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Flabby thinking behind fast-food crackdown

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For one month in 2003, U.S. documentary filmmaker Morgan Spurlock ate three hearty meals a day at McDonald's restaurants and proved conclusively that you can get fat by consuming 5,000 calories a day at your neighbourhood Golden Arches. Mr. Spurlock's hit film, *Super Size Me*, made a trendy contribution to the intellectual tradition that exempts people from the consequences of their own actions. Yet *Super Size Me* did have a certain lingering influence. Now, almost everyone thinks that fast-food restaurants cause obesity - including the guardians of public health who seek to regulate them.

The case against fast-food restaurants is circumstantial - but strongly circumstantial. More restaurants exist now than 50 years ago. More people eat more meals in restaurants than they did 50 years ago. (In 1960, the U.S. obesity rate was 15 per cent and there were 50 restaurants per 1,000 square miles; in 2005, the obesity rate was 30 per cent and there were 120 restaurants per 1,000 square miles.) Restaurants serve bigger meals than they did 50 years ago - bigger meals than people make for themselves at home. People who eat out consume more fat and more sodium than people who eat at home. (The average restaurant meal delivers 339 more calories than people, on average, eat at home.) More people are obese than 50 years ago. Ergo, fast-food restaurants cause obesity.

Acting on this correlation of facts, governments are now legislating restrictions on fast-food restaurants, patrolling school cafeterias for junk food and advocating "fat taxes" as hefty as cigarette taxes. Los Angeles leads the way. Last July, the L.A. municipal government prohibited any new fast-food restaurant from opening in a 32-square-mile (83-square-kilometre) zone that contains 500,000 low-income residents.

But wait. Do these restaurants really cause obesity? In a rigorous re-examination last year of the circumstantial evidence, two economists concluded that restaurants - either fast-food or sit-down - have no causal connection either to obesity or to any other overweight condition. In their report, published in mid-December, economists Michael Anderson (University of California at Berkeley) and David Matsa (Northwestern University in Chicago) say restaurant meals are "statistically insignificant" as a cause of obesity.

Obese people, they report, get a higher percentage of their "empty" calories at home than at fast-food restaurants - consuming 30 per cent of them in junk food (defined as ice cream, processed cheese, bacon, muffins, cookies, pastries, crackers, potato chips, French fries, candies, soft drinks - and beer). Indeed, they say, obese people consume significantly more excess calories at home than in restaurants. They say that the average person, who does tend to overeat in restaurants, compensates for the extra calories by cutting back during the rest of the day.

Prof. Anderson and Prof. Matsa conducted a rigorous review of the statistics and literature of the fast-food controversy - but went well beyond it in a novel research project that analyzed the consequences of easy access to fast-food restaurants. They studied the eating habits of people who live near fast-food restaurants that operate at selected off-ramps along rural sections of interstate highways. Specifically, they studied the eating habits of people who lived within five miles (eight kilometres) of these fast-food outposts, of people who lived within five to 10 miles and of people who lived further away on roads without restaurants.

They concluded: "Proximity to the interstate highways" - and hence, easy access to fast-food restaurants - "has no affect of any kind on obesity." They found the same result regardless of people's differences - gender, age, education or income. People who lived one mile closer to the restaurants showed a 0.1-percentage-point difference in weight compared with people who lived more distant - and a 0.001-point difference in BMI (body mass index), which defines obesity as a score of 30 or more. They determined separately that access to fast-food restaurants accounts for only 0.2 BMI points for the typical obese person.

"Consumers have multiple sources of cheap calories," they observe. "Restricting a single source is unlikely to affect obesity." They note that fast-food restaurants sell meals at an average price of \$5.51 (U.S.). (The average price for a meal at sit-down restaurants is \$12.30.) Impose a 50-per-cent tax on the fast-food restaurants, they say, and the increased price would still deliver cheap

calories.

The two economists point also to empirical evidence. After years of school-based cafeteria restrictions in several states, for example, elimination of junk food has failed to produce any evidence of weight change among students.

Prof. Anderson and Prof. Matsa suggest another explanation for obesity. The relative price of food is at a historic low. Cheap calories are universally available to poor and low-income people, who are disproportionately found to be obese. They cite research that indicates that food is now so cheap and so widely available throughout the developed world that people are throwing more and more of it away.

Obesity, in other words, is mostly a consumer choice - meaning that people eat too much by choice and exercise too little by choice. And meaning that government regulation can't prevent it without putting police in people's pantries.

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