



AMERICANS' STRUGGLE WITH WEIGHTY ISSUES

It's all over the headlines—Americans are getting heavier. The statistics are sobering: As documented by the Department of Health and Human Services, in 2000, an estimated 64 percent of U.S. adults were overweight or obese. Today, almost three times as many adolescents are overweight as in 1980. With these developments has come a rise in diabetes, heart diseases, and other chronic health problems; approximately 300,000 Americans die each year from factors related to being overweight, at a cost of around \$100 billion.

Some groups argue that the solution to the problem lies in the realm of personal responsibility—Americans need to curb their appetites, keep themselves from giving into temptation, and exercise. But several news sources, including ABC anchorman Peter Jennings and *Consumer Reports* magazine, have gone beyond pointing the finger at individuals for their immoderation to delve into the social, economic, and political trends that make it easy for us to pack on the pounds. The findings may help explain why so many people find it difficult to maintain a healthy weight and hint at systemic solutions that would help all of us make wiser lifestyle choices.

Battle with the Bulge

Americans' struggle to stay slim isn't new, but health statistics show that, during the mid-1970s to early 1980s, something changed in our battle with the bulge. What occurred was likely the confluence of a number of different factors, among them:

- **The Growth of Low-Cost Fast Food.** The number of fast-food restaurants per capita doubled from 1972 to 1997.

- **Supersizing.** According to a study by nutrition experts Marion Nestle and Lisa R. Young, "Portion sizes began to grow in the 1970s, rose sharply in the 1980s, and have continued in parallel with increasing body weights." Vendors found that they could increase profits by charging slightly more for larger helpings.

- **The Expansion of Food Choices.** New candy, snack, cereal, soda, and other high-calorie food products have flooded the market in recent years. At the same time, the food industry has spent around \$33 billion a year on advertising, especially to children.

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- **The Reduction in Smoking.** According to "Finding Fault for the Fat" by Daniel Akst (*The Boston Globe Magazine*, December 7, 2003), "Giving up smoking was responsible for about a quarter of the increase in the number of overweight men over a decade and for a sixth of the increase in overweight women."

- **The Reliance on Cars.** Especially in the suburbs, people now spend more of their time driving than walking.

According to some experts, these factors have been exacerbated by certain public-policy decisions. Federal farm subsidies have led to an overabundance of corn, rice, soybeans, sugar, and wheat in this country. These staples are then used to create processed foods and fatten hogs and cattle—the foods we should eat less of

to maintain a healthy weight. Because of subsidies, the prices of products high in calories and saturated fat have risen much less quickly than those of fresh fruits and vegetables.

The USDA food pyramid is also under attack for leading Americans to bulk up on refined carbohydrates while rejecting all fats. Government officials thought the distinction between a good and bad fat and a good and bad carbohydrate was too complicated. They simplified the message and gave license to unbridled consumption of white bread, white rice, pasta, and potatoes—foods that the body metabolizes much more quickly than their whole-grain cousins—while preaching wholesale rejection of fats, even unsaturated fats, which are important for good health.

Even school officials have contributed to the problem through efforts to balance their budgets. To save money, some school districts have reduced or eliminated physical education classes. And with so-called "pouring contracts," soft-drink makers pay fees to put vending machines in schools. The American Academy of Pediatrics recently called for a ban on soda in schools as part of an effort to battle childhood obesity.

Food for Thought

Whenever we see a pattern of behavior that escalates over time, we can be pretty sure that some strong reinforcing processes are at work. We all need to take responsibility for our own actions and choices. But if the majority of Americans are struggling with weight issues, then clearly larger forces are at play than lack of individual resolve. And unless American society finds ways to intervene in the escalating obesity problem, according to pediatric nutritionist Keith-Thomas

Ayoob, “This may be the first generation of kids [in the United States] that has a life span shorter than that of their parents.” That’s some sobering food for thought. ■

—Janice Molloy

Sources: “Obesity in America: How to Get Fat Without Really Trying,” an ABC news report by Peter Jennings, broadcast on December 8, 2003; “Cut the Fat,” Consumer Reports, January 2004

Causal loop diagrams don’t need to be complex to offer insights—hone your skills by drawing one or more of the loops described in this or other articles about the obesity epidemic in America. Also, where are the leverage points for change? How might a healthy food production and consumption system operate within a society?

YOUR WORKOUT CHALLENGE

Systems Thinking Workout is designed to help you flex your systems thinking muscles. In this column, we introduce scenarios that contain interesting systemic structures. We then encourage you to read the story; identify what you see as the most relevant structures and themes; capture them graphically in causal loop diagrams, behavior over time graphs, or stock and flow diagrams; and, if you choose, send the diagrams to us with comments about why the dynamics you identified are important and where

you think leverage might be for making lasting change. We’ll publish selected diagrams and comments in a subsequent issue of the newsletter. Fax your diagrams and analysis to (781) 894-7175, or e-mail them to editorial@pegasus.com.

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