

Corporate Food System: Consequences for Public Health¹

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There is a growing public awareness that something is fundamentally wrong with the American food system. For decades organic food advocates have been calling attention to growing health problems associated with the widespread use of pesticides, hormones, and endocrine disruptors in the production and manufacturing of food. The maladies include various forms of cancers, heart disease, attention deficit disorder, and a variety of food allergies. More recently, foods recalled for contamination with E-Coli O157:H7, Salmonella, and various agrichemical contaminants have become almost commonplace – the most recent being a recall of more than a half-billion eggs. In spite of persistent claims by the food industry and government to the contrary, it's becoming increasingly evident that much if not most of America's food is not good for public health and some of it is simply not fit to eat.

The tipping point of public concern may well be the growing epidemic of obesity in America. Obesity is not simply a matter of personal inconvenience or embarrassment; it is closely linked to a whole host of diet related diseases, including diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and several types of cancer. Most recent statistics classify two-thirds of American adults and nearly one-third of children and teens as obese or overweight. Since 1980, the number of obese adults has doubled. Even more troubling, since 1970, the number of obese children ages 6-11 has quadrupled, and the number of obese adolescents ages 12-19 has tripled.ⁱ

A 2010 report by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, *F As In Fat; How Obesity Threatens America's Future*, documents how the growing prevalence of obesity has continued unabated, in spite of a host of programs mounted by government and nonprofit organizations to combat it, President Obama's White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity being but the latest of many.ⁱⁱ By 2020, obesity related illnesses are projected to erase virtually all of the improvements in public health of the past several decades and claim about one-in-five dollars spent for health care. Health care in America already consumes more than 17% of our GDP, nearly three times as much as the 7% claimed by agriculture/food – not likely a mere coincidence. If current trends continue, healthcare will account for more than one-third of the GDP by 2040. With an aging population, growing public demand for public healthcare, and a ballooning federal budget deficit, America simply cannot afford the continuing economic costs of obesity.

On March 26, 2010 Jamie Oliver, an outspoken British chef turned activist, called for a “food revolution” in America. The occasion was the premier of a six-episode reality show on ABC Television. The show was filmed in Huntington, West Virginia – supposedly the most overweight city in the most overweight country in the world. The premise of the show was that people's physical health is linked directly to the foods they eat. In the first episode, Oliver pointed out that today's children are the first generation whose members are expected to live shorter lives than their parents. It's not the kids' fault; they eat what parents and other adults choose to feed them, or at least allow them to eat. Too often, this means whatever is cheapest,

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quickest, and most convenient. In our pursuit of quick, convenient, cheap food we are destroying the future of our children and grandchildren. It's time for a “food revolution.”

A question yet to be resolved is how we are going to fight this revolution. Are we going to allow the food industry to continue to blame diet related health problems on overweight people? Or instead, are we going to place the blame where it most likely belongs – on the food system? In addressing the issue of obesity, we are confronted with dueling hypotheses. The conventional hypothesis promoted by the food industry is that obesity is a problem of people, specifically fat people. They claim that people, in their quest for self-gratification, choose sedentary lifestyles and calorie-dense foods. An equally logical alternative hypothesis, which remains largely unexamined, is that obesity is a problem of society, particularly the pervasiveness of unhealthy, calorie-dense foods. Certainly, many Americans have unhealthy lifestyles, but most Americans also have only very limited access the nutrient-dense foods they need for good health.

Depending on which hypothesis is correct, the solutions to obesity and other diet related health problems are very different. If the conventional hypothesis is true, people need to be educated and/or trained to choose healthy lifestyles and make healthy food choices. The assumption is that nothing is basically wrong with the food system. The obesity problem then can be solved by fixing the people. If the alternative assumption is true, there's nothing basically wrong with the people; it's the food system that needs fixing. The problem is a food system that limits healthy food choices. People do need to be educated to make wise food choices but they also need education about how to fix the food system so it will give them ready access to a variety of healthful, nutrient-dense foods.

Even the problems of unhealthy lifestyles may be linked to diets lacking in basic nutrition. Inadequate nutrition may leave people physically unable to endure the physical activity they need for good health. In those cases where obesity is linked to specific medical problems, the problems may well be a consequence of eating food with chemical residues or additives, or eating manufactured “food-like substances” – such as high-fructose corn syrup and partially-hydrogenated vegetable oils. The scientific evidence indicates it's not the people who need fixing; it's the food system.

During the first half of the twentieth century, as people became less physically active, they also ate less, according to a USDA analysis of food trends between 1909 and 1999.ⁱⁱⁱ Americans consumed roughly 10% fewer calories per person in the late 1950s than in 1909. Calorie consumption leveled off during the 1960s. Beginning in the 1970s, total calories in the average American diet have tended persistently upward, while physical activities of all types obviously continued to decline. Between 1980 and 2004, total daily calories per capita increased by 22%.^{iv} The result is the well-publicized expansion of the American waistline, with alarming increases in numbers of Americans who are overweight and obese. Why did people behave logically for the first half of the century and illogically the last half? The human species obviously hasn't changed much since over the past century, but the food system certainly has.

Products derived from corn and soybeans, the two crops most highly subsidized by the government, have stood out as major contributors to higher calorie diets. High-fructose corn syrup replaced cane and beet sugar as the sweetener of choice, most notably in carbonated

beverages. Soybean oil replaced lard and butter as the fat of choice, finding a growth market in the deep fryers of the fast food industry. In fact a significant portion of increased calorie consumption is likely a result of increased spending for food eaten away from home. Fast food franchises seem to thrive financially by selling large portions of foods high in sweets, fats, and salt. But, it isn't just a matter of eating more sugar and fats. Per capita consumption of fats increased 24% and carbohydrates increased 20%, but protein consumption also increased 15%.

Trends in fruit and vegetable consumption, important sources of vitamins and minerals, have been basically flat over the past 30 years, with intermittent blips and minor year-to-year variations. More than 40% of Americans eat no fruits or vegetables on any given day, and per capita consumption persists at levels well below those recommended for good health. Going all the way back to 1909, per capita fruit consumption has essentially doubled, but the total increase has been in canned, frozen, and other processed fruits. Over the same period, commercial vegetable production has increased by roughly one-third – vegetables other than potatoes.

However, the increase in commercial vegetable consumption has been more than offset by a decrease in vegetables from home gardens. Home gardens accounted for about one-fourth of per capita vegetable consumption in 1909, and probably as much and even more through the war years with the Victory Gardens of the 1940s. By late 1990s, home gardens accounted for less than 3% of all vegetables consumed. Perhaps the resulting changes in nutritional quality of vegetables over time are more significant than changes in amounts of vegetables eaten. If so, it's not likely that subsidizing or promoting fruits and vegetable production would solve the nutrition problem. We quite likely would just end up with new industrial “food-like substances” produced from fruits and vegetables, high in calories and lacking in nutrients.

The most likely source of America's diet/health problem is the food system in general. The reversal and upward trend in per capita calorie consumption corresponds directly with the industrial corporatization of the American food system. Agriculture of the 1950s was still dominated by diversified family farms producing foods primarily for local and regional markets. Most farms still relied primarily on healthy, organic rich soils. The “mom and pop” grocery stores local diners that dotted urban neighborhoods and country towns bought most of their produce from local and regional farmers. Most food was still produce on small family farms. After World War II, change happened quickly. By 2000, agriculture was dominated by large specialized corn, soybean, wheat, and rice farms and large-scale confinement animal feeding operations, under corporate control. Supermarkets had evolved into supercenters and fast food had become common American fare. With the corporatization of the American food system, the economic bottom line apparently took priority over the health of the American people.

Selected sources:

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ⁱⁱ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, *F As In Fat; How Obesity Threatens America's Future*,

http://www.pbhfoundation.org/pbh_direct_new/jul09_2010/Obesity2010Report.pdf .

ⁱⁱⁱ USDA, Major Trends in U.S. Food Supply – 1909-1999, *A Century of Change in America's Eating Habits*, Economic Research Service, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/foodreview/jan2000/frjan2000b.pdf>

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