

Waist Reduction

Garbage has finally made the news. Waste reduction has become a hot topic in many cities with piles of refuse straining the seams of municipal landfills.

Economists are also concerned about reducing waste. But for them, the challenge is fiscal rather than environmental. Waste reduction involves curbing expenditure deemed excessive.

Social policy too has become increasingly interested in trimming the fat. In this case, the focus has nothing to do with excess garbage or profligate spending. The social challenge involves shrinking a different waist – the circumference of the population.

Obesity figures released by Statistics Canada noted clearly the expanding bulge. A recent study found that 36 percent of Canadian adults are overweight and 23 percent are obese. The proportion of obese children has nearly tripled over the past 25 years.

Canada is not alone in dealing with this burgeoning problem. The World Health Organization refers to escalating global obesity as ‘globesity.’

Much of the weight struggle stems from inactivity. More than half of young people are not sufficiently active for optimal health and development. An estimated 52 percent of baby boomers are inactive; obesity in this group increased by close to 60 percent over the last decade.

Physical activity has a significant impact upon the growth and maturation of children and youth. There is a strong, positive relationship between physical activity and muscle strength, bone density, motor fitness and aerobic capacity.

At the other end of the age spectrum, active living has been found to reduce significantly the risk of coronary heart disease and stroke – the leading causes of death in Canada. It also plays a role in controlling diabetes, the fourth major killer, and in preventing certain site-specific cancers. The health care system gains immeasurably from reduced costs that otherwise would be spent on treating obesity and related problems – an estimated \$1.8 billion or 2.4 percent of health care costs.

Opportunities for recreation are essential ingredients in tackling this big challenge.

Unfortunately, many school boards have fumbled the ball. The average time devoted to physical education is not more than an hour or two a week – among the lowest in the world. Quebec alone requires physical education in its curriculum until graduation. It is of interest that the BC Education Ministry has just announced its intent to involve all students in at least 30 minutes a day of physical activity. In most provinces, physical education becomes optional as early as Grade 8.

Municipalities are the other key players when it comes to recreation – though they are finding it increasingly demanding with all the other balls in their court. They face ever-expanding pressures related to physical hardware (roads, water and sewers), green infrastructure, economic development, social services and cultural programs.

The problem is that local governments lack the fiscal base to match this range of responsibility. They supplement regressive property taxes with user fees, which make it difficult for many households to participate in recreational programs. The new federal children's fitness tax credit provides modest recognition of these costs. But tax cuts for families cannot substitute for public investment. Households cannot build and maintain through individual contributions the required facilities and programs.

In fact, municipalities face a huge infrastructure deficit (an estimated \$5 billion in Ontario alone) arising from the need to repair aging arenas, swimming pools and community centres. The province's recent commitment to upload social services will ease somewhat the imbalance. Alberta's new 10-year funding deal for municipalities will also relieve the strain.

While essential, active living is not sufficient to tip the scales of the problem. Obesity is

the result of many factors including genetics, food availability and pricing, sedentary work, arm-chair leisure and poor community design. The globesity epidemic calls for a multifaceted response that goes beyond physical education and municipal recreation.

Other vital actions must address the availability, pricing and distribution of high-quality food. Access to affordable nutritious food is especially difficult for low-income households that experience disproportionately higher rates of obesity and poor health.

Community design is another basic ingredient. Municipal zoning often requires that distinct land uses – such as housing, retail, office and recreation – be kept separate. The result is that you can't get there from here. Obesity needs to be tackled right at the drawing board – when decisions are made about local transportation modes, including multiple and safe options for walking and cycling.

As in most social problems, obesity is a complex challenge that requires a complex response. Instead of chewing the fat on this issue, governments at all levels should take immediate and coordinated action in partnership with communities to address this large and growing national concern.

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