them.

I grew up as a typical mid-1980's latchkey kid. My parents were split up, my dad off trying to rebuild his life, my mom working long hours to make the monthly bills. Lunch and dinner, for me, was a daily choice between McDonald's, Taco Bell, Kentucky Fried Chicken or Pizza Hut. Then as now, these were the only available options for an American kid to get an affordable meal. By age 15, I had packed 212 pounds of torpid teenage tallow on my once lanky 5-foot-10 frame.

Then I got lucky. I went to college, joined the Navy Reserves and got involved with a health magazine. I learned how to manage my diet. But most of the teenagers who live, as I once did, on a fast-food diet won't turn their lives around: They've crossed under the golden arches to a likely fate of lifetime obesity. And the problem isn't just theirs -- it's all of ours.

Before 1994, diabetes in children was generally caused by a genetic disorder -- only about 5 percent of childhood cases were obesity-related, or Type 2, diabetes. Today, according to the National Institutes of Health, Type 2 diabetes accounts for at least 30 percent of all new childhood cases of diabetes in this country.

Not surprisingly, money spent to treat diabetes has skyrocketed, too. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that diabetes accounted for \$2.6 billion in health care costs in 1969. Today's number is an unbelievable \$100 billion a year.

Shouldn't we know better than to eat two meals a day in fast-food restaurants? That's one argument. But where, exactly, are consumers -- particularly teenagers -- supposed to find alternatives? Drive down any thoroughfare in America, and I guarantee you'll see one of our country's more than 13,000 McDonald's restaurants. Now, drive back up the block and try to find someplace to buy a grapefruit.

Complicating the lack of alternatives is the lack of information about what, exactly, we're consuming. There are no calorie information charts on fast-food packaging, the way there are on grocery items. Advertisements don't carry warning labels the way tobacco ads do. Prepared foods aren't covered under Food and Drug Administration labeling laws. Some fast-food purveyors will provide calorie information on request, but even that can be hard to understand.

For example, one company's Web site lists its chicken salad as containing 150 calories; the almonds and noodles that come with it (an additional 190 calories) are listed separately. Add a serving of the 280-calorie dressing, and you've got a healthy lunch alternative that comes in at 620 calories. But that's not all. Read the small print on the back of the dressing packet and you'll realize it actually contains 2.5 servings. If you pour what you've been served, you're suddenly up around 1,040 calories, which is half of the government's recommended daily calorie intake. And that doesn't take into account that 450-calorie super-size Coke.

Make fun if you will of these kids launching lawsuits against the fast-food industry, but don't be surprised if you're the next plaintiff. As with the tobacco industry, it may be only a matter of time before state governments begin to see a direct line between the \$1 billion that McDonald's and Burger King spend each year on advertising and their own swelling health care costs.

And I'd say the industry is vulnerable. Fast-food companies are marketing to children a product with proven health hazards and no warning labels. They would do well to protect themselves, and their customers, by providing the nutrition information people need to make informed choices about their products. Without such warnings, we'll see more sick, obese children and more angry, litigious parents. I say, let the deep-fried chips fall where they may.

GMO Food Debate In The National Spotlight

You don't have to look far to find foods with GMOs today. According to the [Grocery Manufacturing Association](#), 70% of items in American food stores contain genetically modified organisms, ingredients that have been scientifically engineered in laboratories to enhance certain traits. While GM ingredients have only been on the market in America for around 20 years, they're already sparking national controversy, as people wonder what the potential impacts could be on the environment and our health.

Corn, rice, canola oil and soybeans were among the first FDA-approved GMOs during the mid 1990s. Large companies such as [Monsanto](#), [Nestle](#), [General Mills](#) and [PepsiCo](#) experienced cost benefits by using these added ingredients, and the trend quickly spread to other sects of the food industry. In 1998, the [papaya](#) was among the first GM fruit to be approved by the FDA. In the special case of the papaya, the fruit had developed a virus that would have destroyed it worldwide were it not for scientific engineering. But the GM papaya opened a door of possibilities for genetic modification of other produce items, most notably the zucchini and potato. Today, the [FDA has approved over 40 seeds and plants](#) for genetic modification.*

In addition to the visual perfection that GMOs boast, proponents claim that they have more profound advantages as well:

- GM crops can be made resistant to viruses, fungi and bacterial growth.
- GM crops can be engineered to grow faster.
- GM crops can be engineered to be naturally pest-resistant, undermining the need for pesticide chemicals.
- GM crops can be engineered to tolerate extreme weather conditions, such as cold fronts or droughts, allowing for a geographically diverse range of growth sites.
- GM crops can be engineered with added vitamins and minerals, which is especially beneficial in third world countries dealing with malnutrition.

Sounds great! So what's with all of the fuss about GMOs in America?

Under [California's Proposition 37](#), companies would be required to put warning labels on domestically produced foods containing GM ingredients, as the [European Union has since 2002](#). Currently, the FDA has shied away from interfering with GM foods as much as possible, trusting food companies to watch out for public safety. According to the [FDA's Statement of Policy](#), "Section 402(a)(1) of the act imposes a legal duty on those who introduce food into the market place, including food derived from new crop varieties, to ensure that the food satisfies the applicable safety standard."

Unfortunately, not all Americans are confident that food companies will act with public health in mind without greater legal enforcement from the FDA. If the proposition passes in California, as it is projected to, the current 70% of food items in your average grocery store containing GMOs would have to be relabeled. And because California is historically a leader in American legislative action, it's likely that national reform would soon follow.

Being new developments, GMOs carry mystery, raising concern and questions among scientists and consumers
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who wonder:

-What are the possible long-term environmental effects of GM crops?

-Do GMOs pose health risks to humans? (The FDA's states, "Theoretically, genetic modifications have the potential to activate cryptic pathways synthesizing unknown or unexpected toxicants, or to increase expression from active pathways that ordinarily produce low or undetectable levels of toxicants." The FDA encourages companies that are concerned about toxicity to "consult informally with the agency on testing protocols for whole foods when appropriate.")

-Could cross breeding create new food allergens?

-GM fruits, vegetables, oils and grains...what's next? GM animals for consumption?

Although scientific studies have not proven significant ill effects on humans or the environment as a result of GMO production so far, many people argue that they haven't been on the market long enough to see what the long-term could hold. Based on practice and tests to date, the FDA claims that it has, "not found it necessary to conduct, prior to marketing, routine safety reviews of whole foods derived from plants."

Food manufacturers worry that labeling GM products with warnings could cause food prices to rise and create uncalled for concern among consumers. "It sort of implies the product is bad for you when there is no basis for that," said CEO of Faribault Foods, [Reid MacDonald](#). Nonetheless, many Americans are demanding the right to know what they're eating.

Scientists are able to perform basic safety tests and speculate about the future, but only time will tell for certain what impacts GMOs may have. As of now, GM skeptics believe that the FDA has put too much trust into the hands of food companies to decide if their ingredients are safe. "Companies developing new ingredients, new versions of established ingredients, or new processes for producing a food or food ingredient must make a judgment about whether the resulting food substance is a food additive requiring premarket approval by FDA." While so many California citizens are busy advocating for Prop. 37, there are still differing views worldwide on whether or not GMOs could be problem solvers or creators. British Parliament member [George Freeman](#), for example, urges the UK to ease up on its legislation. "The resilience we need for the future will be delivered by smart plant breeding – and that's all GM is," Freeman told farmers at a speech in Norfolk. Even [Bill Gates](#) has argued that GMOs could help solve world hunger, calling upon other billionaires to invest in biotech companies. "By spending a relatively little amount of money on proven solutions, we can help poor farmers feed themselves," Gates stated in his fourth annual letter, released in January 2012.

Still, the FDA admits that GMOs are controversial, and will continue to require attention and possible legal action. "FDA recognizes the desirability of establishing consensus within the industry, the scientific community, and the public on the agency's scientific assessment approach to food safety presented in this guidance section. For this reason, FDA plans to announce, in a future Federal Register notice, a workshop to discuss specific scientific issues."

*These GMOs are not to be confused with produce items such as tangelos, pluots and grapples, which come to be through a process of cross-breeding, and not laboratory-conducted genetic engineering.

*This article originally opened with a sentence referring to “pluots,” “tangelos,” “lematoes” and “grapples” as GMO produce. The incorrect sentence was omitted after defining the distinction between cross-bred items and GMOs.

The Sliming

How processed beef trimmings got rebranded, again and again and again.

By [Daniel Engber](#) | Posted Thursday, Oct. 25, 2012, at 3:48 AM ET

What do you call a mash of beef trimmings that have been chopped and then spun in a centrifuge to remove the fatty bits and gristle? According to the government and to the company that invented the process, you call it *lean finely textured beef*. But to the natural-food crusaders who would have the stuff removed from the nation's hamburgers and tacos, the protein-rich product goes by another, more disturbing name: *Pink slime*.

The story of this activist rebranding—from *lean finely textured beef* to *pink slime*—reveals just how much these labels matter. It was the latter phrase that, for example, birthed the great ground-beef scare of 2012. In early March, journalists at both the Daily and at ABC began [reporting on a burger panic](#): Lax rules from the U.S. Department of Agriculture allowed producers to fill their ground-beef packs with a slimy, noxious byproduct—a mush the reporters called unsanitary and without much value as a food. Coverage linked back to a [New York Times story from 2009](#) in which the words *pink slime* had appeared in public for the first time in a quote from an email written by a USDA microbiologist who was frustrated at a decision to leave the additive off labels for ground meat.

The slimy terror spread in the weeks that followed. Less than a month after ABC's initial reports, almost a quarter million people had signed a [petition to get pink slime out of public school cafeterias](#). Supermarket chains [stopped selling burger meat that contained it](#)—all because of a shift from four matter-of-fact words to two visceral ones.

And now that rebranding has become the basis for a [263-page lawsuit](#). Last month, Beef Products Inc., the first and principal producer of lean/pink/textured/slimy beef, filed a defamation claim against ABC (along with [that microbiologist and a former USDA inspector](#)) in a South Dakota court. The company says the network carried out a malicious and dishonest campaign to discredit its ground-beef additive and that this work had grievous consequences. When ABC began its coverage, Beef Products Inc. was selling 5 million pounds of slime/beef/whatever every week. Then three of its four plants were forced to close, and production dropped to 1.6 million pounds. A weekly profit of \$2.3 million had turned into a \$583,000 weekly loss.

At Reuters, Steven Brill argued that [the suit has merit](#). I won't try to comment on its legal viability, but the details of the claim do provide some useful background about how we name our processed foods, in both industry and the media. It turns out the paste now known within the business as *lean finely textured beef* descends from an older, less purified version of the same. Producers have long tried to salvage the trimmings from a cattle carcass by cleaning off the fat and the bacteria that often congregate on these leftover parts. At best they could achieve a not-so-lean class of meat called *partially defatted chopped beef*, which USDA deemed too low in quality to be a part of hamburger or ground meat.

By the late 1980s, though, Eldon Roth of Beef Products Inc. had [worked out a way to make those trimmings a bit more wholesome](#). He'd found a way, using centrifuges, to separate the fat more fully. In 1991, USDA approved his product as *fat reduced beef* and signed off on its use in hamburgers. JoAnn Smith, a government official and former president of the National Cattlemen's Association, signed off on this "[euphemistic designation](#)," writes Marion Nestle in *Food Politics*. (Beef Products, Inc. maintains that this decision "was not motivated by any official's so-called 'links to the beef industry.'") So 20 years ago, the trimmings had already been reformulated and rebranded once.

But the government still said that *fat reduced beef* could not be used in packages marked "ground beef." (The government distinction between [hamburger and ground beef](#) is that the former can contain added fat, while the latter can't.) So Beef Products Inc. pressed its case, and in 1993 it convinced the USDA to approve the mash for wider use, with a new and better name: *lean finely textured beef*. A few years later, Roth started killing the microbes on his trimmings with ammonia gas and got approval to do that, too. With government permission, the company went on to sell several billion pounds of the stuff in the next two decades.

In the meantime, other meat processors started making something similar but using slightly different names.

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AFA Foods (which filed for bankruptcy in April after the recent ground-beef scandal broke), has referred to its products as *boneless lean beef trimmings*, a more generic term. Cargill, which decontaminates its meat with citric acid in place of ammonia gas, calls its mash of trimmings *finely textured beef*.

So how did all these careful phrases get transformed into *pink slime*? According to the lawsuit from Beef Products Inc., the words *pink slime* were rarely placed in articles about the industry until spring 2012. Since then, they've showed up almost 5,000 times. In a four-week stretch starting March 7, the lawyers write, "Defendants used the phrase 'pink slime' 137 times on the ABC broadcasts, ABC online reports, and in social media postings." The lawsuit also says the network knew that *finely textured beef* wasn't all that slimy to begin with. The filing includes several images of the product, both as evidence of its not-so-nasty texture and to counter another claim by ABC that the product looks like Play-Doh. "When Defendants called [lean finely textured beef] 'pink slime,' consumers understood that Defendants were indicating that LFTB was a noxious, repulsive, and filthy fluid," the lawyers write. "The ABC Defendants' description of LFTB as 'pink slime' and 'Play-Doh' was knowingly false."

Leaving aside the question of what ABC really knew, it does seem clear that the network's branding blitz did a lot to promote the panic. The word *slime* suggests bacterial contamination; it even has a [meaning in the lab](#), referring to a subset of [gooey polysaccharides](#) secreted by many microorganisms. The *pink* part only makes the phrase sound more fleshy and disgusting—like human genitals painted with a film of protozoa. But the labels tell a story that doesn't match the facts. In truth, the trimmings paste is not particularly unhealthy. Consumer watchdog groups seem to agree that ammoniated, processed beef is no more unsanitary or unappetizing than the other minced and remixed concoctions that emerge from the nation's meat factories. (It might even be the better choice.) Even Jim Avila of ABC News has conceded, "[We've never said 'pink slime' is unsafe.](#)"

There's a symmetry to this. The beef industry tweaked its product and its brand, and it turned some sorry *beef trimmings* into a sprightly sounding, profit-making item called *lean finely textured beef*. Then ABC and others undid the market by offering up their own version of the product. Reconstrued as *pink slime*, the beef trimmings became a cash cow for the media. According to the lawsuit, ABC had dropped behind CBS in the ratings for 25- to 54-year-olds not long before the network began its coverage of the scandal. By the end of [Slimeageddon](#), it was back in front and by a broader margin.

It's also true that the *pink slime* brand had its own miniature evolution. In the story for the Daily that started all the fuss in March, one of the two "whistleblowers" at USDA told reporter David Knowles that they'd started with a different name. "[We originally called it soylent pink](#)," he said. It's plain to see why this early label didn't stick. *Soylent pink* isn't so disgusting on its face—*soy* is food, after all—and the dated reference to the movie [Soylent Green](#) seems to miss the point. In that film, of course, the mystery food is [made out of people](#). By going from *soylent pink* to *pink slime*, the critics switched the framing from its supposed lack of authenticity (finely textured beef isn't what you think) to its supposed lack of cleanliness (finely textured beef is fetid and disgusting).

In the end, though, the *pink slime* panic does boil down to a crisis of authenticity. The same ex-USDA inspector told Knowles that "my main objection was that it was not meat." Gerald Zirnstein, the microbiologist who typed out the words *pink slime* in an internal email, went on to write, "[I do not consider the stuff to be ground beef](#), and I consider allowing it in ground beef to be a form of fraudulent labeling." In an [excellent essay](#) on the dispute from back in March, Ari LeVaux points out that Zirnstein's gripe "is hardly damning criticism—it's like complaining that 2 percent milk is being labeled as whole milk."

It's not the first time that a panic over food ingredients has contained a hidden question of philosophy. Should we say a mash of beef trimmings is a kind of meat or not? What is the nature of *beef* itself? It may sound absurd to quibble over which cow parts count as flesh and which ones don't, but such debates form the basis of decisions made in government and by consumers, too. Consider the fight over whether it's OK to rename *high-fructose corn syrup*. The corn producers want to call their stuff *corn sugar*, but the people who grow beets and sugarcane don't want to lose their lock on what we've come to call *real sugar*. Never mind that one may be [no more unhealthy or unappetizing](#) than the other. Whether you're talking about a mash of beef trimmings or a

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corn-based sweetener, it's the labels that make the difference.

For a Healthier Country, Overhaul Farm Subsidies

While health officials wage a costly war on obesity and diabetes, taxpayers are subsidizing foods that make us fatter. It's time to rewrite the farm bill

By [The Editors](#) | Thursday, April 19, 2012 | 25

Some years ago two nutrition experts went grocery shopping. For a dollar, Adam Drewnowski and S. E. Specter could purchase 1,200 calories of potato chips or cookies or just 250 calories worth of carrots. It was merely one example of how an unhealthy diet is cheaper than a healthy one. This price difference did not spring into existence by force of any natural laws but largely because of antiquated agricultural policies. Public money is working at cross-purposes: backing an overabundance of unhealthy calories that are flooding our supermarkets and restaurants, while also battling obesity and the myriad illnesses that go with it. It is time to align our farm policies with our health policies.

In past years farm subsidies have been a third rail of American politics—never to be touched. But their price tag, both direct and indirect, has now brought them back into the debate and created an imperative for change. Conditions such as heart disease, diabetes and arthritis are strongly correlated with excess poundage and run up medical bills of nearly \$150 billion every year. The government has poured billions of dollars into dietary campaigns, from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's new MyPlate recommendation (half of daily food consumption should be fruits and vegetables) to programs aimed at providing more produce in schools and in military cafeterias.

Agricultural subsidies undercut those efforts by skewing the market in favor of unhealthy calories. Much of the food we have to choose from—and how much it costs—is determined by the 1,770-page, almost \$300-billion Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 (commonly known as the “farm bill”). This piece of legislation, up for renewal this year, covers everything from nutrition assistance programs to land conservation efforts. It also determines how much money gets paid out to agricultural operations in subsidies and crop insurance programs. Federal support for agriculture, begun in earnest during the Great Depression, was originally intended as a temporary lifeline to farmers, paying them extra when crop prices were low. Nearly eight decades later the benefits flow primarily to large commodity producers of corn and soy, which are as profitable as ever.

The current bill gives some \$4.9 billion a year in automatic payments to growers of such commodity crops, thus driving down prices for corn, corn-based products and corn-fed meats. Cows that are raised on corn, rather than grass, make meat that is higher in calories and contains more omega-6 fatty acids and fewer omega-3 fatty acids—a dangerous ratio that has been linked to heart disease.

Cheap corn has also become a staple in highly processed foods, from sweetened breakfast cereals to soft drinks, that have been linked to an increase in the rate of type 2 diabetes, a condition that currently affects more than one in 12 American adults. Between 1985 and 2010 the price of beverages sweetened with high-fructose corn syrup dropped 24 percent, and by 2006 American children consumed an extra 130 calories a day from these beverages. Over the same period the price of fresh fruits and vegetables rose 39 percent. For families on a budget, the price difference can be decisive in their food choices.

But fruits and vegetables do not have to be more expensive than a corn-laden chicken nugget or corn syrup-sweetened drink. One reason they are costly is that the current farm bill categorizes them as “specialty crops” that do not receive the same direct payments or crop insurance that commodity crops do.

With the government tightening its belt, some of those old subsidies finally look ready to fall. Many lawmakers across the political spectrum, including President Barack Obama and the leaders of the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry, have recommended cutting direct commodity payments, which would save money and help us stay healthier.

There is no dearth of policy options. Research groups such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation in Princeton, N.J., recommend leveling the playing field by extending subsidies and insurance programs more widely to fruit and vegetable producers. The government can also use its own purchasing power, through school lunch programs and institutional buying decisions, to fill people's plates with healthy choices. The imperative, however, is clear: any new farm bill should at the very least remove the current perverse incentives for people to eat unhealthily.

This article was published in print as "Fresh Fruit, Hold the Insulin."

Fat and getting fatter: U.S. obesity rates to soar by 2030

Tue, Sep 18 2012

By [Sharon Begley](#)

NEW YORK (Reuters) - If Americans stick to their eating and exercise habits, future historians will look back on the early 21st century as a golden age of svelte.

Using a model of population and other trends, a new report released on Tuesday by the Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation projects that half of U.S. adults will be obese by 2030 unless Americans change their ways.

The "F as in Fat" report highlights the current glum picture of the U.S. obesity epidemic, in which 35.7 percent of adults and 16.9 percent of children age 2 to 19 are obese, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported earlier this year.

But for the first time, the report builds on state-by-state data from the CDC to project obesity rates. In every state, that rate will reach at least 44 percent by 2030. In 13, that number would exceed 60 percent.

Obesity raises the risk of numerous diseases, from type 2 diabetes to endometrial cancer, meaning more sick people and higher medical costs in the future, the report said.

It projects as many as 7.9 million new cases of diabetes a year, compared with 1.9 million new cases in recent years. There could also be 6.8 million new cases of chronic heart disease and stroke every year, compared with 1.3 million new cases a year now.

The increasing burden of illness will go right to the bottom line, adding \$66 billion in annual obesity-related medical costs over and above today's \$147 billion to \$210 billion. Total U.S. healthcare spending is estimated at \$2.7 trillion.

That projection supports a study published earlier this year in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine that found that by 2030, 42 percent of U.S. adults could be obese, adding \$550 billion to healthcare costs over that period.

'A TALE OF TWO FUTURES'

As with all projections, from climate models to Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," human actions can prevent the worst of the scenarios, according to health policy experts.

"This is a tale of two futures," said Jeffrey Levi of George Washington University and the executive director of Trust for America's Health. "We're at a turning point where if we don't do something now to mitigate these trends, the cost in human health and healthcare spending will be enormous."

Obesity is defined as having a body mass index (BMI) above 30. Overweight means a BMI of 25 to 29.9. BMI is calculated by taking weight in pounds and dividing it by the square of height in inches, and multiplying the result by 703. For instance, someone who is 5 feet, 5 inches tall and weighs 185 pounds (84 kg) has a BMI of 30.8.

Obesity rates among U.S. adults have more than doubled from the 15 percent of 1980. In that same time, they have more than tripled among children.

Since the CDC found that the percentage of obese children and adults was essentially unchanged between 2008 and 2010, some experts question whether the "F as in Fat" model overstates future obesity by assuming past trends continue in a straight line.

"This is a strong assumption," said economist Justin Trogdon of RTI International in North Carolina. "Recent evidence from other surveys suggest obesity rates may be leveling off."

Mathematician Martin Brown of Britain's National Heart Forum, a nonprofit group, who led development of the model, said it takes a longer view by design.

"You have to take trends over a number of years," he said. "In the age groups that matter, there just isn't much
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evidence of a leveling off in obesity rates."

EDUCATION AND INCOME

Obesity has long been associated with education and income. The report found that about one-third of adults without a high school diploma were obese, compared with about one-fifth of those who graduated from college or technical college.

And one-third of adults who earn less than \$15,000 per year are obese, compared to one-quarter of those who earned \$50,000 or more per year. The obesity-poverty connection reflects such facts that calorie-dense foods are cheap and that poor neighborhoods have fewer playgrounds, sidewalks and other amenities that encourage exercise.

As a result, many states projected to have the most obesity in 2030 do now, too. In 2011, 12 states had an adult-obesity rate above 30 percent, with Mississippi the highest at 34.9 percent. Colorado was the lowest at 20.7 percent.

The report projects that in 2030 in Mississippi, 66.7 percent of adults will be obese, as will 44.8 percent in Colorado, which will still be the thinnest state.

More surprising are projections for states such as Delaware, now ranked 19 for obesity with a rate of 28.8 percent. The model uses 1999 as a baseline, explained Brown. "So if a state had a low rate of obesity in 1999 and is fairly high now, that indicates a steep rate of increase, which we believe will not go away." Result: an obesity rate of 64.7 percent in Delaware in 2030, making it the third-most obese state.

States facing the greatest percentage increase in obesity-related medical costs are now in the middle of the pack. New Jersey faces the largest increase in costs, 34.5 percent, as its obesity rate is projected to climb from 23.7 percent today to 48.6 percent in 2030. Eight other states could see increases of 20 percent and 30 percent, including New Hampshire, Colorado and Alaska.

Trust for America's Health sees room to change that trajectory with the right interventions.

"We have learned that with a concerted effort you can change the culture of a community, including its level of physical activity, eating habits, what foods are offered in schools, and whether families eat together," said Levi.

In New York City, for instance, obesity for elementary and middle-school students dropped 5.5 percent from the 2006-07 school year to 2010-11, thanks mostly to healthier school lunches, public health experts said.

"A lot of this is about making healthy choices easier and not mandating healthier lifestyles," Levi said.

Limit fast food advertising toward kids, lower childhood obesity rates

By Deirdre Imus

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| FoxNews.com

advertisement

As parents, our impulse is to try to control everything our children eat, hear, touch, smell, feel, and see. It can be exhaustive, but we wouldn't have it any other way – after all, we are their conduits in this overwhelming world, guiding them down or away from the paths we think are best. But no matter how much we try to shield our kids from negative forces – like advertisements on television or elsewhere – sooner or later these messages seep in, whether by accidental exposure, through conversation with friends, or other means. Your child (like mine) may never have eaten a McDonalds hamburger, but he or she undoubtedly knows what one looks like, thanks to the power of advertising. And a recent study out of the University of British Columbia confirms that viewing such images directly impacts childhood obesity rates – and not in a good way. In Quebec, for the last 32 years, it has been illegal for fast-food companies to advertise to kids in print or electronic media. Researchers estimate that, as a result of this ban, children in Quebec consumed 13.4 to 18.4 billion fewer fast food calories per year, and spent \$88 million less on fast food than they otherwise would have. And guess what? Quebec has one of the lowest childhood obesity rates in Canada, despite the sedentary lifestyle many children tend to lead there, according to the study. What's more, the report also found that French speaking young adults in Quebec were 38 percent less likely to buy fast food than those in Ontario, where there is no ban on advertising, showing that habits established in childhood tend to stick for the rest of our lives. While this news is heartening for the children and all other citizens of Quebec, it is disappointing that the rest of Canada – and the United States, for that matter – have not been similarly brave enough to adopt this same prohibition. That something so simple like banning ads of a specific nature could produce such a striking effect on childhood health is a revelation, to say the least, and should inform future governmental policy in North America and abroad. Which brings me to another recent story about the use of advertising to discourage negative behaviors: Just last week, an appeals court said that New York City could not try to scare smokers by requiring stores that sell cigarettes to display grotesque images of diseased lungs and decaying gums. Mayor Michael Bloomberg is often criticized for trying to legislate people's health, as when he announced earlier this year his intention to ban super-sized sugary drinks, but his approach has already shown results: A study by city health officials showed that a five-year-old ban on the use of trans fats in restaurants in New York City has sharply reduced consumption of these unhealthy fats.

As an unexpected bonus, many of the fast-food chains banned from using trans fats in New York City have elected to discontinue cooking with trans fats at other locations nationwide, according to the study. Advertising affects the choices we make, whether we like it or not, and whether we realize it or not. It's a simple truth for adults who know better, and a scary truth for children, who usually do not. Banning fast-food advertising or allowing graphic images to discourage smoking won't solve the obesity and nicotine problems in this country or any other, but it's a step in the right direction – a step that more legislators shouldn't be afraid to take. It's also a sign that parents need to be more vigilant than ever about their children's media consumption. Monitor the channels they watch and publications they read to see what kinds of ads are displayed. If you're not comfortable with the products being sold at your kids' expense, change the channel or take away the magazine. Better yet, pick up the phone and lodge a complaint with the station or publisher, and then tell your friends to do the same. Remember, too, that we ultimately bear the responsibility to make good choices regardless of what the advertising or fast food industry puts in front of us. Advertising may be loud, but the consumer can be louder.