SHOULD JUNK FOOD BE BANNED ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES?

AUTOR: VALERIA OROZCO CASTRO

The debate over banning junk food in universities has gained a lot of attention lately, especially after the recent prohibition announced by the president. According to ENSANUT 2022, 75.2% of adults over the age of 20 in Mexico are overweight or obese. Junk food has been identified as a major contributor to this public health issue. Some argue that removing junk food from university campuses is a necessary step towards improving student health. But is prohibition truly the best path forward? Or is it simply a shortcut compared to the harder, more sustainable route of education?

Universities are not just academic institutions, they are environments where lifelong habits are shaped. As Dr. Simon Barquera, Director of Nuntrition Policy Research at the Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública (INSP), stated: ¨the obesogneic environment must be dismantled, especially in institutions that shape future generations¨ (Barquera et al. 2020). In this context, banning junk food may seem like a logical solution of policies such as the front-of-package warning labels introduced by the government.

However, public health interventiions should go beyond restrictions. They must respect individual autonommy, address socioeconomic realities, and provide people with the knowledge and tolls to make informed decisions. In Mexico, the problem is not only the high obesity rate, it´s also that over 40% of university students come from low-income households. For many of them, processed snacks are the most accessible and affordable source of energy between classes. Banning junk food without realistic and healthy alternatives risks creating more harm than good, it may remove what is, for some, their only affordable food option.

This is where the Health Belief Model (HBM) becomes useful in understanding behavior. According to this model, people are more likely to engage in health-promoting behaviors when they perceive a personal risk such as understanding the consequence of obesity, also when they believe in the severity of the threat and that taking action will reduce it and what for me would be the most important of all when they feel confident in their ability to take action.

If students are not aware of the risks, believe they have better options, or feel supported in making heathier choices, then prohibition will likely be ineffective or even counterproductive. They might just go off-campus to buy junk food anyway, defeating the purpose of the ban. While banning junk food may be intended as a respone to Mexico ´s alarming obesity rates, restriction alone is not the answer. Universities hold huge power in shaping future habits but real change stems from education, not from prohibition. Institutions must empower students by making healthier choices both accessible and affordable, while also creating a culture of health literacy.

REFERENCIAS

1. Barquera S, Hernández-Barrera L, Tolentino-Mayo L, Rivera-Dommarco J. Obesity prevention in Mexico: the need for a comprehensive strategy. Salud Pública Méx. 2020;62(6):595–604. Disponible en: https://www.saludpublica.mx/index.php/spm/article/view/5136
2. Consejo Nacional de Evaluación de la Política de Desarrollo Social (CONEVAL). Informe de evaluación de la política de desarrollo social en México 2022 [Internet]. México: CONEVAL; 2022 [citado 6 de mayo de 2025]. Disponible en: https://www.coneval.org.mx
3. Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública. Encuesta Nacional de Salud y Nutrición 2022: Resultados nacionales [Internet]. Cuernavaca: INSP; 2022 [citado 6 de mayo de 2025]. Disponible en: https://www.insp.mx/informacion-relevante/la-salud-de-los-mexicanos-en-cifras-resultados-de-la-ensanut-2022
4. Rosenstock IM, Strecher VJ, Becker MH. Social learning theory and the Health Belief Model. Health Educ Q. 1988;15(2):175–83. Disponible en: https://doi.org/10.1177/109019818801500203
5. UNICEF México. Análisis de la implementación de la prohibición de venta de alimentos ultraprocesados a menores de edad en Oaxaca [Internet]. Ciudad de México: Fondo de las Naciones Unidas para la Infancia; 2022 [citado 6 de mayo de 2025]. Disponible en: https://www.unicef.org/mexico/