

Talking About Sugar Sweetened–Beverage Taxes Will Actions Speak Louder Than Words?

Lori Dorfman, DrPH

In this issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, Colleen Barry and her colleagues¹ present results from a national public opinion survey assessing the level of support for arguments commonly used in public debate about instituting taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages. Many in public health want to learn what will persuade the public to support taxing sugary beverages because they are eager to mimic the success in tobacco control, where increasing excise taxes on cigarettes is the single most effective way to reduce consumption, especially among youth. The findings of Barry et al. will disappoint these advocates because no argument in favor of taxes garnered a majority of support.

Although disappointing, these findings are not surprising for at least two reasons. First, despite mounting evidence linking sugary beverages with obesity, we are at the early stages of public health forays into taxing sugar-sweetened beverages with the express purpose of addressing health problems. Second, we are living in a time of unprecedented disdain for governmental solutions² and taxes in particular. We face formidable challenges in arguing for taxes on sugary beverages, but a strategy with such terrific potential warrants continued efforts.

We've Only Just Begun

The rapid increase in nutrition-related disease has been stunning. The first Surgeon General's call to action on obesity was released only 11 years ago.³ Compare that timeline to tobacco control: the first Surgeon General's report linking tobacco with heart disease and lung cancer was issued in 1964, yet it was not until 1988 that California passed its watershed initiative to institute a 25-cent tax per pack of cigarettes to generate revenues for research, community programs, and a statewide media campaign that was the envy of the nation—followed by accelerated declines in smoking and a sea-change in how the public viewed the tobacco industry. Since 2009, there

have been at least 30 attempts across the nation to tax sugary beverages, none successful.⁴ We are on a good trajectory but still early in our efforts to improve food and beverage environments.

As new jurisdictions propose taxes on sugary beverages, public health advocates will have to experiment with new arguments, including countering the popular arguments that Barry and colleagues identified. For example, the most popular argument they found was that taxes on sugary beverages were arbitrary since obesity has many causes. To counter this frame, public health advocates will have to build support for the menu of policies that can improve food and beverage environments; taxes will likely be an important part of the solution but not the whole solution. Even in tobacco control where excise taxes have been crucial, other policies have been necessary as well. For example, in arguing for sugary-beverage taxes, will it help if people learn that eliminating smoking on airplanes was good for the public's health—especially the part of the public that works as flight attendants—despite the fact that it did nothing to protect workers in bars, restaurants, or those who live in multi-unit housing? The key framing issue is to make the entire landscape surrounding individuals visible so that the various policies that can improve the environment make sense.

Disdain for Government and Taxes

Public health works today against a backdrop of calls to shrink government and transfer responsibility to the private sector. Taxes, rather than being viewed as a mechanism for pooling our resources to benefit society as a whole, are seen as unacceptable even when the goal is saving lives. Barry et al. found this sentiment reflected in the next most popular arguments against taxing sugary beverages: that the taxes were a money grab by politicians or an unacceptable government intrusion into our personal lives. These arguments resonate clearly with the public because they are deeply rooted in market values that have always been a challenge to population-level public health approaches. From this perspective, taxes interfere with the public good rather than support it. But as Daniel Beauchamp has explained, a market ethic “unfairly protects majorities and powerful interests from

From the Berkeley Media Studies Group, Public Health Institute, Berkeley, California

Address correspondence to: Lori Dorfman, DrPH, Berkeley Media Studies Group, 2130 Center Street, Suite 302, Berkeley CA 94704. E-mail: dorfman@bmsg.org.

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their fair share of the burdens of prevention”⁵; it is up to public health advocates to explain how environments affect health and to elaborate the appropriate role of government to protect its citizens by making those environments healthier. From this perspective, taxes are one tool that government uses to protect people and advance public health.

Barry and colleagues suggest that future message-framing studies would help us understand how to better make the arguments in support of sugary-beverage taxes and other public health policies. Framing studies should examine not just what arguments people favor, but how those arguments fare against opposition. It may be that the arguments that best support public health policy are not the most popular but the ones that hold sway—even with a smaller segment of the public—against frequent arguments opposing sugary-beverage taxes. This is because frames come in packages: although rugged individualism celebrates ingenuity, effort, and personal responsibility, it also suggests that if people fail, it is their own fault. Similarly, an argument for a sugary-beverage tax may also simultaneously evoke unspoken arguments against it.

Actions Can Speak Louder Than Words

Perhaps more than framing studies, we need continued attempts to enact the policy itself. The more a policy is proposed and discussed the greater the legitimacy of that policy. Policy proposals create opportunities for news coverage, which can set the agenda for public discussion. Barry et al. show that, at present, those discussions are likely reflecting more criticism than support for taxing sugary beverages. But each new policy attempt also communicates the fact that someone—and, as policy attempts

mount, growing numbers of someones—support the policy. Supporters of taxes for sugary beverages can attract and embolden those who agree with the policy if they are vocal and visible and develop frames that are rooted in public health values reflecting social justice even if those in agreement constitute a smaller proportion of the public.

Public health advocates should not wait for the “perfect message” before attempting the policy changes that have the potential to improve individual health and create healthier environments. One way to be sure that the public sees how environments influence health is not just to talk about it but to do something about it. Sometimes actions speak louder than words.

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