

Book Review: *The Fattening of America, How the Economy Makes Us Fat, If It Matters, and What To Do About It*

by Eric A. Finkelstein and Laurie Zuckerman

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The authors discuss the issues surrounding the incidence of obesity, the typically identified causes of obesity and its ensuing health risks and consequences. They also address other factors that may or may not impact obesity or what they purport is the real underlying cause of our obesity epidemic, e.g. the economic forces that have simultaneously lowered the cost of food consumption while raising the cost of physical activity. They, in essence, label the environment as ‘obesity-producing’ and discuss the role health insurance, medical technology, government, business, industry, policy makers, and others play in setting the costs of obesity. The authors also point out the implications of obesity in areas of peoples’ lives including taxes, government, and industry and suggest strategies for reducing obesity.

As an economist, Finkelstein sees the obesity epidemic being initiated and promoted by sheer economics. He reasons that it is a product of our economic and technological success. He concludes that people respond to their environment in predictable ways such that, if the cost of a particular product or activity decreases or the benefits increase, then people will consume more or do more and visa versa. This is no surprise to nutritionists as we often hear that people are too busy to cook. Preprocessed, prepared and unhealthy high-calorie foods are too cheap and quickly available at grocery stores and fast food restaurants, and people, including the children, are eating more but not getting the exercise they need to burn off the excess calories. We know too much time is spent in front of the TV or the computer. However, some of the authors’ discussions concerning governmental policies and how they affect what people eat or how the New Deal may have affected the world food consumption pattern, are very interesting. For example, why certain products (like corn and soybeans) are less expensive than others may not be known by those of us who are not economists. Governmental policies affect the foods farmers grow which, in turn, affects product prices and our consumption patterns.

As pointed out by the authors, increasing technology also has made certain high fat and high sugar foods become increasingly cheap in the last few decades, which, in turn, causes people to buy and eat more of these foods. I remember as a child (now I am showing my age) that my two siblings and I might get a treat during our weekly shopping trip to the grocery store with our

mother. If our behavior was ‘real good’ she would buy one 6-ounce coke (back in the small green bottle days) and we would share it. Today a typical person consumes 16 ounces every day. In fact, the authors quoted research showing that soft drinks constitute about 7% of calories consumed making them the number one food consumed in the American diet. They calculated that if the average American drank plain water or unsweetened beverages in place of sweetened ones, they would weigh 15 pounds less than they do.

The authors advocate that we will solve our obesity epidemic by making reducing weight an economic benefit rather than providing more public health programs or media campaigns. They introduce some very interesting points and history related to the causation of obesity that I, not being a student of business, governmental policy or politics, had not realized. They are concerned that the environment has played a significant role in obesity and has made it more costly to maintain a healthy weight. Whether you agree with the authors’ points of view or not, this book is intriguing and causes the reader to look at the obesity epidemic in a new light.

Reference

Finkelstein, Eric A., Zuckerman, Laurie 2008. *The Fattening of America, How the Economy Makes Us Fat, If It Matters, and What to Do About It*. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey

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