Invited Commentary | Nutrition, Obesity, and Exercise

Changing the Food Environment One Checkout Lane at a Time
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Recent advances in obesity pharmacotherapy and food-as-medicine programs have expanded clinical tools for treating obesity, nutrition insecurity, and diet-sensitive chronic diseases, such as diabetes and cardiovascular disease. Despite new therapies, obesity and food insecurity continue to rise in the United States and disproportionately affect the health of low-income and racial and ethnic minority groups. The ubiquitous unhealthy food environment undermines health and health equity goals by promoting consumption of cheap, energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods and beverages. Real progress in reducing diet-sensitive chronic diseases and nutrition insecurity will not occur without changing the current food environment.

One strategy to promote healthier choices is to alter the food environment's choice architecture by placing healthy food and beverages in highly visible and accessible locations. Health-promoting choice architecture is effective in a variety of retail settings, including food stores located in low-income communities. The food industry has leveraged unhealthy choice architecture for decades to increase their profits by marketing tempting food and beverages high in added sugars, sodium, and unhealthy fats. In most grocery and convenience stores, candy, sugar-sweetened beverages, and salty snacks are found in prominent locations near front entrances, on aisle endcaps, and in checkout lanes, leading to impulse purchases. Despite evidence that unhealthy marketing practices have a larger effect on low-income and racial and ethnic minority shoppers, these practices have gone unchecked.

Some supermarkets and other food retailers have voluntarily implemented programs (eg, healthy shelf labels) to help their customers make healthy choices. However, these efforts are inconsistently implemented and not regulated. Policies are needed to ensure that health-promoting interventions in the food environment are equitably applied in all stores and communities.

In March 2021, the city of Berkeley, California, took an important first step in this direction by implementing a first-of-its-kind healthy checkout ordinance that restricted the types of food and beverages that could be placed in large (>2500 sq ft) stores’ checkout lanes to include only unsweetened beverages and foods with minimal added sugars (<5 g/serving) or sodium (<200 mg/serving). The study by Falbe et al assessed compliance with the new policy in a pre-post (February 2021 to February 2022) natural experiment comparing 23 Berkeley stores with 75 comparison stores from 3 similar California cities that did not implement a healthy checkout policy. Results demonstrated that within 1 year of the ordinance Berkeley stores had an impressive 65% relative increase in all compliant healthy checkout facings and a 125% relative increase in compliant food and beverage checkout facings.

Compliance with a city-mandated healthy checkout policy is an important real-world implementation outcome for changing the food environment. Although Berkeley may not be representative of many cities in the United States, the findings by Falbe et al provide evidence that a citywide policy was feasible, acceptable, and effective for changing the food environment of store checkout lanes. It is likely that most stores in Berkeley were compliant with the policy without much regulation, as the ordinance was not enforceable until January 2022, 1 month prior to the postpolicy assessment.

Realistically, healthy checkout policies alone are unlikely to change the overall diet or health of most individuals. Multilevel policies are needed to address different aspects of the food environment, particularly with the expansion of online grocery shopping, including for shoppers using Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other food assistance benefits.
Although future adaptation and innovation will be needed, there is strong existing evidence for 3 policies to promote healthier food and beverage choices that, if implemented broadly, could significantly change the US food environment.

First, healthy placement policies to improve the availability and visibility of healthy foods in stores or online are supported by research demonstrating that prominent placement of healthy food options in checkout lanes, endcaps, front of store, and online improve shoppers’ healthy choices.1,2,6 Falbe et al5 observed the highest compliance with the Berkeley healthy checkout policy in large supermarkets, mass merchandisers, and other chain stores, suggesting potential for national scalability of these policies. With more than 250 000 retailers in the United States authorized to accept SNAP benefits, healthy placement standard policies in SNAP-authorized stores, particularly supermarket and superstore chains, could have a large public health impact.7 Similar to tobacco, the food industry’s widespread unhealthy food and beverage marketing practices target Black, Latino, and low-income consumers, particularly those using SNAP.3,4 Healthy placement standards would improve food purchases of all customers, without interfering with freedom of choice.8

Second, front-of-package labeling policies are supported by numerous studies showing that simple and easily visible labels assist consumers with making healthy choices.6 Following publication of the White House National Strategy on Hunger, Nutrition, and Health in September 2022, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) initiated a review of potential front-of-package labels. The FDA is currently considering a variety of evidence-based strategies, including multiple traffic lights, guiding stars, and warning labels, before making a recommendation for a standardized front-of-package system that would be implemented nationally.9

Third, policies to tax sugar-sweetened beverages have been implemented in some US cities. The largest is Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with a 1.5-cent/oz tax on sugar-sweetened and artificially sweetened beverages starting in 2017. Two years after implementation, taxed beverage sales decreased by at least 35% compared with before the policy.10 Although taxed beverage prices increased approximately 29% (with 68% of the cost of the tax passed through to consumers), taxation of both sugar-sweetened and artificially sweetened beverages aimed to distribute the cost burden more equitably across different socioeconomic and racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Local and national policies to improve the food environment are critical but will not be sufficient for sustaining a healthy food system.6 The food industry must also contribute by innovating healthier products (eg, low in added sugars, sodium, and unhealthy fats) that are affordable. Implementation of SNAP healthy placement standards and front-of-package labeling could nudge manufacturers to reformulate products to align with these healthy food policies.6 However, it will be important to monitor unintended consequences, such as new marketing strategies aimed at circumventing regulations.

The study by Falbe et al5 demonstrated successful implementation of a healthy checkout policy in Berkeley, California, within just 1 year of the ordinance. Results of this study add to the evidence for effective and acceptable healthy food policies and open the door for other cities, states, and countries to follow suit. We have enough data. It is time to take action.

ARTICLE INFORMATION
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