

The Economic Ties among Americans' Expanding Girths, \$4-Gas, and Global Warming

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Americans have been gaining weight at a world-class pace. Two-thirds of the country's population is now overweight. One-third is obese, and the obesity rate has doubled in less than three decades. The average weight of Americans has increased 24 pounds since 1960, with perhaps more than 40 percent of this weight gain occurring during the past decade – which has economic ties to gas prices..

While some of the weight gain can be chalked up to American's one-inch increase in average height, a substantial share of the average weight gain is clearly packed-on pounds. The *health* problems – greater incidence of heart disease, high blood pressure, and diabetes, for example – attributable to the country's growing girths are well documented and widely understood, even by many overweight Americans who don't seem to be able to set aside the chips and dip.

The *economic* causes and potential consequences of the country's excess tonnage are as varied as they are widely unrecognized. For example, the added healthcare costs from excess weight are no doubt feeding into the rise in health insurance costs, which have been driving many Americans out of the health insurance market and onto the rolls of the uninsured.

Why the weight gain? The most simplistic answer is that many Americans have not been able to put down their forks.

A more fundamental explanation may be found in the conflict between our evolutionary-determined physiology confronting dramatically improved efficiency in the modern food industry. Those early humans in the Pleistocene Epoch and before who developed a taste for sweet and fatty

food sources had an energy advantage that improved their relative reproductive success. Early humans who had the “thin gene” tended to pass into oblivion during the common lean times, while those who had the “fat gene” made it through the lean times with their packed-on pounds and lived on to achieve greater reproductive success. In effect, successful early humans used their butts as their refrigerators.

Now, modern humans face a weight crisis partially because they disproportionately have the fat gene and also face the daunting task of resisting the temptation of everywhere-abundant sweet and fatty foods, the real prices of which have been in long-term freefall. Today, even with the very recent reversal in food prices, it simply takes more fortitude for people to avoid packing on the pounds than it did for people in our not-too-distant past who often had to expend close to a calorie of energy just to hunt down or gather a calorie of food. (Indeed, returning all the way to recommended “ideal” weights set decades ago could now be life shortening for many Americans, given the life-debilitating stress that constant denial of low-cost food temptations can invoke.)

But then, somewhat surprisingly, researchers have chalked up a nontrivial portion (perhaps 13%) of the jump in Americans’ obesity rate to the long-term decline in the real price of gasoline. Apparently, the declining real price of gasoline during the past half century has caused people to drive more, walk less, and eat out more.

The economic consequences? At one level, Americans’ weight gain has, for example, caused a growth in sales of extra-extra large sizes and oversize caskets, as well as an increase in the required sturdiness of stretchers paramedics use to load extra large patients into ambulances that have had to be fortified with stronger frames and more powerful engines (at a considerable cost increase).

At a more serious level, the American population is officially close to 302 million. However, with the added weight, today’s American population has the body mass equivalent of 344

million, computed using the average American weight in 1960. This means that the weight gain of Americans since 1960 is the equivalent of 42 million more Americans than are officially counted, and these “additional Americans” have to be hauled around, literally, on people’s back, in their cars, and on planes.

Researchers have estimated that because of this weight gain, the country is consuming nearly a billion gallons of gasoline a year more than would be consumed if Americans weighed on average no more than they did in 1960 (and there were many overweight Americans back then). Airlines are consuming another billion gallons more in jet fuel a year to carry the extra passenger weight compared with the fuel they would be burning had Americans maintained their average 1960 weight, with the extra fuel costs adding to the financial problems of the country’s airlines.

More gallons of fuel are being used, of course, to produce and distribute the additional calories that end up around people’s girths. Then people need more calories just to carry around the excess tonnage, which requires more fuel use. If you want to see an unheralded, but nontrivial economic source for \$4-a-gallon gas prices, take a look at people’s waistline rolls on any American street (or practically anywhere else in the developed world).

The excess weight is, of course, causing the emission each year of millions of additional tons of CO₂ and other pollutants over and above what would have been emitted if, again, Americans weighed no more than they did in 1960.

If Al Gore is right that global warming is a serious human-induced problem, then one of the unheralded contributing causes of the break-up of the arctic ice shelf and the deaths of polar bears can be the expanding girths of Americans (and many other people around the world).

Here is an “inconvenient truth” for Al Gore and his comparably overweight admirers among environmentalists: A nontrivial part of your carbon footprint could be your (heavy) footprint. Help save the planet: Go on a diet (or extend your diet) . . . fast! Oh, one last side note: There is a silver

lining in the clouds of the recent hike in food and gasoline prices Those price increases should make dieting a little easier for Americans.

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