

## HAVE IT YOUR WAY, BUT AT WHAT COST?

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Currently at ShopRite, a family pack of fresh chicken drumsticks costs \$1.79, and a twenty-four pack of Kraft American cheese singles costs \$3.52. In another section of the store, however, an eight-ounce pack of Brussels sprouts costs \$3.29, and a twelve-ounce pack of blackberries is priced at a frightening \$6.99 (Shoprite). With these prices, it's no wonder that the average consumer, perhaps unconsciously, opts for the chicken over the vegetables, and most certainly over the fruit. But these purchasing decisions, while seemingly innocuous, may have large implications for our health and well-being. Several studies have shown that heavy consumption of meat and dairy can increase blood pressure and cholesterol, leading to heart disease and stroke (Butler). Furthermore, according to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, globally, 14.5% of all greenhouse gas pollution can be attributed to livestock, which is more than that attributed to cars and planes combined (FAO). With that in mind, why do these pricing disparities exist? When did meat and dairy become more affordable than fruits and vegetables? Researchers hypothesize that variance in prices comes from the way agricultural subsidies are allocated across the nation. It is not surprising, therefore, that discussion surrounding the 2018 Farm Bill—the law governing subsidy allocation—has sparked debate across the country (Lauinger).

Agricultural subsidies first emerged in the midst of the Great Depression to act as a helping hand to struggling Midwestern farmers. Arthur Allen, a writer at *The Washington Post*, explains that the federal government aimed to both “protect the national food supply” and compensate farmers for the “unpredictable swings in agricultural markets.” In the 1930s, land-based subsidies were spread out amongst a variety of commodities. However, land, and thus most of the subsidies, soon became concentrated in the hands of farmers of a few industries, namely wheat, soy, corn, and rice (Bittman). These concentrated subsidies, initially intended to act as temporary measures to

stimulate growth, have become more or less permanent. Programs created in the hope of weaning producers off of subsidies have not had their intended effect, and the government currently pays farmers over \$20 billion annually (White).

Corn and soy products, two of the most heavily subsidized commodities, are both mainly used as “animal feed for production of meat, dairy products, and eggs” (“Government Support”). Even the other greatly subsidized commodity products—such as wheat—and waste products from crop processing also act as animal feed. Consequently, meat and dairy are heavily subsidized while “specialty crops,” like fruits and vegetables, receive no regular direct subsidies (“Government Support”). In a post on his website Meatonomics, which is based on his book of the same name, David Robinson Simon states that “American governments spend \$38 billion each year to subsidize meat and dairy, but only 0.04% of that . . . to subsidize fruits and vegetables.” Economists hypothesize that this variance in subsidy allocation is responsible for the drastic decrease in prices of meat and dairy relative to those of fruits and vegetables. David Leonhardt, of *The New York Times*, found that since 1978, fruits and vegetables have increased in price by roughly 40%, while sodas, also dependent on corn production, have decreased in price by 33%.

Much of the current debate surrounding the 2018 Farm Bill stems from differing opinions regarding food pricing resulting from the allocation of these subsidies. Primarily, the question that arises is: should meat and dairy be cheaper than vegetables? The debate centers on a few crucial consequences, namely the influence of these subsidies and the resulting prices of nutrition and the environment. Two dominant sides arise in response to these concerns: those who believe that cheaper meat and dairy prices ensure sufficient calorie-dense food at affordable prices and those who believe that these same prices jeopardize the health of the nation.

Opponents of the status quo are calling for subsidy reforms in the 2018 Farm Bill in the hopes of altering subsidy allocation and thus commodity pricing. Primarily, they argue that while meat and dairy subsidies have increased consumption of these foods in the United States, the rates of consumption “exceed[] nutritional needs and contribute[] to high rates of chronic disease, such as cardiovascular dis-

ease, diabetes mellitus, and some cancers” (Walker et al.). A JAMA study from 2016 found that individuals whose diets “consist of a lower proportion of subsidized foods have a lower probability of being obese” (Siegal et al.). More specifically, compared to people who ate the least amount of subsidized food, the people who ate the most had a “37% higher probability of being obese” and a 41% greater risk of having belly fat (Siegal et al.). Subsidy opponents argue that both the high prices of foods proven to help reduce these risks as well as increasing costs of treating these diseases in America (now roughly \$150 billion a year) only act to worsen health outcomes (Russo and Smith).

Moreover, opponents lament the large disconnect between America’s nutritional recommendations and the nation’s agricultural policies. On MyPlate, the federal food diagram published in 2011 to replace the food pyramid, Americans can see what a healthful diet should look like: roughly one-half fruits and vegetables, one-third grains, one-fifth protein, and a small circle for dairy (Allen). The designers of MyPlate crafted this diagram in the hopes of lowering incidence rates of chronic disease largely attributed to animal fats (Allen). However, it is clear that federal incentives to farmers reflect a different agenda, one that seems intent on encouraging our consumption of animal fats. Furthermore, consumers have little choice, as Simon, the author of *Meatonomics*, argues: “legislation and price control . . . deprive[] consumers of the ability to make informed and independent decisions of what and how much to eat” (Simon qtd. in Hunt).

But how causal is the relationship among food pricing, consumption, and health? Proponents of meat and dairy subsidies argue that the connection between farm subsidies and worsening health, including the development of chronic diseases, lacks evidence. Dr. David Katz at the Yale University School of Medicine claims that consumer habits have a greater impact than price subsidies on consumption. “If you took the price of fruits and vegetables down by 10 percent,” he insists, “consumption would not increase” (qtd. in Williams). Raj Patel, a research professor at the University of Texas, Austin, similarly argues that commodity subsidies play a smaller part than several other factors—such as cultural icons signing deals with massive junk food

chains like Pepsi (Aubrey). Their conclusions stem from evidence-based economic principles and argue for a lack of price-responsiveness when it comes to staple food items such as meat, dairy, fruits, and vegetables (Alston).

Furthermore, several proponents argue that the premise of these subsidies was and is to ensure a “plentiful supply of food at reasonable prices” (Siegel et al.). Reduced prices for these commodities have increased demand for them and thus their consumption, but this increased consumption of meat and dairy could help sustain the lives of poor American families through their dense caloric value at low prices. Steven Levitt, author of *Freakonomics*, suggests that McDonald’s double cheeseburger is “the cheapest, most nutritious and bountiful food that ever existed in human history,” providing twenty-three grams of protein, nineteen grams of fat, and 20% of calcium all for a mere \$1-\$2 (qtd. in Johnson). Much higher quantities of fruits and vegetables—categorized as less energy dense foods—would be required to satiate Americans and would still not fulfill the nutritional guidelines, let alone provide such a ‘bargain’ (Haspel).

At the root of the debate over food subsidies is the weight placed on certain costs and benefits to individuals. Proponents argue that lower prices and subsequently increased consumption of meat and dairy can help sustain the lives of poor American families through the dense caloric value provided by these foods. Opponents argue that this type of short-term thinking overlooks the immense health costs of medical treatments that will be required and the societal costs to the environment related to meat production. Philip Wollen, a philanthropist and recipient of the Australian of the Year award, adds in his renowned speech “Animals Should Be Off The Menu,” “Cutting meat by only 10% will feed one-hundred million people. Eliminating meat will end starvation forever” (Wollen). He reminds us that one kilo of beef requires 50,000 gallons of water—water that could be put to use growing far more fruits, grains, and vegetables, and thus help end starvation. Simply stated, while proponents focus more on short-term benefits that cheap meat and dairy provide to Americans, opponents concern themselves with long-term consequences.

Despite the potential future consequences, subsidy allotments denoted by the farm bills in past years have remained more or less

constant. For most Americans, long-term consequences of meat and dairy consumption are harder to substantiate and consequently they appear to be less convincing as arguments. This stems from a longing for short-term gratification embedded in both human nature and American society. Journalist Paul Roberts defines America today as the “Impulse Society,” a people driven by instant gratification shamelessly seeking the fastest reward. He argues that this pursuit of short-term self-gratification once suggested a personal failing, but is now the default principle for both individuals and sectors of society. Roberts’s conclusions are rooted in evidence from a number of different disciplines, including economics, political philosophy, and business management (Roberts).

Roberts, along with other social scientists, believes that this type of trapped thinking acts as an impediment to societal change in a number of areas, including both human health and the environment. In a study by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), Dr. Stephanie B. Coursey Bailey argues:

The patience and commitment required to improve population health outcomes over the long term run counter to our strong cultural desire for instant answers and immediate gratification. Such a system, based only on short-term change, is incompatible with the provision of meaningful incentives for population health improvement. (Coursey Bailey)

Americans similarly avoid addressing long-term threats to the environment, as Coleen Jose, a writer for *Scientific American*, notes in “Short-Term Gratification Proves an Obstacle to Climate Change Progress.” But are American citizens to blame for our tendency to zero in on the present and the immediate consequences to our health and the environment that may result, or are there other factors at play? Darrell Worthy, a psychology professor at Texas A&M, explains that “immediate gratification is the default response” and that it is “difficult to overcome these urges” (qtd. in Muther). Phil Fremont-Smith of ImpulseSave, Inc. agrees: “We’re not wired to think about the long-term anymore” (qtd. in Muther). Even more concerning, some argue that long-term thinking has never been our priority: research

from Massachusetts Institute of Technology contends that short-term prioritization may be partly biological (Princen).

This tendency to prioritize our short-term gratification prompts us to consume larger quantities of meat and dairy than we would otherwise. However, with respect to consumer demand, Dr. David Katz and Raj Patel, proponents of meat and dairy subsidies mentioned earlier, assert that changing prices of these commodities does not reflect changes in consumption patterns. Thus, this may unveil another problem present in our society: one of habit and dependency. Food historian Rachel Laudan explains that eating meat is “the expression of being modern, progressive, and civilized” and that consumption is driven by high demand (Barclay). The problem with meat and dairy consumption, as with cigarette usage, is that “It’s tough to convince people to cut back on something they crave” (Barclay). Nonetheless, according to many social scientists, there may be more to our cravings and our tendency to satisfy them instantly than merely a biological predisposition. A reporter for CBC News suggests that “food cravings [are] engineered by industry” (Crowe). Marta Zaraska, author of *Meathooked: The History and Science of Our 2.5-Million-Year Obsession with Meat*, agrees that meat consumption is driven by supply rather than demand. Even *Beef*, a cattlemen’s magazine, confessed that “The beef industry has worked hard to create the love affair that Americans have with a big, juicy ribeye” (qtd. in Zaraska). Moreover, while the meat industry is “ultrapowerful and ultraconsolidated” and thus “capable of swinging out food preferences,” the fruit and vegetable industry “hardly exists as a united entity” and, as a result, has very little power (Zaraska).

In either case, Americans’ predisposition to short-term gratification is vastly manipulated by price, taste, culture, or, most likely, a deadly combination of all three. Zaraska explains how campaigns promoting meat manipulate us far more effectively than those promoting vegetables:

Between 1987 and 2013, the U.S. beef checkoff collected \$1.2 billion, an impressive pile of money that is used “to increase domestic and/or international demand for beef.” . . . To give you some perspective: one of the very few campaigns drafted to promote eat-

ing veggies, 5 A Day for Better Health, developed by the National Cancer Institute and the Produce for Better Health Foundation, had in 1999 a public communications budget of less than \$3 million. (Zaraska)

Advertisement furthers the manipulation. Zaraska cites a European study that insists most meat advertising is carefully crafted: “Rather [than] make the consumer reflect about the living animal, communication should be centered on other attributes linked to the hedonic sides of meal preparation and consumption” (qtd. in Zaraska). The industry particularly focuses on millennials. To target the younger sector, the industry aids in designing “beef education” curriculums for school classrooms, in which lessons are created “to show the diverse products that cattle give to enrich our lives!” (ANCW). To reach older millennials, the industry finances recipe sharing and picture promotion of their beef-centric meals on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Pinterest (Zaraska).

These carefully crafted manipulations force us to reconsider the role of government. In our democracy, in which the Declaration of Independence protects and safeguards the right of individuals, how is this deception excused? Much of the justification lies in the presence of several conflicts of interests that have become manifested through the years. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) outlines its strategic goals for 2018-2022. Three of which are: to “Promote American agricultural products and exports”; to “Facilitate rural prosperity”; and to “Provide all Americans access to a safe, nutritious and secure food supply” (USDA “Strategic”). In a nation where 51.7% of all farmland is devoted to just livestock and poultry (excluding dairy) these two goals simply cannot safely coexist (USDA “Overview”). Furthermore, several members of committees drafting dietary recommendations evidently do have a history in meat campaign organizations. Former USDA director of communications Alisa Harrison was first executive director of public relations for the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA), and JoAnn Smith, the NCBA’s former president, was later appointed as chief of USDA’s Food Inspection Division (Zaraska).

As American citizens, we are left to ponder how to respond. The government promises a “secure” food supply for our nation. But is a food supply so heavily promoted by such dominant industries really all that secure? Evidently, our tendency to fulfill short-term gratification, as a result of both biological predispositions and cultural cravings, is fairly difficult to eliminate. If we continue to overlook it, our tendency may very well act to worsen health and environmental outcomes, leading to a glum future. Presently, the biggest hindrance appears to be a lack of knowledge. While the influence of industry is visible everywhere—in media, scientific studies, and even governmental nutrition organizations—industry proponents have done well to deeply penetrate our subliminal perception and they aim to keep it that way: hidden and tucked away. But we have a choice—we can continue to ignore it, or we can raise our awareness levels and fight for a healthier, safer future. If we are not willing to help ourselves, we cannot count on others to bail us out. Hopefully, in this case, we will not let our short-term tendencies prevail.

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