



Supersized Sugary Drinks Target the Poor

By David R. Jones
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Supersized sugary drinks are disproportionately marketed to the city's poor neighborhoods, mostly communities of color. These drinks – which have no nutritional value - are a major cause of overweight and obesity. The high incidences of diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, and stroke in these communities attest to the unhealthy diets promoted by the purveyors of fast, cheap food and drinks that permeate the city's poorer neighborhoods.

Mayor Bloomberg recently unveiled a plan to help curb obesity and its collateral diseases in New York City by prohibiting restaurants, sports venues, street vendors, and movie theaters from serving sugary drinks larger than 16 ounces. Grocery stores and bodegas would be exempt.

Obesity is a leading cause of preventable death, second only to tobacco. It kills 5,800 New York City residents a year. Being overweight or obese is now the norm in our city: 58 percent of adults – or a total of 3,437,000 people – are overweight or obese.

Obesity not only damages the lives of individuals; it costs us billions in higher health costs and lost productivity each year. The mayor has pointed out that treating obesity-related diseases costs \$4 billion a year.

Obesity is a major problem in New York's young people. A recent report by the U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention found that: "Childhood obesity continues to be a leading public health concern that disproportionately affects low-income and minority children. Children who are obese in their preschool years are more likely to be obese in adolescence and adulthood and to develop diabetes, hypertension, and asthma."

The beverage industry has responded with a huge advertising, costing millions. There have been ubiquitous television ads and mailers extolling their products. In an act of supreme cynicism, those who oppose the ban on supersized drinks adopted the "Million Man March" concept for a City Hall rally a few weeks ago. Called the "Million Big Gulp March," they had the nerve to try to equate their "liberty" to consume supersized sugary drinks with the struggle for civil rights in America.

Residents of primarily black and Latino neighborhoods - East and Central Harlem, North and Central Brooklyn, and the South Bronx - are more likely to drink sugary drinks, and to drink four or more sugary drinks daily, than are white residents of the Upper West Side and Flatbush. The results are catastrophic. Residents of Bedford Stuyvesant or East New York are four times more likely than a resident of the Upper East Side to die of diabetes. Black New Yorkers are almost three times more likely, and Latinos twice as likely, as whites to die from diabetes.

The supersizing of sugary drinks has become routine over the years. Beverages at McDonald's have increased by 457 percent since 1955, from seven fluid ounces to 32 fluid ounces. It costs the beverage companies pennies to provide ever larger sugary drinks while their profit margins jump exponentially.

Government has a compelling interest in preventing obesity and its complications which justifies limiting the size of sugary drinks in food service establishments. The Health Code restricts other commercial products to benefit public health, including bans on lead in paint and trans fats in foods. A recent study by the city's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene reveals that the ban on trans fats has had an effect on the healthier consumption of restaurant food, especially fast foods.

While banning supersized sugary drinks alone won't do the job, it's a step in the right direction. The ban would require the approval of the city's Board of Health. The Board should move forward and adopt the mayor's proposal.

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