



Report Blames Free-Market for 'Obesity Epidemic', Evidence Says Otherwise

By [David Atherton](#)

16 May 2014

A new [report](#) out this week claims that the obesity is rising at unprecedented rates, despite increasing evidence to the contrary. It was headed up by Dr. Laura Webber, who believes that 75 percent of us will obese by 2030. Apparently about 66 percent of men are either overweight or obese and 57 percent of women, and this is projected to rise to 74 percent and 64 percent respectively.

When it comes to dealing with obesity Dr. Webber said "The UK and Ireland, where obesity prevalence is among the highest, possess unregulated liberal market economies similar to the US, where the collective actions of big multinational food companies to maximise profit encourages over-consumption." She added:

"We need to make healthier food more affordable and less healthy food less so, by using taxes on sugary drinks for example and subsidies on fruit and vegetables."

The obese will cost "the NHS an extra £19.2 billion a year." The children feature heavily too. "We need to protect children from this environment – important to restrict unhealthy food marketing to children on all media and in settings where children gather such as schools."

Is there any empirical evidence to offer a persuasive case? The report exists only in abstract terms, which means the paper itself appears to not have been published and maybe going through peer review. In its absence, cynics may accuse Dr. Webber of science by press release.

However Chris Snowdon Director Lifestyle Economics at the Institute of Economic Affairs has been researching the facts. What Snowdon [found](#) from Health Survey England was a notable increase on obesity from 1993 to 2001 where male obesity or being overweight rose from 57 percent to 67 percent, but reached a plateau and has remained static with only minor variations. With childhood weight problems, there was a rise too from 1995 but in this case peaking in 2004, but has slightly declined or stabilised depending on your interpretation.

Even more ballast has been supplied by Dr. Patrick Basham, Adjunct Scholar to the Cato Institute and Director of the Democracy Institute in a [paper](#) published very recently, co-written with Mr. Nadeem Esmail and published by the prestigious Canadian free market organisation the Fraser Institute called "Obesity in Canada: Overstated Problems, Misguided Policy Solutions."

Basham and Esmail found that "Between 2003 and 2012, there has been no statistically significant change in the rate of overweight (Body Mass Index between 25 and 30) among Canadian adults."

Additionally "The rate of obesity among Canadian adult males appears to have stabilized or perhaps even declined, though adult females have seen a steady increase in obesity since 2003. Among Canadian youth (aged 12 to 17), rates of overweight and obesity are largely unchanged between 2005 and 2012."

Contradicting Dr. Webber's statist solutions, they point to "little solid evidence that commonly proposed government policy interventions could systematically reduce the prevalence of excess weight and obesity."

I had an opportunity to interview Dr. Basham for his reaction. I asked if the prevalence of obesity is exaggerated why governments overstate the "obesity" epidemic? He replied: "They do so due to a combination of political and media ignorance that is exploited by successful lobbying on the part of both internal and external stakeholders, i.e. respective departments of health, NGOs, public health establishment, Big Pharma, and rich, well-intentioned but terribly misinformed philanthropists."

I also asked who do you think has a vested interest in keeping the myth alive?

"It's a perfect storm of rent-seeking interest groups: politicians seeking favourable "he/she really cares!" headlines; public health bureaucrats seeking larger budgets and more power over the unwashed; academics seeking grant money; pharmaceutical companies seeking more consumers for their weight loss drugs; lawyers seeking class-action suits against the food industry; diet companies seeking more clients; and, of course, good ol' fashioned paternalists (the Left and the Right) who know what's good for the rest of us and are fixated upon giving it to us good and hard!"

While certainly there are high levels of people being overweight and obese, it does seem for various reasons there is little evidence that the problem is an increasing epidemic.