

“Study Designs and Analytic Strategies for Environmental and Policy Research on Obesity, Physical Activity, and Diet”

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Research status and gaps related to environment, policy, and nutrition

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The good news is that our research is critically important and relevant to current decisions, but the not-so-good news is that there are now new demands on our research process. I would like to cover the following three challenges I believe are facing us as a field: Timing, Lawyers; and Partners.

Policy changes are happening quickly - and they are happening with or without us. Policy makers across the country are doing many different things to address the obesity epidemic, and much of these ideas are based on intuition rather than science. If we want to participate, we must figure out a way to keep up. The traditional process of coming up with an idea, applying for a grant, getting it funded, doing the study, and then publishing in an academic journal simply takes too long. I had a study come out this month on sugared cereals that are marketed to children. We were testing the relationship between specific health and ingredient claims on the box and the nutrition fact label. We collected data two years ago - and since then, some of the cereal companies have changed how they label the boxes, so the findings are not as relevant as they would have been.

When cities and states start pursuing a strategy (like menu labeling), the field needs to mobilize quickly to do a series of coordinated studies to test the idea. It would be great to have a "quick strike" fund that could support such work. We also need a faster way to release study findings. Other fields like economics have "working papers," which allow researchers to release ideas without risking the ability to later publish in a peer reviewed journal. I recommend we investigate these options.

A second surprising aspect of our work is that we now must interact with lawyers. Because some research on the food environment has financial implications for the food and beverage industry, lawyers are interested in our work. While it is helpful to have legal professionals using our work to create good policy, there are going to be times when lawyers and scientists have different agendas. A good example of this was in a newspaper article from yesterday's *New York Sun* called "Evidence of Flabby Content in City's Calorie Push." Basically, this article was written to discredit the menu labeling efforts in New York by saying that the research they are citing as support was rejected from a couple of peer review journals, such as *MMRW* and *JAMA*. I think many of us have had papers rejected by *JAMA*, but we typically don't worry about there being a newspaper account of that event. We need to be prepared for this type of scrutiny, and also to educate journalists about the process of publishing so that the public is not misled by this type of reporting.

Another challenge facing us when doing this research is that the RCT is not a feasible research design much of the time. The field needs to set its own standards by which to evaluate the strength of evidence, and these standards should be clearly articulated to help both the scientists and the legal experts evaluate policy related research. This came up in the NYC menu labeling lawsuit recently; experts disagreed on the strength of the evidence because they were applying different metrics.

Finally, much of our research requires non-academic partners. I would never be able to do my own research without my partner in the Department of Education in CT who is funded through USDA's Team Nutrition program. Her funding doesn't allow spending money on evaluation, so my funding covers that part while she covers the cost of the actual intervention. USDA, CDC, and NIH are providing funding for creating, implementing and evaluation programs - but not all together. I suggest a team approach whereby teams of health professionals can apply for funding simultaneously from all three agencies to complete a project. A great place to implement this would be in coordination with the CDC's state obesity plan funding. More flexible funding sources will promote these partnerships. Segments of the food industry have also expressed interest in being partners. This raises serious questions about conflicts of interest. Guidelines are also needed for our field to help scientists engage in positive partnerships that will help move the science forward and to help scientists avoid getting caught up in real or perceived conflicts of interest.