

Peddling Junk Drinks in Poor Neighborhoods

"If these people are not starving, they are hungry, and sometimes fat with hunger, for that is what cheap foods do."

- Michael Harrington, "The Other America" (1962)

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.

The beverage industry has responded with an advertising campaign suited to the candidates running for president. There have been television ads extolling their products. Our mail boxes are being stuffed with flyers, ostensibly from "New Yorkers for Beverage Choices," but paid for by the American Beverage Association, trumpeting "freedom of choice," as if drinking a supersized soda is enshrined in the Bill of Rights. The cost of their campaign is in the millions.

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 last week. Called the "Million Big Gulp March," (honest) they had the nerve to try to equate their "liberty" to consume supersized sugary drinks with the struggle for civil rights in America.

Targeting the Poor

Sugary drinks - along with cigarettes and malt liquor - are disproportionately marketed to the city's poor neighborhoods, mostly communities of color. These drinks are a major cause of overweight and obesity. And the obesity epidemic strikes hardest in communities already suffering from health and economic disparities, particularly our black, Latino and low-income communities where the rate of overweight and obesity reaches 70 percent in some neighborhoods. 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 these neighborhoods.

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. The toll of obesity and resulting diabetes is striking New Yorkers unequally. 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.

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 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 supersizing of sugary drinks, which has become a routine over the years, is played down by the beverage industry. Beverages at McDonald's have increased by 457 percent since 1955, from seven fluid ounces to 32 fluid ounces. Why? The beverage industry will tell you it's what the consumers want. The truth is that the industry's profits are driving these larger and larger drinks. It costs the beverage companies pennies to provide ever larger sugary drinks while their profit margins jump exponentially.

When Michael Harrington was writing about the poor being "fat with hunger," he meant the cheap food and sugary drinks without nutritional value that are peddled to them. Nearly 40 percent of the city's public school students (K-8th grade) are obese or overweight. The beverage industry and its advertising campaigns prey upon these most vulnerable young people.

Some have argued that legislation or government action cannot take the place of personal responsibility in what we do to our bodies. But that has proven false when we see the declining number of smokers in the city after smoking bans in restaurants and parks.

Government Action

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.

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.

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.

David R. Jones, Esq., is President and CEO of the Community Service Society of New York (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: www.cssny.org.

From the New York Amsterdam News
July 19 – July 25, 2012