

Obesity campaigns appear to have the cause wrong

By Gary Taubes, Newsweek

Most of my favorite factoids about obesity are historical ones, and they don't make it into the new, four-part HBO documentary on the subject, *The Weight of the Nation*. Absent, for instance, is the fact that the very first childhood-obesity clinic in the United States was founded in the late 1930s at Columbia University by a young German physician, Hilde Bruch. As Bruch later told it, her inspiration was simple: she arrived in New York in 1934 and was "startled" by the number of fat kids she saw—"really fat ones, not only in clinics, but on the streets and subways, and in schools."

What makes Bruch's story relevant to the obesity problem today is that this was New York in the worst year of the Great Depression, an era of bread lines and soup kitchens, when 6 in 10 Americans were living in poverty. The conventional wisdom these days—promoted by government, obesity researchers, physicians, and probably your personal trainer as well—is that we get fat because we have too much to eat and not enough reasons to be physically active. But then why were the PC- and Big Mac--deprived Depression-era kids fat? How can we blame the obesity epidemic on gluttony and sloth if we easily find epidemics of obesity throughout the past century in populations that barely had food to survive and had to work hard to earn it?

These seem like obvious questions to ask, but you won't get the answers from the anti-obesity establishment, which this month has come together to unfold a major anti-fat effort, including *The Weight of the Nation*, which begins airing May 14

and “a nationwide community-based outreach campaign.” The project was created by a coalition among HBO and three key public-health institutions: the nonprofit Institute of Medicine, and two federal agencies, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes of Health. Indeed, it is unprecedented to have the IOM, CDC, and NIH all supporting a single television documentary, says producer John Hoffmann. The idea is to “sound the alarm” and motivate the nation to act.

At its heart is a simple “energy balance” idea: we get fat because we consume too many calories and expend too few. If we could just control our impulses—or at least control our environment, thereby removing temptation—and push ourselves to exercise, we’d be fine. This logic is everywhere you look in the official guidelines, commentary, and advice. “The same amount of energy IN and energy OUT over time = weight stays the same,” the NIH website counsels Americans, while the CDC site tells us, “Overweight and obesity result from an energy imbalance.”

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