

Accelerating Policy on Nutrition: Lessons from Tobacco, Alcohol, Firearms, and Traffic Safety

Appendix

This appendix contains details on the components of an infrastructure; specific research ideas; the agenda and four memos prepared for the Acceleration Meeting. Each memo describes one public health issue's trajectory from a personal to an environmental concern, key research "moments" that propelled action (including policy action), strategic triumphs and gaffs, and the memo author's suggestions for how the lessons might transfer to obesity.

Components of an Infrastructure for Supporting Policy Advocacy to Reduce and Prevent Obesity

The Acceleration meeting participants were clear: Without a systematically-built infrastructure to connect advocates, policy change victories in obesity prevention and reduction will be few and the victors will be isolated. The field needs a well conceived and strong infrastructure to cultivate connections between researchers, advocates, communities, and policy makers, across different states and localities. A well-built infrastructure would have three key components: policy advocacy, bridging, and media advocacy. These three functions together would provide comprehensive support for advocates.

Policy advocacy is essential because policy is likely to be an important mechanism for creating healthier eating environments. An infrastructure would facilitate policy advocacy by identifying those eager to work on environmental change — be it through research or advocacy — and providing them with independent funding to build themselves a base of support separate from the food industry. Currently many nutrition researchers are influenced by the food industry. An infrastructure would create mechanisms for sharing ideas and cultivating the field for those who are interested in prevention and public policy, independent from food industry interests. The policy advocacy function would also include analysis and technical assistance for advocates working to enact policy on the local level.

The **bridging** function brings various groups together to learn from each other and build a larger movement for change. An infrastructure would facilitate bridging by convening groups to join together in obesity prevention work, such as anti-hunger and anti-poverty organizations. Other bridges need to be built between those working on nutrition and physical activity; and others with sustainable agriculture researchers and advocates who are not yet talking to obesity researchers and prevention advocates. And, of course, an infrastructure would create nurturing bridges between researchers and advocates working on various obesity-related issues who have made the commitment to work on questions of policy.

Media advocacy supports policy change by using the news media strategically to amplify advocates' positions and pressure policy makers to act. Effective communications can change the environment in which the policy discussion takes place. A strong infrastructure would support two communication streams: between a network of advocates and researchers, and then with the public and policy makers, when issues and policies are ready for prime time. An infrastructure would facilitate this by building advocates' skills via media advocacy training, so advocates can talk persuasively about the public health values that underlie their actions and demands. Researchers will need skills to respond effectively when reporters ask questions that risk reducing the complexities of their findings to sound bites. Advocates will need the skills to respond effectively when the debate turns to personal choice and freedom, and be able to discuss the appropriate role for government and industry in the effort to arrest obesity.

If it operates as it has in other public health movements, an infrastructure for obesity prevention would also support policy change by reframing the debate through proactive alerts to the field and message development. Currently, the food and beverage industry capitalizes on the general confusion about healthy eating and tries to generate more confusion so that people throw up their hands and fall back on whatever tastes good. This confusion makes for a basic but terrifically difficult communications problem that is complicated by the nutrition community's close relationship with the food industry. Strategic communications can help the field stay focused on the issue of responsibility — the fact that the food industry is the nation's number one source of information about food, much of it misleading, because of its interest in keeping profits high. News coverage that focuses on alternative interpretations can turn up the heat on an issue. Advocates can use media advocacy to expose, motivate and inform those already working on the issue, and to draw new eyes and attention to promising prevention policy.

Ultimately, obesity prevention and reduction must be framed in terms of shared responsibility. Choice and personal responsibility dominate the current discourse on obesity. While they are important frames, there are others that need to be promulgated if advocates are to successfully make the case about the impact of food environments on obesity and the policy solutions that might ameliorate those effects. Obesity will be reframed if the movement has support for its policy and media advocacy, and builds strong bridges between researchers and advocates, and among other constituent groups, so that prevention policy frames come to dominate public debate.

An infrastructure to support prevention advocates could take many forms, involving several organizations that would partner to do the following in each of the key areas:

Policy Advocacy Support

- Identify those eager to work on environmental change – through research and/or advocacy – and provide them with independent funding.
- Advocate for national public health institutions such as NIH and CDC, and state and local health departments, to create and expand national plans for reducing and preventing obesity that include environmental prevention. For example, Healthy People 2010 should expand its policy recommendations beyond the workplace and schools. Encourage interagency collaboration in government, within the health sector and across sectors (such as public health and agriculture).
- Provide support for coalitions and “free lance” advocates with targeted skills development and training.
- Disseminate research to other researchers, advocates, policy makers, and the public. Use creative approaches to bring data to the attention of policy makers.
- Provide those working for environmental policy change with key documents such as fact sheets and summaries of new research.
- Monitor the food industry for activities (e.g. marketing campaigns, policy initiatives) that could have an impact on efforts to reduce obesity.
- Provide support for those who want to counter these activities.

Bridging

- Convene groups so they can learn from each other and build a larger movement for change. Convene at the national, state, and local levels and on issue-specific topics (e.g., a conference on land use policy for preventing obesity). Provide reflective and discursive space for exploring new ideas.
- Create bridges for anti-hunger and anti-poverty organizations to join together in obesity prevention work. This is a natural fit because poverty, hunger and lack of resources are all connected. A case in point would be a visible and coordinated response to those saying that if poor people are obese, the U.S. should cut the food stamp and the poverty nutrition programs.
- Build bridges with the people working on sustainable agriculture and other agricultural reform efforts who are not yet talking to obesity researchers.

- Create and nurture bridges between researchers and advocates who have made the commitment to work on environmental policy.
- Facilitate communication between a network of advocates and researchers at various skill levels, and, when they are ready, with the public and policymakers.
- Convene meetings of researchers and advocates so that they can learn from one other and better understand each other's needs and limitations.
- Provide a news service that would provide current information on policy advances, media opportunities and new research in a way that would be useful to both researchers and advocates.

Media Advocacy Support

- Build advocates' skills via media advocacy training, so advocates can talk persuasively about the public health values that underlie their actions and demands.
- Frame obesity prevention and reduction in terms of shared responsibility. Study the news media to understand how the issue is currently framed, and share the analysis with researchers and advocates so they can make strategic choices about what to emphasize in their public discourse.
- Reframe the debate through proactive alerts to the field and message development. Help the field stay focused on the issue of institutional accountability. Help advocates use media advocacy to expose, motivate and inform those already working on the issue, and to draw new eyes and attention to the issue.
- Create limited paid ads to support environmental initiatives to prevent obesity.
- Provide focused action alerts including summaries of key media opportunities, framing suggestions, questions and answers, key facts, etc.
- Support advocates and researchers so their voices are prominent in news coverage and on editorial pages.

RESEARCH IDEAS FOR ACCELERATING PROGRESS ON OBESITY

The Acceleration Meeting participants generated many questions that could be investigated to inform policy solutions to the obesity epidemic. Many of these revolved around the question of excise taxes for soda, unhealthy snacks, or other foods, in part because of the proven effectiveness of excise taxes in reducing tobacco consumption. Other questions concerned capturing lessons from the “natural experiments” underway as groups take actions they believe will prevent or reduce obesity, such as enacting soda bans in schools, or investigations into how the food environment affects communities.

Research Questions on Excise Taxes for Foodstuffs

As Ken Warner notes in his memo for the Acceleration Meeting, tobacco excise taxes have the “doing-good-while-doing-well” feature of reducing smoking while at the same time raising state revenues. This makes them appealing for considering what might reduce obesity. While the group acknowledged that food is substantially different than tobacco, participants still felt that research would provide insight into the dilemma of whether it was reasonable to seek excise taxes for food despite its differences from tobacco. The questions include econometric inquiries into what tax price points would reduce consumption as well as more sociological or pragmatic questions about how taxes can be successfully introduced in the political arena.

- 1. At what price point does an excise tax reduce consumption of soda or other items?** Some researchers suggest that a tax on food would need to be 7-8% above the price before it would affect consumption, but research is needed to say for sure.
- 2. Would a “saturated fat” tax or other ingredient-specific taxes have an effect and/or be viable?** Price elasticity and profit margins on food vary a great deal — soda is different than fluid milk. Product- or ingredient- specific research would be necessary to ascertain the effects of a tax.
- 3. How much revenue can be generated from excise taxes on food?** This research question explores excise taxes on food as a mechanism for funding obesity prevention and reduction programs as opposed to using an excise tax to reduce consumption directly. Taxes on tobacco have both reduced consumption and provided the resources necessary for large-scale, statewide prevention programs, including community-based programs for prevention and cessation and comprehensive mass media campaigns. But price points for food may be too high for immediate consumption effects of low level taxes (see question 1). Because the markets are so large, however, a tax that would not effect consumption would still generate a great deal of revenue. California now generates \$200 million a year from a \$.01 tax on 20 ounce sodas. Conducting research to ascertain how much revenue would be generated by different sorts of taxes would help public health advocates determine whether such policy battles are worthwhile.
- 4. What is the level of public support if excise tax revenues are earmarked for nutrition and physical activity programs?** This research question would examine public opinion about taxes, and should ask specific questions about how support for building a prevention infrastructure and programs compares to support for revenue going into the state’s general fund. Many advocates believe that public support for taxes is high if the funds are earmarked for nutrition and physical activity programs or even split between programs and the state’s general fund, but this notion needs closer examination. Related to this, researchers should examine which states allow earmarking.
- 5. What’s the best way to reinvest tax revenues to ameliorate the regressive nature of excise taxes?** Excise taxes are, by their nature, regressive. This is of great concern when the item being taxed is food, an essential for life. But if there are distinct health benefits from taxes for populations that suffer disproportionately from obesity, there may be good reason to pursue taxes. Still, special effort should be made — and research conducted — to determine how to offset the regressive effects. For example, would reinvesting in local schools’ physical education and athletics programs help ameliorate the effects of a regressive tax on certain

foods? Arkansas and Indiana dedicated 15% of their tobacco Master Settlement Agreement funds to develop infrastructure in communities of color — has that helped build support in the community for tobacco control? Would similar earmarking work for obesity prevention and reduction?

- 6. What tax policies make sense on a state-by-state, or regional, basis?** For example, California does not produce as much corn as other states and so does not have as large a stake in the high fructose corn syrup market as other states. Does that mean it would be easier to enact a steeper soda tax in California? Mapping food inputs on a state-by-state basis with this sort of question in mind would inform policy advocacy strategy for those considering raising soda taxes in particular.

Research Questions on Other Topics

- 7. Would food or activity subsidies result in healthier eating and more activity?** The flip side of using taxes to reduce consumption of harmful products is to use subsidies to make healthier products cheaper and easier to use. Would food subsidies encourage purchase and consumption of more healthful foods (e.g., fresh fruits and vegetables)? Would subsidies increase the number of stores that sold fresh fruits and vegetables? This question is another way of determining how taxes can be structured so that they don't inadvertently burden the poor who really do count every penny spent on food.
- 8. Besides excise taxes, what revenue enhancing strategies are viable?** A robust prevention movement will need public support from public dollars. Where might those revenues come from? School bonds? Development fees? Redevelopment activities? A thorough assessment of revenue generating possibilities at the state and local levels would inform policy advocacy.
- 9. What are the links between government agriculture policy (e.g., farm subsidies) and obesity?** The question of current government subsidies to the food industry needs to be investigated in depth. How do current trade agreements affect the U.S. food environment? What are the advertising subsidies (tax write-offs) being employed by the food industry? For example, what is the dollar amount taxpayers are currently subsidizing the fast food industry based on tax write-offs for its advertising? Or the high sugar breakfast cereal industry? How many subsidy or tax write-off dollars are for foods high in fat, salt, and sugars?
- 10. What sources of food and activity are available in what locations (neighborhoods, schools), and how does this correlate to health status or obesity rates?** This research would reveal if there were disparities associated with race or class. Questions like this can also be linked to questions of land use policy. For example, what land use laws are typically available to local communities? If policy potential and enacted policies were mapped across communities, there would be opportunities for case control studies and/or natural experiments where laws have been enacted regarding recreational space, food access, and restaurant placement.
- 11. What are the relationships between race, class, obesity, and policy?** For example, the Praxis Project found that certain local tobacco control policies afforded different levels of protection to different population groups — suburban communities had stricter policies, and so were more protected, than urban communities. Because of a higher concentration of people of color in the urban communities, this contributed to a racial/ethnic disparity. Is the same true when it comes to policies aimed at reducing and preventing obesity? What policy makes sense in low income communities (tax breaks for farmers markets, food buying coops) as well as for the population at large (food labeling requirements)?
- 12. What are the factors that dictate or influence placement of different food sources in communities?** What factors determine the placement of detractors to healthy eating, such as fast food outlets? A related question would investigate the impact of local policy on local jobs, i.e., does the fast food industry contribute to economic growth in communities by providing jobs to local residents? What factors determine the placement of environmental inducements to healthy eating, such as grocery stores, farmers markets, salad bars, or others?

- 13. What are the potential policy interventions, which policies have been evaluated, and which need evaluation?** Researchers could conduct population-based assessments of where policies need to be directed. For example, what youth-based policy ought to be assessed – limits on ads targeting young children, limits on vending machines, and/or sponsorships in schools? Learning the level of attributable risk (if it can be calculated) of vending machines in schools or soda bans would help advocates and policy makers understand their value.
- 14. What are the effects of soda bans on the schools?** Are soda bans revenue neutral? Does classroom behavior differ in schools with and without access to soda?
- 15. What are the effects of soda bans on the students?** A few strategically designed studies would tell us what happens to kids' overall diet when schools ban soda. Do students just go to convenience stores instead and come out "soda-neutral"? [This question would address the immediate effects of attempts to reduce soda consumption among youth, but not the longer term goals companies have for using vending machines and advertising in schools to establish brand loyalty through adulthood and into the next generation of drinkers.]
- 16. Do large, conspicuously posted listings of fat and calorie content reduce sales of certain items in restaurants?** If so, does the effect change if the size or placement of the information changes? Does the type of restaurant the information is posted in make a difference?
- 17. What research can be linked to action?** For example, the California Center for Public Health Advocacy conducted a study of diabetes death rates by legislative district that made it much easier to interest local politicians in the data. Researchers have done similar studies aggregating firearm deaths by legislative district, with similarly increased attention from policy makers.
- 18. What is the food industry's position on various policies?** Monitoring the industry has been extremely important in all the public health areas discussed at the Acceleration Meeting. The food industry is not a monolith, and how its various components respond to the obesity epidemic, and public health's efforts to stem the epidemic, will have an impact on how the public health work proceeds. In alcohol, for example, the spirits, beer, wine, and hospitality industries were not always aligned in their responses to various policy proposals. Research that describes and helps anticipate responses to the obesity epidemic from the various food industry components will be important.
- 19. What does the public think about the obesity epidemic and various proposals to address it?** Public opinion research can measure the extent to which the public recognizes the problem and to assess the level of support for various solutions.
- 20. How are food and activity issues portrayed in the news?** Preliminary research in this area indicates that while the environment is implicated as part of the problem, solutions – when they are mentioned at all – are limited to personal responsibility. Since the news provides much of the information available to policy makers and the public, it is important to determine how that part of our public conversation frames the issue and what is missing from the debate. Is policy discussed? If so, how is it justified? Are solutions described? What are they, and who is portrayed as responsible for enacting them?

Note: Any comprehensive listing of research questions important for understanding and preventing obesity should also include investigations of food marketing and advertising. That topic is not included here because it was covered thoroughly in The California Endowment's previous meeting (June 2003) and proceedings (November 2003), "Food and Beverage Industry Marketing Practices Aimed at Children: Developing Strategies for Preventing Obesity and Diabetes."