

Policy Brief

To: Andrew Gournardes

From: Martin Vanegas

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Re: Federal Mandate To Reduce Nationwide Obesity

Statement of Issue: What policies can be developed to promote healthier lifestyles and specifically address the challenges of obesity in the U.S.?

Background:

Obesity is a disease that continues to grow and poses a significant threat to public health today. During the years 1975 and 2016, the prevalence of obesity had increased in every country in the world, with at least 13% of the world's adult population being obese in 2016.¹ The increase in the likelihood of developing chronic health conditions and cancers because of being obese is something that needs to be addressed. Obesity-related noncommunicable diseases account for over 5 million deaths globally each year, with over half occurring under the age of 70.² The risks of being obese is something many struggle with for several reasons. According to the international agency for research on cancer, obesity due to an improper diet and lack of physical exercise has been linked to 13 different types of cancer.³ It's known by clinicians all around the world that obesity affects the physical and psychological wellbeing of patients, but it also plays a major role in having an impact on the state of health economics. Obesity may result in early onset of death from acquired diseases and individuals suffering from this may also have reduced/loss of productivity in the workplace that may have negative impacts on economics. It's been shown that studies from multiple countries with individuals that are obese miss more days of work than individuals without obesity, and work at less than full capacity when they are at work.⁴ This is where a decrease in the quality of life of an individual can lead to an unhealthier lifestyle.

Particularly in the United States, there are multiple reasons as to why obesity has continued to increase over the years. Some of the reasons may include reduced access to healthcare, barriers to healthy food options, sedentary lifestyles and the prevalence of modern food marketing and advertising. In parts of the U.S, there may be communities where individuals have limited access to affordable and nutritious food. These individuals are usually of a lower socioeconomic status and are largely made-up ethnic minority groups like Hispanics and African Americans.⁵ There are several reasons why this issue affects ethnic minorities more than other groups. It has been shown that living in an area that is considered a food desert has been linked to poor diet and greater risk of obesity compared to those that live near

^{1,2,4} Okunogbe A, Nugent R, Spencer G, Ralston J, Wilding JPH. Economic impacts of overweight and obesity: current and future estimates for eight countries. *BMJ Global Health*. 2021;6(10):e006351. doi:10.1136/bmjgh-2021-006351

³ Bevel MS, Tsai MH, Parham A, Andrzejak SE, Jones S, Moore JX. Association of food deserts and food swamps with Obesity-Related cancer mortality in the US. *JAMA Oncology*. Published online May 4, 2023. doi:10.1001/jamaoncol.2023.0634

grocery stores that provide fruits and vegetables.⁶ There are also cases where food swamps have developed and consist of neighborhoods that contain a larger amount of access to unhealthy and fast food that outcompete healthy food alternatives. A prime example is East New York where it is considered the largest food swamp in all the five boroughs. This may lead to food insecurity and inequitable health outcomes.⁷

In the past, there have been initiatives like that of the healthy food finance initiative supporting opening grocery stores in areas that are determined as food deserts. Although it showed promising evidence of giving better access to healthier food, it was not as successful as promised since there continued to be accessibility to unhealthy foods.⁸ One of the reasons why this may be the case is due to unhealthy food marketing and advertisements. These advertisements in the digital world like that of social media and search engines have been on the rise to incentive adults and children alike to purchase unhealthy food options. Certain target populations are more likely to be vulnerable to these tactics. Children that are easily influenced using celebrity endorsers, or cartoon characters, as they increase engagement and the recall making it more likely to want what is being advertised.⁹ This is an issue that further increases the risk of obesity and all the issues that come with this disease.

- **Adults with obesity in the United States compared with those with normal weight experienced higher annual medical care costs by \$2,505 with costs increasing significantly with class of obesity.**¹⁰ It's predicted that by 2030, if obesity trends continue unchecked, obesity-related medical costs alone could rise by \$48 to \$66 billion a year in the U.S.
- **Advertisements and marketing of unhealthy foods contribute to unhealthy dietary choices.** The food and beverage industries may be opposed and experience economic hardship if certain obesity prevention policies result in reduced consumption of unhealthy foods and sugary beverages.
- **The bill “treat and reduce obesity Act of 2021” (TROA) aims to improve access to healthcare for Medicare beneficiaries affected by obesity.**¹¹ This would expand Medicare coverage of behavioral therapy for obesity. Also allows for coverage under Medicare’s prescription drug benefit of drugs used for the treatment of obesity.

Policy Options:

• A proposed federal mandate for Implementing a junk food tax on unhealthy foods options that include foods that are considered fast foods would make it more costly for individuals to obtain. On average, these companies spend nearly \$14 billion per year on marketing in the United States, with around 80% of the

^{5,6,7}Stowers KC, Schwartz MB, Brownell KD. Food swamps predict obesity rates better than food deserts in the United States. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2017;14(11):1366. doi:10.3390/ijerph14111366

⁷ Murphy J. New York City’s Biggest ‘Food Swamps’ *City Limits*. Published online May 21, 2018. <https://citylimits.org/2018/05/21/new-york-citys-biggest-food>

⁹ Carthy CM, De Vries R, Mackenbach JD. The influence of unhealthy food and beverage marketing through social media and advergames on diet-related outcomes in children—A systematic review. *Obesity Reviews*. 2022;23.

¹⁰⁻¹¹ Oac. Politics, policies, and the current landscape for obesity. *Obesity Action Coalition*. Published online January 18, 2022. <https://www.obesityaction.org/politics-policies-and-the-current-landscape-for-obesity>

advertising promoting unhealthy food choices.¹² The revenue generated from this tax can be used to help lower income families with support to purchase healthier food alternatives and fund programs that focus on obesity prevention with the risks that obesity comes with it. Also, this could potentially lead to improvements in public health and decrease the generation of food swamps.

- **Advantages:** Provides a way to generate an income to promote more awareness about obesity risk. This can include what patients should eat to have a more balanced diet and healthier lifestyle. This also helps curb but not eliminate the issue with food industry marketing and advertisements that target advertisements. This is further supported by those with this interest like the U.S. Representative Rosa DeLauro and Senators Richard Blumenthal and Cory Booker.¹³
- **Disadvantages:** This mandate would affect more low-income families that may not be able to afford better, and healthier quality food as opposed to middle- and upper-class families. What classifies as unhealthy food to be taxed on also remains to be discussed, which can lead to confusion. Asking for food companies to make revenue from using targeted ads for junk food can lead to job loss.

• A proposed federal mandate that can incentivize healthy food companies to set up businesses can be proposed. Through tax incentives or grants, this would appeal to healthy food industry companies like grocery stores and farmers markets that decrease areas like the southern U.S that are considered food deserts and allow more access to healthier options in low-income neighborhoods.

- **Advantages:** Provides healthier access to food alternatives like fruits and vegetables to low-income communities. Also allows businesses to benefit from a tax incentive or grants from the federal government that gives more opportunity for profit. This will allow individuals to create healthier lifestyles which is one of the bases of prevention of obesity. These companies would be more willing to set up shop in these areas where care is needed the most.
- **Disadvantages:** Allowing grants and tax incentives will place a financial burden on the federal government. This may push for opposition from political figures that may not be for increasing the federal government spending. It has been shown by the healthy food finance initiative that the influence of introducing healthier foods into neighborhoods may not be as beneficial as there continues to be accessibility of unhealthy foods in areas that need them.

• A proposed federal mandate that is aimed at promoting a healthier lifestyle through quality foods and education. This would be achieved through community-led programs in low-income neighborhoods. The federal government can give grants to states where they would be able to create programs. These programs can raise awareness on the associated risks surrounding obesity and provide local food drives that offer fresh fruits and vegetables to those in need. States may also implement programs into public schools around the nation, where promotion of healthier school lunches can help keep students healthier.

¹²Food Marketing to Children - State of Childhood Obesity. <https://stateofchildhoodobesity.org/policy-topic/food-marketing-to-children>

¹³ DeLauro, Blumenthal & Booker introduce bicameral bill to curb unhealthy food & beverage marketing targeting kids | Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro. Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro. Published November 15, 2022. <https://delauro.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/delauro-blumenthal-booker-introduce-bicameral-bill-curb-unhealthy-food>

Mayor Eric Adams in NYC with his Food Education Roadmap is a great way to promote healthier school communities for the rest of the world to follow.¹⁴

- **Advantages:** Raises awareness of the growing risk of obesity in low-income neighborhoods. Also promotes healthier alternative foods to those in need using fresh fruits and vegetables using federal grants. This helps reduce food deserts and promote educational learning to local communities. The education in these programs can help teach those about the values of eating a balanced meal with knowledge of physical exercises (as simple as 30–60-minute walks).
- **Disadvantages:** Once more this puts strain on the federal government in terms of supply grants to communities. There should be a way to track and monitor how the funds are being given out and to which community programs it's being given. Although a viable option, there still is no way to guarantee that using these community led programs will change areas that are considered food swamps.

Policy Recommendation: As obesity continues to become more of an issue around the world and acting is imperative. In this sense, the most realistic and affordable approach would be to implement a federal mandate aimed at promoting a healthier lifestyle through quality foods and education. By creating community led programs around the nation that the rest of the world can follow in. This not only helps educate communities in need in lower socioeconomic areas about the risks of obesity, but it also provides access to healthier styles through food drives and in public schools. As we have seen with programs built in NYC by major Eric Adams, building healthy eating habits early is essential. In the short term, this option may prove to be expensive for the federal government to implement nationwide but in the long run will help shape future healthier communities.

¹⁴ Mayor Adams unveils Food Education Roadmap to promote Healthier school communities across New York C. The Official Website of the City of New York. Published June 6, 2023. <https://www.nyc.gov/office-of-the-mayor/news/388-23/mayor-adams-food-education-roadmap-promote-healthier-school-communities-across-new-york>

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