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English 1010

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Obesity

The Obesity rates in this country have reached epidemic levels. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1/3 of adults in the U.S. are obese and 12.5 million children and adolescence. Obesity related diseases such as stroke, type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and certain cancers are on the rise. These diseases are some of the leading causes of preventable death. I have had my own personal experience with obesity. When I was in high school, poor eating habits and the lack of exercise lead to me gaining a substantial amount of weight. Interestingly, my family owns a fast-food restaurant and I have worked there since I was a young boy. My dad has been obese his whole adult life and suffers from many health problems because of it. One day I had the realization that I was turning into my father, and from that point forward I began to change my lifestyle. I lost 88 pounds within a 6 month period. Because of my experience with obesity and working in the fast-food industry, it has led me to the question, “Who is to blame for obesity?” The following articles provide diverse viewpoints on this subject and will help to answer my question.

Balko, Radley “What You Eat Is Your Business.” *They Say/I Say: the Moves That Matter In Academic Writing*. 2nd ed. Cathy Birkenstein, Gerald Graff, and Russell Durst. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2012. 395-398. Print.

Obesity is becoming a more prominent issue reveling itself more and more in society. In Radley Balko’s article, “What You Eat Is Your Business”, he presents the issue of how the

government feels they need to control the growing rate of obesity. He states that government is initiating new anti-obesity restrictions on junk food in school vending machines, more demanding labels on food, and restrictive food marketing to children. Basically meaning, the government wants to tell you how to eat. Balko feels that the government is fighting obesity in the wrong way. Instead of having the government providing a small variety of food options available to consumers, they should be working on getting people to take responsibility for what they are eating. In Balko's words, "your well-being, shape, and condition have increasingly been deemed matters of 'public health,' instead of matters of personal responsibility." He further states that insurance companies throughout the United States are not charging overweight or obese clients higher premiums, which in turn cause clients to have little to no financial incentive for maintaining a healthy lifestyle. People assume that if the government is paying for the medication needed, then what is the incentive for them to eat the right foods? If we want to fight obesity, the attempt towards the socialization of medicine needs to be put to a stop so that Americans can gain ownership of their own health.

Balko is senior editor at *Reason* magazine. He specializes in investigative writing on the subject of civil liberties, is a columnist for Fox news.com and has had his writing published in major magazines. He is as expert at investigating controversial issues and takes an individual stand against influential entities such as the government and insurance companies. Balko is very convincing to the reader because of his simplified and commonsensical writing style.

Many points that were presented in this article assisted me in answering my research question. Balko doesn't blame the fast-food industry for the country's obesity epidemic. I think he states it well when he says, "We'll all make better choices about diet, exercise, and personal health when someone else isn't paying for the consequences of those choices". The article by

Pollan shares this same mentality. However, Balco focuses more heavily on policy changes that bring on personal responsibility.

Pollan, Micheal. "Escape from the Western Diet." *They Say/ I Say: the Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. 2nd ed. Cathy Birkenstein, Gerald Graff, and Russel Durst. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2012. 434-440. Print.

Michael Pollan believes that we should get rid of the western diet. In his opinion, the problem with the western diet is that we focus too much on nutritionalism or individual nutrients such as fats, carbohydrates or antioxidants instead of whole foods. This is what is causing the obesity epidemic in America. Scientists find different things that they think we should focus on to solve the problem on dieting issues. According to Pollan, "scientists...gravitate toward a single all encompassing explanation." There are many different industries that benefit financially from nutritionalism. Doctors, scientists, pharmaceutical companies and many others, benefit from our buying into this idea. Pollan thinks that the country is going about it the wrong way. In his article Pollan refers to English doctor Denis Burkitt who offers a solution to the problem. He believes that we should "go backwards to the diet and lifestyle of our ancestors." We ought to be eating whole foods instead of processed foods. Pollan proposes three rules that he thinks will solve the nations dieting problems. "Eat Food. Not Too Much. Mostly Plants." These three rules would be a set of personal policies that would help us simplify our food choices. He believes that the focus should come away from the food itself and should be more targeted on the manners and habits that create a healthy eating culture.

Being the author of six books that focus mainly on nutritionals and obesity, Michael Pollan would be considered an expert on this topic. He is a professor at the University of California at Berkley and was named one of Time Magazine's top 100 most influential people in

2010. Interestingly, he rejects the science that focuses on individual nutrients as the culprit of obesity. However, Pollan does back up his claims with evidence from experts in the medical field. He is very persuasive in his arguments against diets that focus on specific nutrients.

This article introduced a concept that helps to answer my research question. I agree with his rejection of dieting and nutritionalism in general. The approach being taken by scientists who focus on individual nutrients is a relatively new concept. I agree with Pollan that we need to simplify what we eat in a way that is similar to how our ancestors used to eat. This is a very unique and different viewpoint than any of the other articles that I have researched. However, there is a similarity between this article and the one written by Radley Balko in that they both believe that a healthy lifestyle is within our own control and is our own responsibility.

Strasburger, Victor C. “Children, Adolescents, Obesity, and the Media.” *Pediatrics* 128.1

(2011): 201–208. *pediatrics.aappublications.org.ezproxy.lib.utah.edu*. Web. 6 Apr. 2013.

An article published in the American Academy of Pediatrics titled *Children, Adolescents, Obesity, and the Media* suggests that media plays a large role in the cause of obesity. First of all, time spent in front of the television means less time that children are engaged in physical activities. Many studies have found that physical activity decreases as screen time increases. Second, eating behavior is imbedded in programming on television as well as in the advertising of unhealthy food. This research found that 80 percent of all advertisements in children’s programming are for fast-foods or snacks. Third, people tend to snack while they are watching a television program. Fourth, too much television viewing can interfere with sleep patterns, which is a risk factor for obesity. It has been found that viewing 3 or more hours per day of television doubles the risk of difficulty falling asleep. Sleep loss has been linked to excessive eating. The

authors of this publication believe that regulation should be placed on advertising unhealthy food in children's programming.

This article was published in a very credible professional journal. *Pediatrics* is the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics. Victor C. Strasburger is a renowned pediatrician and Chief of the Division of Adolescence Medicine at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine. The author's claims are not only convincing but they are supported by the research that he did on the subject. In reading the article I discovered that he has 139 references as supporting research.

Strasburger highlights 4 key reasons why children and teens are becoming more obese, one of which highly relates to my presented research question. He places some blame on companies targeting children in advertising fast-foods and snacks during children's programming. This article made me think about how fast food is a part of the issue contributing to obesity, but not the whole problem. I agree with the information he found in his research, but realize that the obesity epidemic is very complex. Comparing this article to the one written by David Zinczenko, I find similar viewpoints. Both believe that advertising fast-food to children is a factor contributing to obesity, but they offer different solutions. Strasburger believes that congress and the federal government should ban advertising junk food during children's programming, whereas Zinczenko thinks that the problem could be solved by requiring nutrition labels on fast-food products.

Young, L.r., and M. Nestle. "The Contribution of Expanding Portion Sizes to the US Obesity Epidemic." *American Journal of Public Health* 92.2 (2002): 246–249. Print.
***pediatrics.aappublications.org.ezproxy.lib.utah.edu*. Web. 6 Apr. 2013.**

In a research article published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, author Lisa R. Young found that portion sizes are contributing to the obesity epidemic. The study found that there has been a significant increase in portion sizes since the 1970s. For instance, French fries at McDonalds in the past were only offered in one size. That fry is now the smallest size available at the restaurant today. Not only are Americans eating out more, but they are frequently exposed to new and larger products. One of the reasons why portion sizes have grown so dramatically over the last several decades is price competition. Larger portions bring more market share. Survey results in this study found that consumers equate value with portion size. Customers want more food for their money. In fact, people are choosing restaurants based on the size of the food portions. Young suggests that education and other public health programs are needed to address the food trends that are currently contributing to obesity.

This study was conducted by Lisa R. Young who has a Ph.D. and is a registered dietitian. She is a professor at New York University in the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies. Her research was published in the *American Journal of Public Health* which is affiliated with the American Public Health Association. This was a retrospective study which compared fast-food portion sizes of the past to portion sizes today. The evidence found in this study supports the author's claims that portion sizes are contributing to the obesity epidemic.

I found this study very interesting because I have experience this myself as a manager of an old fashioned fast-food restaurant. Consumer's views of portion sizes have changed dramatically. I can see how this is a contributor to obesity and helps to answer my research question in part. Young's solution to the problem is to offer education to the public through health programs. In contrast, the article written by Radley Balko suggests that making obesity a public health matter is the last thing we should do because it takes away personal responsibility.

Zinczenko, David. "Don't Blame the Eater." *They Say / I Say: the Moves That Matter in Academic Writing*. 2nd ed. Cathy Birkenstein, Gerald Graff, and Russel Durst. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2012. 391-393. Print.

In his writing "Don't Blame the Eater" by David Zinczenko, he talks about the growing rate of childhood obesity and its connection with the fast-food industry. According to the National Institute of Health, type 2 diabetes can be attributed to at least 30 percent of all new childhood cases of diabetes in the U.S. Zinczenko tells of his experience as an obese young man who came from a broken family. His mom worked all day so he had to find his own means of food, which often lead to fast-food restaurants. After gaining a significant amount of weight he found a healthier way of life in the Navy. He was able to lose a lot of weight and knows that not everyone is as fortunate as he is and may be unable to lose weight and change his or her unhealthy lifestyle. Zinczenko states that there is a higher availability of fast-food places than healthier places to eat or to get healthy food. Fast-food companies market their products to children without nutritional facts or warning labels. Often times you can ask for nutritional facts when you order your food, but he thinks that it would be wise for fast-food companies to include a nutritional facts label on their products. According to Zinczenko, without these labels or warnings we will keep seeing the obesity rate grow in children and adults.

David Zinczenko is a successful author of many best-selling books about diet. He also has had his articles printed in numerous newspapers and has appeared on several popular television programs. I find this article convincing for two reasons. First, he has had personal experience. As a child his circumstances required him to eat the majority of his meals at fast-food restaurants. Therefore, he can understand first-hand the lack of healthy food available.

I agree with Zinczenko to a certain extent. While I tend to agree more with Balko's theory that personal responsibility is the key to fighting obesity, I do see the dilemma posed by Zinczenko when it comes to children and the lack of healthy food choices available to some at risk kids. As I think about my research question in the context of this article, I find again that this is just another piece of the puzzle to obesity, but not the entire cause.

In conclusion, all of the articles I reviewed presented a cause or placed blame on organizations or industries for the obesity problem in the U.S. They all presented valid points, but none of them could answer my research question in full. Each article provided only a piece of evidence or explanation. While some of the articles had similar themes, each one of them provided a very different solution to the problem. I have learned that fast-food can contribute to obesity, but it can't be blamed for causing obesity. I work at my family restaurant full time and eat there nearly every day. Yet, I have maintained my 88 pound weight loss for 2 years now. I'm living proof that fast-food restaurants can coexist with healthy people.