



The National School Lunch Program and its Relationship to Childhood Obesity

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Abstract

Obesity has reached epidemic proportions, significantly increasing the risk of diabetes, heart disease, and other chronic illnesses, especially among American children. Despite the serious health consequences, the prevalence of obesity continues to rise, fueled by unhealthy dietary habits and limited access to nutritious foods. The paper investigates the current state of school lunch regulations in the United States, highlighting the shortcomings of the USDA guidelines. While some progress has been made in recent years, the regulations still fall short of ensuring that students receive healthy and balanced meals. The paper also explores the issue of competitive foods, which often contain high levels of sugar, sodium, and unhealthy fats. By analyzing the impact of school lunch policies on childhood obesity, this research aims to identify areas for improvement and propose solutions to address the growing health crisis. The paper concludes with recommendations for policymakers, schools, and families to promote healthier eating habits and create a more supportive environment for children.

Keywords: childhood diabetes, obesity, NSLP, competitive foods

The Dangers of Obesity

When Columbus first landed in the Americas, he unwittingly brought additional deadly weapons in the form of diseases. Diseases such as smallpox, measles, and cholera were deadlier than any sword and wiped out upwards of 90 percent of the population (Nunn and Qian, 165). However, the Native Americans and Europeans would never have guessed that the most deadly and prevalent plague would eventually originate in America. Over the past century, Americans have been getting and spreading an epidemic of obesity and diabetes at alarming rates. After WWII, America has been steadily exporting a culture of consuming more processed, sugary, and fatty foods, while simultaneously making sedentary lifestyles the norm (Chobot et al).

Being overweight can greatly increase risks of diabetes and is a major factor in the likelihood of contracting Type 2 diabetes (Powell). Conversely, An endless trap is created by these two diseases that often leaves few options for respite. All this makes no mention of the ethical dilemma that comes with making people permanently dependent on drug companies or a government to live a normal life. According to the American Diabetes Association, healthcare-related costs for diabetics in 2017 reached an average of \$16,752 dollars per patient (2018). Clearly, more preventative measures must be taken to fight the disease.

For the sake of this paper, however, we will discuss the impact that obesity has on children in America and how policy may affect the way obesity manifests. According to an American Heart Association Journal, in 2008 more than 19 percent of school age children were obese (Novak and Brownell). What makes diabetes a particularly pressing issue is the way in which diabetes particularly impacts children. Being obese greatly increases the likelihood of diabetes. If we do nothing to stop the spread of childhood diabetes, we as a nation could end up with future generations dependent on medications to live, and a population unfit to perform as a society. This disease could spell the end of our species.

The main aim of any health care system is prevention. Physicians should never be satisfied providing lifelong prescriptions as a solution to patients, but rather being able to empower their patients to prevent disease is the ideal solution. Keeping with this tenet, this paper will examine and quantify the way in which the American Government has created policies through the NSLP that have gone against the main precepts of healthcare and have only served to encourage a dangerous trap of obesity and diabetes.

Obesity is very tightly tied to diet. Although it is easy to paint diet as a fully individual environment, the reality is that government policy can greatly influence the food environment one has access to (Wunderlich and Kohler). The government mainly influences food policy in two ways. First, by regulating and subsidizing crops and secondly by setting standards for the quality of food given to students in public schools. This paper will focus on the latter topic.

Method

In order to analyze the role of school lunches in the obesity epidemic and the long term health of children, it is necessary to first identify the primary causes of childhood obesity then examine whether those factors are at play in school lunches. The obvious two factors are exercise and diet, the latter of which will be the focus of this paper.

USDA Regulations

Currently, the USDA - the department responsible for setting nutritional guidelines in schools - specifies that all school meals must contain at least 80 percent “whole grains” and have less than 1420 mg of sodium for grades 9-12, less that 1360 mg for grades 6-8, and less than 1280 mg for grades K-5 and zero trans fats (“Transitional Standards,” 2022). Currently,

regulations still lack any clear limit on added sugar and how processed foods can be. The lunch guideline also includes parts to what makes a whole meal. In order to receive subsidies for their meals, schools must also provide at least 5 total cups of fruits and 5 total cups of vegetables over the course of a week (National Archives, 2023). These rules provide plenty of leeway for unhealthy food practices to creep into school lunches. There are no guidelines that keep restrictions on the sale of so-called “competitive foods” which are foods like chips and juices. The law also is riddled with loopholes that allow for juice and fruit preserved in syrup to be served in place of fresh fruits and veggies; tomato paste on pizzas can also count towards the vegetable requirements for most meals (Potts). Overall, experts agree that these USDA guidelines do prevent the worst offenders for health from reaching students (Fox). The issue is that USDA regulation only applies to meals that receive subsidies from the federal government. The real danger lies in the foods that creep past regulations: competitive foods.

“Competitive Foods”

The problem of so-called “competitive foods” should cause the most concern for any parent. The competitive food market allows food vendors to largely bypass USDA regulation and sell foods with “low in nutrients and energy-dense” (Fox). The same study also found that nearly 40 percent of students grades 1-12 consumed competitive foods on a school day (Fox). Competitive foods include vending machine foods and a la carte snacks that compete with school offered lunches. Back in 2014, the USDA attempted to regulate these competitive foods sold during the school day by creating the “smart snack” guidelines (Cohen et al). These new smart snack regulations restrict high calorie sodas and restrict snacks to under 200 calories and total sugar to be less than 35% by weight (“Transitional Standards”). There are also upcoming regulations on sugars. For example, starting October flavored milk cannot have more than 12g of sugar per 8 oz and competitive milk can have no more than 15g per 12oz (“Transitional Standards”). While such measures are a step in the right direction, they do not change the fact that these standards encourage food manufacturers to attempt to meet sugar and sodium requirements without actually improving nutrition of the food. Additionally, manufacturers are still free to add sugar to any snacks. Finally, it must be mentioned that since students eat a third of their meals at schools, it is logical that they will seek out similar food at home and during the summer. They will likely not be eating the USDA compliant versions of food at home, leading to additional unhealthy eating habits.

The Solution

The current USDA guidelines for school lunches, while a step in the right direction, still fall short of ensuring that students are receiving the healthiest possible meals. The regulations, which primarily focus on whole grains, sodium, and trans fats, lack clear limits on added sugar and processed foods. Additionally, the guidelines allow for loopholes that permit unhealthy options like juice preserved in syrup and tomato paste to count towards fruit and vegetable requirements. The most significant concern lies in the prevalence of competitive foods, which often contain high levels of sugar, sodium, and unhealthy fats. While recent regulations have aimed to restrict the sale of these foods during the school day and place caps on relative sugar content, they do not address the underlying issue of unhealthy food manufacturing practices. To improve the nutritional quality of school meals, it is essential to implement stricter guidelines that limit added sugar, processed foods, and unhealthy fats in both subsidized meals and competitive foods. Furthermore, efforts should be made to promote healthy eating habits among



students and their families, including providing education on nutrition and encouraging the consumption of whole, unprocessed foods. By taking a comprehensive approach to school nutrition, we can help ensure that children are receiving the healthy meals they need to thrive.



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