

Grappling With Complex Food Systems to Reduce Obesity: A US Public Health Challenge

Rates of overweight and obesity have increased sharply worldwide since the 1980's. In the US 40% of adults aged over 20 were living with obesity in 2015-2016, which is substantially higher than the global average. Factors linked to obesity include sugar consumption, increased portion sizes, price, marketing and out of home eating. Food systems are also potential drivers of obesity. The prevailing view in public health is that the current structure of the food system contributes to increased consumption of energy dense and lower quality food. Although, it is not yet well understood how food systems influence consumption patterns due to its complexity.

Global food systems are highly interconnected. As a result, a change in food system interventions could have unintended global health, environmental, economic or social consequences. A systems approach is considered to be most effective for designing policy interventions with intended outcomes. This approach allows understanding of the whole system, aiding the effective design of converging sets of policies. In the US, governments have enacted obesity control and prevention policies designed in isolation from each other, and so their impact on the prevalence of obesity has not been significant. The authors highlight that there are system based examples within local and community projects in the US. However, sometimes impact is modest due to many challenges associated with the wider food system.

Overall, it is concluded that there are no quick fixes. An interdisciplinary research agenda based on a systems perspective is essential, particularly focused on local and community interventions.

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