

## Why Do We Have an Obesity Epidemic?

With all the recent talk about food security and the links between hunger and obesity, the news media has taken notice. In a New York Times Magazine article published on October 21, 2003, Michael Pollan addressed how government-subsidized agri-business affects the nutritional value of lower-cost foods. Then on December 8, ABC News broadcast an expose of the nation's obesity epidemic, implicating not only unbalanced agricultural funding, but also unlimited advertising by the junk food industry.

In "The (Agri)Cultural Contradictions of Obesity," Michael Pollan writes, "Cheap corn...is truly the building block of the 'fast food nation'". Whether transformed into corn syrup for sodas, used as cheap animal feed, or for bulking up highly processed snacks, cheap corn has enabled the food industry to super-size without significantly increasing the cost of production.

As Peter Jennings points out in ABC News' "How to Get Fat Without Really Trying," popcorn you buy at movie theatres actually costs less to produce than the bag it comes in! Pollan notes that corn syrup has transformed the average bottle of Coca-Cola from 8 ounces to 20. Corn fed animals facilitated the super-sizing of Big Macs and Chicken McNuggets for pennies on the dollar, and the McNugget "is really a most ingenious transubstantiation of corn," including fillers and binding agents made from the stuff. But meeting the needs of hungry people is clearly not just about making food as inexpensive as possible.

Both ABC and Pollan observe that agriculture has been funded by the government since the Great Depression. ABC News, however, focused on increased advertising by the food industry as a reason for the jump in Americans' caloric intake. While advertising doubtless plays a role, Pollan's analysis digs deeper, pointing out radical changes in farm policy during the Nixon administration.

From the New Deal until 1972, farmers could borrow from the government when crop prices were low and repay the loans when the market improved, or hand over their crops if the market failed to rebound. The government then sold from their own storehouses when prices peaked, making back a majority of the money lost to loans.

But when prices for staple foods began to soar after Nixon's 1972 grain deal with Russia, angry consumers pushed him to desperate measures to drive down the cost of groceries. His administration encouraged massive grain overproduction, dismantled government storehouses, and replaced agricultural loans with direct grants.

As a result, argues Pollan, the US now spends \$19 billion per year on agricultural subsidies and feeds the overproduction back to us as junk food. Add to that the \$33 billion that ABC News says the food industry spends annually to advertise junk food to us and to our children, and it is easy to see why obesity is on the rise. Keep in mind that much of the processed food advertised on television is marketed directly to kids, encouraging poor eating habits early in life that often continue into adulthood.

The food industry points to lack of exercise as the cause of obesity. But more trips to the track are hardly a complete solution when you consider that a 150 pound person must walk for a full hour to burn the calories in one 20-ounce Coke.

ABC praised Kraft's recent approach of "making every product a little healthier" and suggests that public policy should regulate the junk food ads targeted to children. Pollan proposes a more balanced approach to subsidized agriculture. Both make valid points but even more must be done. For public policy to be effective in promoting good nutrition and fighting hunger, we need more democratic and locally sustainable practices in food production, distribution, and consumption.

By Dawn Walhausen, Just Harvest

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