

Who's to blame for obesity? Policymakers, the food industry, or individuals?

January 22 2014

Fast food restaurants take a lot of heat for the rise in obesity in the United States, but is it really their fault? A research survey conducted by two food economists revealed that most people believe individuals are to blame for their own obesity – not restaurants, grocery stores, farmers, or government policies. One implication from this research is that creating and enforcing public policies to help reduce obesity and/or encourage healthier food choices may not be as effective as policy makers would like.

University of Illinois researcher Brenna Ellison explained that she and her colleague, Jayson Lusk at Oklahoma State University, are both interested in the effectiveness of different [food](#) policies. However, past research has shown many of the food policies designed to improve food choices, such as requiring [calorie information](#) on restaurant menus and taxing sugar-sweetened beverages, do not always produce the intended results. This leads one to question: Why aren't these policies working? Why aren't consumers responding to increased soda prices or calorie information on menus?

"Obesity is in the news every day so it would be hard to say that people are unaware of the policy initiatives in place to reduce U.S. [obesity](#) rates," Ellison said. "Based on our study results, the more likely conclusion is that consumers' beliefs about who is to blame for obesity don't necessarily align with the beliefs of policy makers and public health advocates. In the United States, we're known for being an individualistic-based society, so it's not exceptionally surprising that we

would put this responsibility for obesity on ourselves."

"Who is to blame for the rise in obesity?" was published in a recent issue of *Appetite*.

An online survey was administered by Clear Voice Research whose registry of panelists is representative of the U.S. population in terms of socioeconomic characteristics, gender, and region. Of the more than 800 people in the United States who took the survey, 774 were usable.

The main question of interest asked survey participants was, "Who is primarily to blame for the rise in obesity?" Respondents were asked to classify seven different entities (individuals, parents, farmers, food manufacturers, [grocery stores](#), restaurants, and [government policies](#)) as either primarily to blame, somewhat to blame, or not to blame for obesity. Results of the study showed that 94 percent of people believed individuals are primarily or somewhat to blame for the rise in obesity, with parents coming in second at 91 percent primarily or somewhat to blame. Survey respondents felt farmers and grocery stores were relatively blameless for the rise in obesity.

Ellison said that one finding from the survey was unexpected.

"We learned that farmers and people who received food stamps were more likely to blame government and farm policy," Ellison said. "That seems off. You wouldn't expect that opinion from people who are benefiting from those policies; however, these individuals could be in the best position to observe the potential harm that some government policies create."

"Unquestionably, U.S. obesity and overweight rates are much higher than they were 20 or 30 years ago so it is not surprising that [policy makers](#) and [public health](#) officials are looking for potential solutions.

That being said, if individuals view obesity as a personal problem, how confident can we be that these solutions will work? We need to be realistic about the solutions we're proposing and implementing, and if people are not buying into them, they may need to be re-evaluated," Ellison said.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Who's to blame for obesity? Policymakers, the food industry, or individuals? (2014, January 22) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-01-blame-obesity-policymakers-food-industry.html>

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