

# Child Obesity Policy Brief

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## The Role Of Agriculture Policy In Reducing Childhood Obesity

For the past few decades, U.S. agriculture policy has spurred production of crops such as corn and wheat, which are frequently made into foods high in calories. Over the same period, childhood obesity has risen dramatically, largely because of the consumption of excess calories -- many from inexpensive snacks, sweets, and sweetened beverages made from those same U.S.-supported crops.

Experts see a connection. American farm policy, they believe, has contributed to an overabundance of high-calorie food that is cheap and easily accessible to families. In 2002, for instance, U.S. Department of Agriculture researchers concluded that the prime factor behind soaring obesity rates from 1985 to 2000 was a 300-calorie jump in what the U.S. food supply delivered to the average eater. Of the extra calories, 24 percent came from added fats; 23 percent from added sugars; and 46 percent from grains, most of them refined.

### POLICY PUSHES PRODUCTION

Over the long term, agricultural policy helps determine what farmers grow. For more than a century, U.S. policy has been to push production to greater heights: specifically, the growing of commodities such as corn, wheat, cotton, rice, and milk, with soybeans added later -- all crops that lend themselves to large-scale production, easy storage, and long-distance shipping. U.S. farmers responded vigorously to the policies, raising output 2.6 times from 1948 to 2002. In 2009, farmers planted more than 87 million acres in corn, the second-highest total in 62 years.

Another apparent benefit is lowered costs to the consumer of foods made from these commodities. Sweets and fats cost less than many healthier foods. And unhealthy foods have become the most inflation-resistant part of the U.S. diet. One review of costs shows that from 1985 to 2000, the inflation-adjusted price of carbonated soft drinks sank nearly 24 percent, while that of fresh fruit and vegetables rose 39 percent.

### TOO MANY CALORIES

Initially, U.S. policy to promote these products was partially done to stem hunger. But today obesity has overtaken hunger as the most prevalent nutritional problem in children. For many of the nation's children, the problem is no longer that they don't get enough calories, but rather that they consume too many. The policies also have helped create an imbalance of available foods, with too many sweets and not enough fruit and vegetables. To meet recommended dietary levels, Americans of all ages would need to increase daily fruit and vegetable consumption by 132 percent and 31 percent, respectively.

To meet those dietary needs, and help reverse the trend of obesity, authors in the March 2010 issue of *Health Affairs* argue that U.S. agriculture policy should be changed to offer more incentives to grow fruit and vegetables. They also contend that the policy should provide incentives for those farmers already growing fruit and vegetables to produce more of them -- and, in particular, to produce them in geographical locations that are closer to the consumers who need them most.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The White House should gather representatives of disparate health and agriculture communities together for a **landmark conference on agriculture policy** that would formulate strategies to grow healthier food and fight childhood obesity.
- Congress should **recruit farmers as essential allies** in the fight against obesity, through financial and other support that encourages the production of more fruit and vegetables.
- In the next Farm Bill -- against the backdrop of greater climate uncertainty, increasing water scarcity, and additional pressure on land from development -- Congress should create a research agenda to identify a **diverse mix of crops and farming methods** that can best meet the nation's health and food needs.
- For federal child nutrition programs, such as the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs, Congress and the executive branch should ensure that commodities purchased under the Farm Bill **meet the USDA's own dietary guidelines** for healthy eating.

## RESOURCE

David Wallinga, "[Agricultural Policy and Childhood Obesity: A Food Systems and Public Health Commentary](#)," *Health Affairs* 29, no. 3 (2010): 405-410.

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Contact:  
**Sue Ducat**  
 Director of Communications  
 301 841 9962  
[sducat@projecthope.org](mailto:sducat@projecthope.org)

*Health Affairs*  
 7500 Old Georgetown Rd.  
 Suite 600  
 Bethesda, MD 20814