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Economists' insights into the obesity crisis

Barry M. Popkin

The book, *fat economics: nutrition, health, and economic policy*, provides an overview of the way economists view the current obesity problem, their analysis of its causes, and consequences and options for intervening at the policy level. Over the past half century, economists have used their tools to study topics as varied as determining interventions effective in enhancing student learning, questioning whether nature or nurture affects IQ and cognitive development, and studying designs to improve the effectiveness of child care. One branch of economics, called human capital or human resource economics, has been the focus of economists specialized in the education, health and nutrition fields. These economists examine how various factors affected smoking, cocaine and other decisions, how husbands and wives resolve power sharing, how intra-household decisions are made, and factors determining a variety of measures of health status. With respect to the latter, Robert Fogel, the 1993 Nobel Laureate in economics, focused parts of his research on how height is correlated with health and well-being and as a measure of economic investment. Two other Nobel Laureate economists, Amartya Sen and Gunnar Myrdal, have written extensively on famine and hunger. Other economists, including the authors of this book, have ventured into the field of obesity and nutrition, publishing articles in diverse biomedical journals.

The authors of *fat economics*, Mario Mazzocchi, W. Bruce Traill, and Jason F. Shogren, have a shorter history of work in the obesity and nutrition fields. Still, they address the following questions: Why are people eating more? How have governments contributed to obesity, poor diet and reduced activity? When it comes to understanding the obesity literature, this book seems somewhat superficial to the specialized scholar, and therefore, their explanation of aspects of the obesity literature lacks depth. The researcher who is not immersed in the field, however, can understand many of their points. For example, useful arguments related to the role of subsidies in our diet and the long-term vs short-term impacts are important, but they do not address some of the longer-term effects, e.g. shifts in the relative prices of foods with various agricultural subsidies over the past 65 years since WWII. Their lack of immersion in the obesity field is likewise apparent in their discussion on issues where there is no consensus, e.g. on the benefit of fruits and vegetables as a way to reduce energy imbalance. While there are important benefits of some items for cardiovascular and cancer-related prevention, there is no evidence that a major increase in fruit and vegetable intake will reduce weight. Therefore, it is the authors' explanation of the economist's approach and description of their tools that is most valuable to the reader.

The book's strength is not in reviewing and addressing the obesity literature but rather in telling how an economist would think about the issues through major topics of concern. One example

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Corresponding Author's Institution: Department of Nutrition, SPH, University of North Carolina, 123 W. Franklin St., Chapel Hill, NC 27516.

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of this is the chapter addressing the causes of obesity. They do not view the causes in the classical method of what causes an energy balance or how fat or carbohydrate excess contributes to obesity. Rather, they explain issues such as the impact of advertising in skewing knowledge and how this information affects consumer behavior.

The authors' descriptions of the economic consequences of obesity and the rationale for government intervention are also quite useful. Their treatment utilizes basic economic tools in their discussion of why government intervention to tax beverages is a rationale action (it may convince low income consumers to adjust their consumption and reduce their health risks, which are currently greater than high income consumers); how the market economy fails (how advertising skews and distorts consumer knowledge); and what consequences matter for economic well-being and national welfare (e.g. reducing Medicaid and Medicare costs, for example), inter alia.

Overall, this book is readable and provides a useful introduction to issues of national policy and describes an economic perspective new to many readers. It does so in a manner that will allow the interested practitioner or scholar new insights into policy decisions and economic analysis. While their perspective would perhaps benefit by a deeper knowledge of the obesity field, the authors have laid out their concepts in such a way to overcome this problem, with the result being a book accessible to the uninformed about the use of economics for studying obesity.

Figure.