

Assessing the Cost of Healthful Food Choices in America

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To eat well in this country costs more than to eat badly. It will take more money and some people simply don't have it. And that's one of the reasons that we need changes at the policy level so that the carrots are a better deal than the chips (Pollan, 2008).

Introduction

You've been here before. You've visited the supermarket and observed the prices of fresh produce, of sustainable grass-fed beef, and of high-quality whole grain foods. You may even have wondered if it was worth the effort to put together a nutritious meal, when you could pick up one pizza to feed your whole family. What if making a flavorful and healthful meal cost less than buying processed, fatty foods? Would that change your decision? Are our food choices driven by our ability to afford certain items? If that were the case, it would follow that people of higher socioeconomic standing would be more likely to have healthy diets, but this is not necessarily true. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the relationship between income level and obesity vary by race and gender. Women- especially white women- do show higher rates of obesity at lower socioeconomic levels, but non-Hispanic black men are more likely to be obese as their income *increases* (Cynthia L. Ogden, Molly M. Lamb, Margaret D. Carroll, & Katherine M. Flegal, 2010). So, we see that, while cost is a factor, it must not be the sole determiner of dietary quality.

Cost

In order to profile a few major elements integral to food choice patterns, let us begin by examining the effect of food prices on our decisions. Say you enjoy frozen burritos from your

local grocery store, but you know they contain an excess of saturated fats, preservatives, and sneaky refined sugars. So, you set out to make your own, healthier version of the meal. You buy a pound of lean organic beef, a block of reduced-fat cheese, and eight whole grain tortillas. The total of your ingredients brings you to \$13.25 for 8 burritos; not including any spices or sauces you might wish to include. \$1.70 per burrito might not seem like an unreasonable price, but consider: your original frozen variety cost \$0.43.

There's certainly evidence of a price gap between high-energy low-nutrition foods and their healthier counterparts. Subsidies given to farmers for growing grains, corn, and soy have made energy-dense, but nutrient-poor foods cheaper than vegetables and fruits that contain important micronutrients (Drewnowski, 2010). The question is; how does that affect the way we eat? Over the past few years, there have been many studies conducted in order to determine the effectiveness of food pricing and tax policy on altering consumption patterns of the public. In one French study, 160 women were given a set amount of money and asked to buy foods from an online store at three different times. The first time, the foods were presented at regular market rates. The second time, the fruit and vegetable prices were reduced by 30%; and the third time all healthy foods were reduced by 30%, while unhealthy ones were increased by 30%. The researchers found that both the second and third parts of the experiment were able to positively alter the food choices of the participants, but that the effects were less in lower-income women (Darmon, Lacroix, Muller, & Ruffieux, 2014). Another literature review concluded that small changes in food prices did not have significant effect on consumers' BMI or obesity rates. However, "nontrivial pricing interventions might have a measurable effect on Americans' weight outcomes, particularly those of children and adolescents, low-SES populations, and those most at risk for overweight" (Powell & Chaloupka, 2009, p. 249). Powell and Chaloupka also pointed to

the inequalities produced by price manipulation at different income levels; suggesting that, “To offset the regressive nature of food taxes, if the goal is to alter the prices of healthy compared with unhealthy foods, instruments in the form of subsidies may be called for on normative grounds, particularly if they could be targeted to low income households” (2009).

Convenience

Back to our burrito: previously, we discussed the actual monetary cost of the ingredients, but we didn’t consider the opportunity cost related to the preparation of the food. How long would it take to make a burrito from scratch? Well, you’ll have to start by browning the meat, which takes about 12 minutes, allowing time for the pan to warm up. You spend at least 5 minutes grating that block of cheese. 10 more minutes go into evenly distributing the fillings and wrapping the burritos, and the final 15 get everything nice and toasty in the oven. As you bite into the products of your labor, you can’t help but think about the fact that you just spent 42 minutes making something you could have microwaved in 2. That’s 40 minutes that you could have spent on housework, or homework, or some much needed relaxation.

Even when healthy foods are affordable, they still may not be attainable. For instance, if a person maintains their socioeconomic status by working two jobs, or if they have unpredictable shift work, it can be difficult to set aside the time required to prepare balanced, nutritious meals. Shopping for food is also time consuming, especially if you don’t have access to grocery stores in your immediate area. Many people in America live in what can be defined, under a number of criteria, as a food desert. Meaning, their food choices are limited by their geographical position. According to USDA data, 17.7 percent of the U.S. population live in low-income, low-access tracts, where they are either 1/2 mile (For urban areas) or 10 miles (rural areas) from the nearest supermarket (United States Department of Agriculture, 2017). When sources of fresh, whole

foods are difficult to access, people rely more on fast food and convenience store options, because, “-people generally buy food at the places closest to them, even if the stores do not have the foods they may prefer or need. Thus, concentrating on the price, quality, and range of healthy food choices in existing locations is important” (National Research Council (US), 2009).

Culture

When you took that bite of your burrito earlier, you were already annoyed with the sacrifices you had to make, in terms of time and money, just to make a healthy substitution in your diet. Now, as you chew through the rest of it, you're saddened by the fact that it doesn't even taste the same. You were used to the flavor of your frozen burritos. You've been eating them since you were a kid. You have memories associated with that food, and even if you don't think about them every time, you get a happy feeling when you taste it. Moreover, you're reminded of what you're missing every time you see a friend or family member eating a microwaved burrito.

Our experiences surrounding food shapes our preferences. The types of food your family or your peers eat influences the foods you eat. Media you were exposed to, advertisements, stories involving food, things you learned in school, all these things are a part of the way we think about what we put in our bodies. We learn what foods we like based on our context, and we tend to eat the food that is represented and available in our culture (Thompson & Manore, 2017). This means that if pizza, cheeseburgers, and fried chicken are the foods you are exposed to every day, they are more likely to be the ones you eat.

Conclusion

It costs more to eat healthy in this country. Not just in food prices, but in time, and energy, and effort. If we want to change the way people eat, finding ways to make healthy choices more affordable will be an important part of that; keeping in mind that simply raising the prices of unhealthy foods will only harm those who already cannot afford to eat. We will also need to work towards making healthy foods more *accessible*. After all, it won't matter how inexpensive vegetables are if 17.7% of Americans don't have grocery stores readily available to them. Some of the ways we might combat food access inequalities are through urban gardening, encouraging local retailers to sell more healthy options, and developing underserved areas more mindfully. Lastly, changes must be made at the base level of our culture. Healthy habits should be normalized in our homes, as well as our media. We each must consider the examples we set for our children and our peers, and strive to portray healthful balance in our own choices. To eat well in this country costs more than to eat badly, and it's also more difficult and less socially desirable. In order to develop a society wherein people eat more nutritious foods, it will be essential to understand and alter the cost, convenience, and culture associated with those foods.

References

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