



Government Meddling to Combat Obesity Unfair and Ineffective

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There is no obesity epidemic in Canada, and even if there was, government intervention aimed at overweight Canadians is costly, poorly targeted and likely ineffective, finds a new study recently released.

It is a myth to say there's an obesity epidemic in Canada leading to widespread illness and death, despite claims from public health advocates, politicians and the media. Further, it is wrong to believe that only government intervention can save us from ourselves. The recent study, *Obesity in Canada: Overstated Problems, Misguided Policy Solutions*, which recognizes a difference between obesity and overweightness, spotlights three main topics: obesity rates in Canada, the connection between obesity/overweightness and poor health/early death, and government response. The study includes data and analysis from Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom.

How fat are we?

From 2003 to 2012, notes the study, the rate of overweightness among the Canadian population has been stable. And while the rate of obesity climbed from 15.3 per cent to 18.4 per cent, it has also stabilized since 2009. In fact, the rate of obesity among adult males may be dropping, though it continues to increase among adult females. For young people aged 12 to 17, rates of overweightness and obesity have been stable since 2005.

Claims of an obesity epidemic aren't supported by the available data, so policy-makers in Canada should perhaps exercise caution, rather than aggressive intervention, when considering policy proposals.



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What are the public (and private) consequences of being fat?

While there is a clear relationship between premature death and obesity, the study finds that people at the low end of the obesity spectrum (according to the Body Mass Index or BMI, which uses a weight-to-height ratio) may be at no greater risk than so-called normal weight individuals. In fact, a number of studies show that overweight people (different from obese) may have a significantly lower all-cause mortality rate compared to people

in the normal weight category, while the underweight face a significant increased risk of mortality.

Considering the health consequences across the weight spectrum, from underweight to obese, the impact of medical innovations and advances over time, and taking a broader view of the economic costs and impacts of obesity, the negative health consequences associated with obesity, and the subsequent strain on Canada's health care system, may be wildly overstated.

Can government trim our fat?

Most government attempts to tackle obesity and overweightness include a familiar menu of policy proposals aimed at private businesses and individuals, which include tax hikes on sugary and fatty foods, food bans, vending machine bans, and menu and food labelling initiatives.

However, these policies often ignore the many complex causes of obesity or overweightness, which include physiological, psychological and socioeconomic factors such as culture, family life and structure, genetics and income. They also impose costs on all Canadians, regardless of individual lifestyle choices, and crucially, disregard the cost to taxpayers, private business and the economy overall.

For example, many of these policies require new or larger government bureaucracies (an agency to determine which foods and beverages should be taxed or banned, for example), stunt

small business growth and generate higher business costs, which are likely to be passed on to consumers.

Government interventions impose costs indiscriminately, inappropriately vilifying particular foods, food manufacturers and distributors. If the interventions fail to shrink waistlines across Canada, we'll likely see advocates arguing that the policies weren't strong or intrusive enough. But in reality, governments have little ability to change the behaviours that lead to overweightness and obesity, and the case for government intervention is neither as strong nor as clear as advocates claim. ■



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