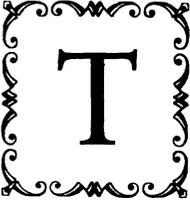


Coverage of Childhood Nutrition Policies in California Newspapers

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PROBLEM

HE prevalence of overweight and obesity in California children and teens is on the rise. Approximately one in five children are considered overweight, with the number of overweight children doubling in the past two decades (1). This leads to a generation at risk for cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and other serious health problems. Recent reports document an alarming rise in type 2 diabetes and hypercholesterolemia in overweight youth (1).

Policies related to public health issues such as childhood nutrition are often influenced by news coverage of these issues. The purpose of this content analysis research is to give public health professionals an understanding of how the issue is portrayed in the news and thus, by extension, presented to policy makers and the public. News coverage has a strong impact on what issues the public and policy makers consider important and how they interpret and respond to those issues (2).

METHODS

We examined two years of news in California's major newspapers to determine how newspapers cover childhood nutrition. The online Nexis database was searched for news coverage and editorials, as well as letters and other opinion pieces on childhood nutrition policy printed from July 1998 through August 2000 in the *Fresno Bee*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Sacramento Bee*, *San Diego Union Tribune*, and *San Francisco Chronicle*. The focus was specifically on these newspapers because they are among the news sources most critical in shaping Cal-

ifornia policymakers' understanding of key public issues. In addition, they are influential in setting the agenda for television news coverage in the state.

We devised a three-part key word search to capture any pieces including policies related to childhood nutrition, school lunches/breakfasts, and obesity prevention. Study pieces had to contain one of the terms "child (including children, child's, etc.), teen, adolescent, or youth" and one of the terms "nutrition, diet, fast food, school lunch, school breakfast, snack, obese (including obesity, etc.), overweight, or pouring contract" and one of the terms "policy, rule, law, legislation (including legislate, etc.), or contract."

Duplicate pieces were eliminated (such as the same editorial printed in both the city and Orange County editions of the *Los Angeles Times*; such instances were counted as a single piece), as were pieces that did not deal substantively with childhood nutrition. To qualify as substantive, at least one-third of the piece had to discuss nutrition issues, to ensure that the article was not simply a passing reference to the topic.

The initial three-part key word search yielded more than 2000 articles. By limiting the search to articles where the key words occurred within 30 words of one another (indicating that the policy terms might be related to the nutrition terms, for example), the sample was narrowed to 171 pieces. After eliminating duplicates and nonsubstantive pieces, we were left with 88 pieces. We coded the 88 substantive childhood nutrition articles to determine primary subjects, frames or arguments, byline, date, placement, individuals and organizations quoted, policies mentioned, and other factors. We coded for both problem definition and solutions mentioned; that is, to what do sources quoted in the newspaper attribute the problem of childhood obesity or other nutrition problems, and what policies do they suggest to remedy the problem?

RESULTS

Substantive discussion of nutrition policy issues appears infrequently in major California newspapers. Fewer than five percent of news and opinion pieces that included nutrition policy discussions devoted more than one-third of the piece to the topic. Two-thirds of the sample (66 percent) were news or feature stories. Columns and other opinion pieces made up 13 percent of the sample. Editorials and let-

ters to the editor each comprised about 10 percent of the sample. When substantive nutrition policy news does appear, it is well-placed. Nearly one-third of the pieces appeared on the front page of their section, indicating the strong newsworthiness of food and nutrition issues. Many of these articles were on the front page of a weekly food section, but others appeared on page one of the business or local news section, and 14 percent appeared on page A1 of the paper.

Primary Subject

The largest single topic was advice for parents (14 percent), including subjects such as what to pack in children's lunch boxes and how to please finicky eaters. Other frequent subjects were food safety, including articles on pesticides and regulation of food processing plants that make foods served in school cafeterias (nine percent); milk pricing and other issues related to the regulation of the dairy industry in California (nine percent); new research on obesity, including articles on the release of studies showing escalating obesity trends in the U.S. (eight percent); and school breakfast programs and other food service issues, including an announcement of reimbursement for after-school snacks served at school-based programs (seven percent). The remaining subjects each accounted for six percent or less of the sample: fast food in schools; new dietary/Body Mass Index recommendations; pouring contracts; gardening and organic foods in schools; the child care food program; the irony of hunger in the U.S.; immigrants' use of government food programs; children's media usage and subsequent inactivity; cuts in funding for school physical education programs; and discrimination against the obese.

Spokespeople

The spokespeople quoted in the coverage were examined because the statements reporters include in stories indicate who is dominating the debate on childhood nutrition. Nutrition policy advocates were the most commonly quoted source (39 percent), followed by government agency representatives (30 percent) and nutritionists or registered dietitians (23 percent). Many advocates in the news were also nutritionists, researchers, or other public health professionals, but were coded first for their advocacy position. This means that the nutritionists quoted in 23 percent of pieces appeared in an educational role, not an advocacy role. Researchers, parents, business people,

physicians, and students or youth were each quoted in fewer than 20 percent of stories. Politicians were quoted in only 11 percent of the pieces. (Multiple speaker types could appear in a single story so percentages do not sum to 100.)

Framing Responsibility for Childhood Nutrition Problems

Frames are central arguments or perspectives in a news story that can shape the perspective of the news audience. Of particular interest is how spokespeople in stories, or authors of letters and opinion pieces, attribute responsibility for the cause and solution of nutrition problems such as childhood obesity. We examined whether childhood obesity and nutrition problems were being framed primarily as an “upstream” (3) public health problem that requires policy solutions or primarily as a problem of individual responsibility. For example, in a story about food safety, is the emphasis on clean food preparation techniques in the home or on pesticides and industry standards in food processing?

The sources quoted in our sample attributed nutrition problems to many factors. The fact that overweight is a simple matter of more food taken in than calories burned was mentioned throughout the sample. However, most pieces also went beyond this to examine the environmental factors that contribute to the problem.

The most common environmental factor was a sense that the government was failing at its oversight responsibilities (see Table 1). Stories demonstrating this perspective included pieces on food safety, fraud in the child care food program, and mismanagement of school breakfast programs. This frame can be seen as useful from a public health sense because it reinforces the idea that institutions, not just individuals, have an important role to play in ensuring the health and nutrition of children. However, the frame is problematic in that it undermines trust in the ability of government to remedy the problem.

Other factors seen as contributing to the problem include a culture that encourages media usage instead of outdoors play; the prevalence of fast food outlets and soda availability; parents who work too hard to pay adequate attention to their children’s nutrition needs; large portions served in American restaurants; cuts in physical education hours at school; genetics, race, and ethnicity; the prevalence of food advertising; and the incidence of crime making it dangerous for children to play outdoors. Other contributing factors cited included pov-

TABLE 1

Frequency of problem definition frames found in major California newspaper nutrition policy stories and opinion pieces, July 1998–August 2000

<i>Problem/contributing factors</i>	<i>Percent of articles (N=88)(6)</i>
Corrupt/inept government	17
Too much TV, computer, video game time	13
Prevalence of fast food outlets (including in schools)	11
Too much soda (including in schools)	9
Inattentive parents	6
Large portions	3
Genetics	3
Elimination/reduction of physical education from school	3
Race/ethnicity	2
Food advertising	2
Crime makes exercising outdoors risky	1
Others (many different topics with one or two stories each)	19

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erty, body image problems related to media images of women, and high stress levels driving people to overeat for psychological reasons.

Framing Responsibility for Childhood Nutrition Solutions

The single most common solution discussed for childhood obesity and other nutrition problems was individual: children and their parents must change their eating and exercise habits (see Table 2). Nearly one-third of news articles included this as the only recommendation, despite the fact that the same pieces often described the complex environmental factors described above. Another 17 percent of pieces merely described the problem without suggesting any remedies.

Other solutions involved social policy, from making healthier options available for school lunch to regulating food advertising aimed at children. However, many of these ideas appeared in just a few articles; that is, if the piece described one systems-level proposal, it was likely to include several. The effect was that solutions that called on institutions to take part in creating change were concentrated in a relatively small percent of the sample.

TABLE 2

Frequency of solution frames found in major California newspaper nutrition policy stories and opinion pieces, July 1998–August 2000

<i>Solutions or policies</i>	<i>Percent of articles (N=88)(7)</i>
Personal behavior change	31
None	17
Make better options available for school lunch	9
Improve counseling by pediatricians	8
Extend physical education requirements in schools	7
Improve nutrition education in schools	6
Add a “fat tax” to foods based on nutrient value per calorie	5
Deny pouring contracts	5
Make school breakfast free for all	3
Increase food service funding	3
Make school lunch recipes healthier	3
Mandate that insurers pay for weight loss programs	3
Serve only organic foods in schools	3
More public recreation facilities	2
Regulate food advertising aimed at children	2
Display nutritional analysis on menus, including fast-food menus	2
Simplify food labeling	1

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Discussion

Despite the importance of nutrition for children’s health and well being, in major California newspapers that are read by statewide policy makers and opinion leaders, substantive articles on childhood nutrition policy are rare. However, what nutrition news does exist is substantive and well placed. News coverage included in-depth pieces on important factors that do affect children’s health. Many of these pieces were a direct result of public health professionals’ efforts to attract news attention to these critical issues.

An individual responsibility frame dominates childhood nutrition news and editorials in major California newspapers. Despite the fact that our key-word search structure was deliberately structured to maximize the number of policy-related stories in the sample, individ-

ual-oriented advice to parents comprised the single largest subject in the sample.

It appears that nutrition advocates themselves may reinforce the individual-oriented response to nutrition problems. Many news pieces quote advocates describing the complex environmental factors that contribute to childhood obesity, such as pervasive marketing of fast foods and lack of availability of healthy options in many neighborhoods. Yet when it came to describing solutions, nearly half of stories focused on individual behavior change or suggested no solutions at all. Policies such as improving school lunch options or simplifying food labeling are rarely discussed, let alone more controversial approaches such as regulating food advertising aimed at children or charging a “fat tax” based on nutrient values of packaged foods.

There are many reasons why nutrition advocates may emphasize personal responsibility to the exclusion of policy solutions. Health educators and nutritionists are rarely trained in policy advocacy, and may not feel they have the credibility, power, or community-organizing skills to pursue environmental-change strategies. The organization of many public health departments into professional “silos” may isolate the nutritionist health educators from their natural allies on this issue: the maternal and child health workers, chronic disease specialists, environmental justice advocates and community development experts who are also concerned with the effects of poor nutrition, and may be pursuing more upstream solutions to change the food and exercise environment in many communities.

Implications for Public Health Advocates

These findings are limited, in that the sample covered only five California newspapers. We are confident that we included the most significant newspapers in the state in terms of their relevance to and coverage of policy debates; however, we do not know to what extent these findings might generalize to newspaper coverage of nutrition policy issues in other parts of the country. Nevertheless, these findings have significant implications for what advocates and journalists must do to paint the picture of environmental changes that could improve nutrition and health for all children. Solutions for complex, pervasive public health problems like childhood obesity require a range of approaches that include both individual responsibility—changes in personal behavior—and institutional accountability—actions by in-

stitutions and government to create environments in which healthy outcomes are easier to achieve and maintain. Government has the legitimate responsibility for protecting the public's health (4). The level of public support for government action to prevent childhood obesity will, in part, be determined by how that issue is framed in the news media. If reporters are to convey the public health approach to nutrition, and public will is to be galvanized to promote such changes, nutrition advocates must become better spokespeople for the policies that can make a difference for all children.

Public health advocates are likely to have greater success getting journalists interested in doing stories on childhood nutrition policy issues if they localize national stories and have ready spokespeople (5). The stories in this sample that resulted from proactive efforts to pitch a locally newsworthy story generated in-depth, substantive coverage that advanced population-based public health solutions. Other coverage not stimulated by advocates' proactive efforts was more likely to be superficial "food features" that resorted to traditional advice about diet and exercise habits. This analysis suggests that public health advocates must be better prepared to pitch stories about policies that could improve health, and be prepared to describe solutions beyond individual efforts. Policies such as improving school lunch options, mandating physical education, or regulating food advertising aimed at children are more controversial and complex than giving basic advice for nutritious eating, yet each policy would also make for an engaging news story that would likely generate interest among reporters and others if advocates pursue them vigorously.

Acknowledgments: This research was supported in part by The California Endowment and California Project LEAN, a project of the California Department of Health Services and the Public Health Institute, as part of "Examination of Communication Factors Affecting Policymakers," a project of the California Cancer Research Program.

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