

# The Obesity Culture Strategies for Change

Francis E. Johnston  
University of Pennsylvania  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

# Percentage obesity (BMI $\geq$ 30) among American adult males

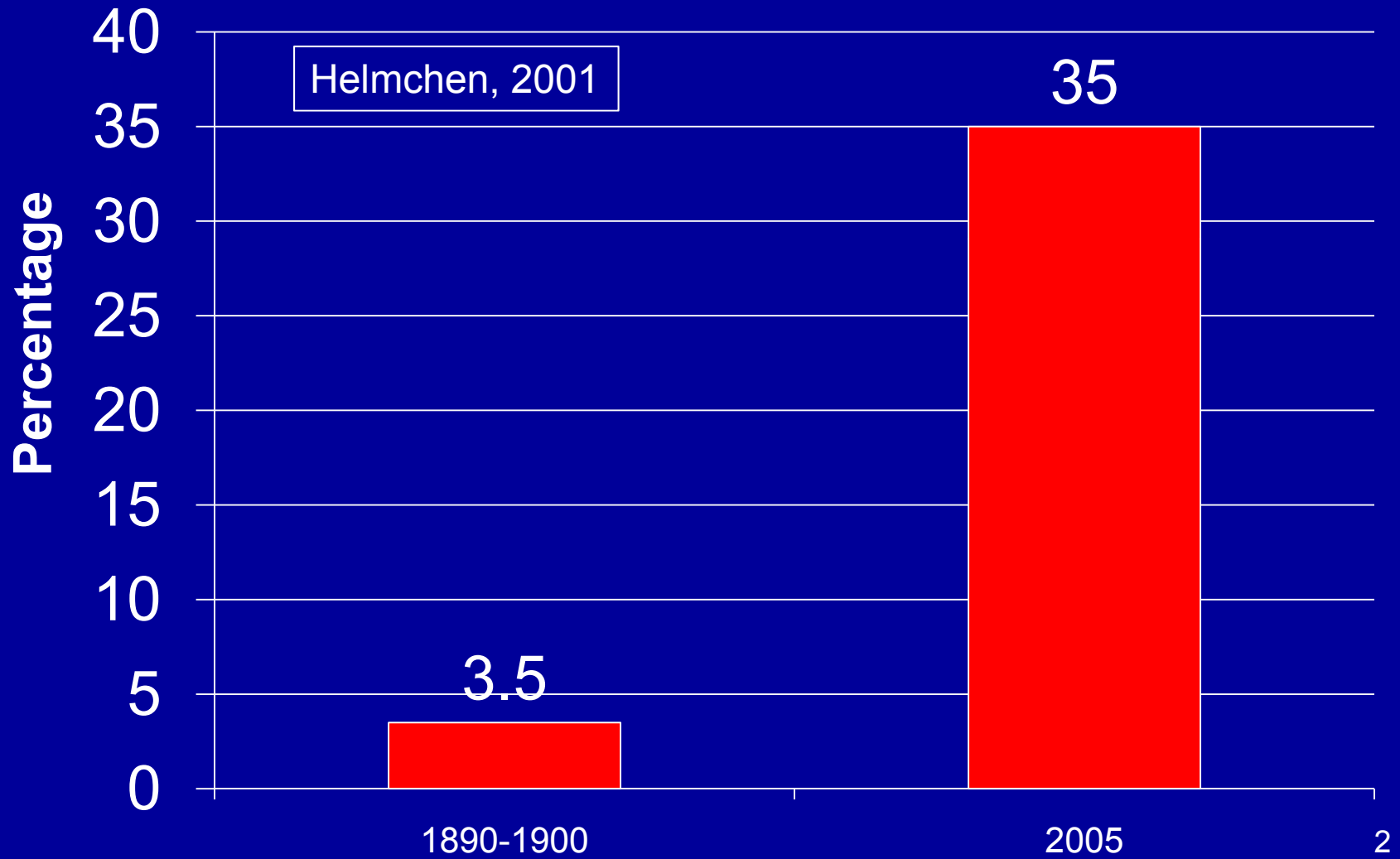
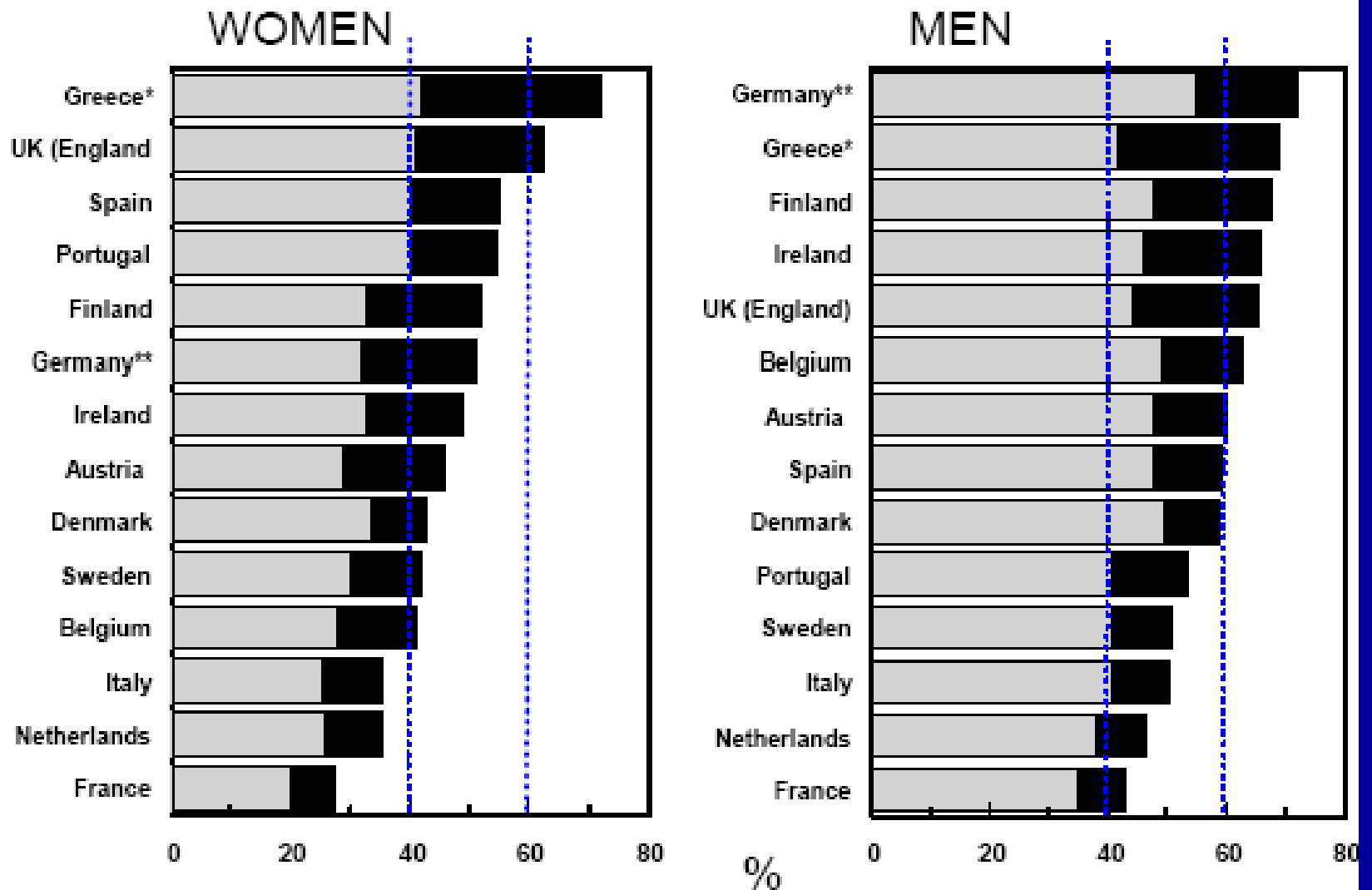
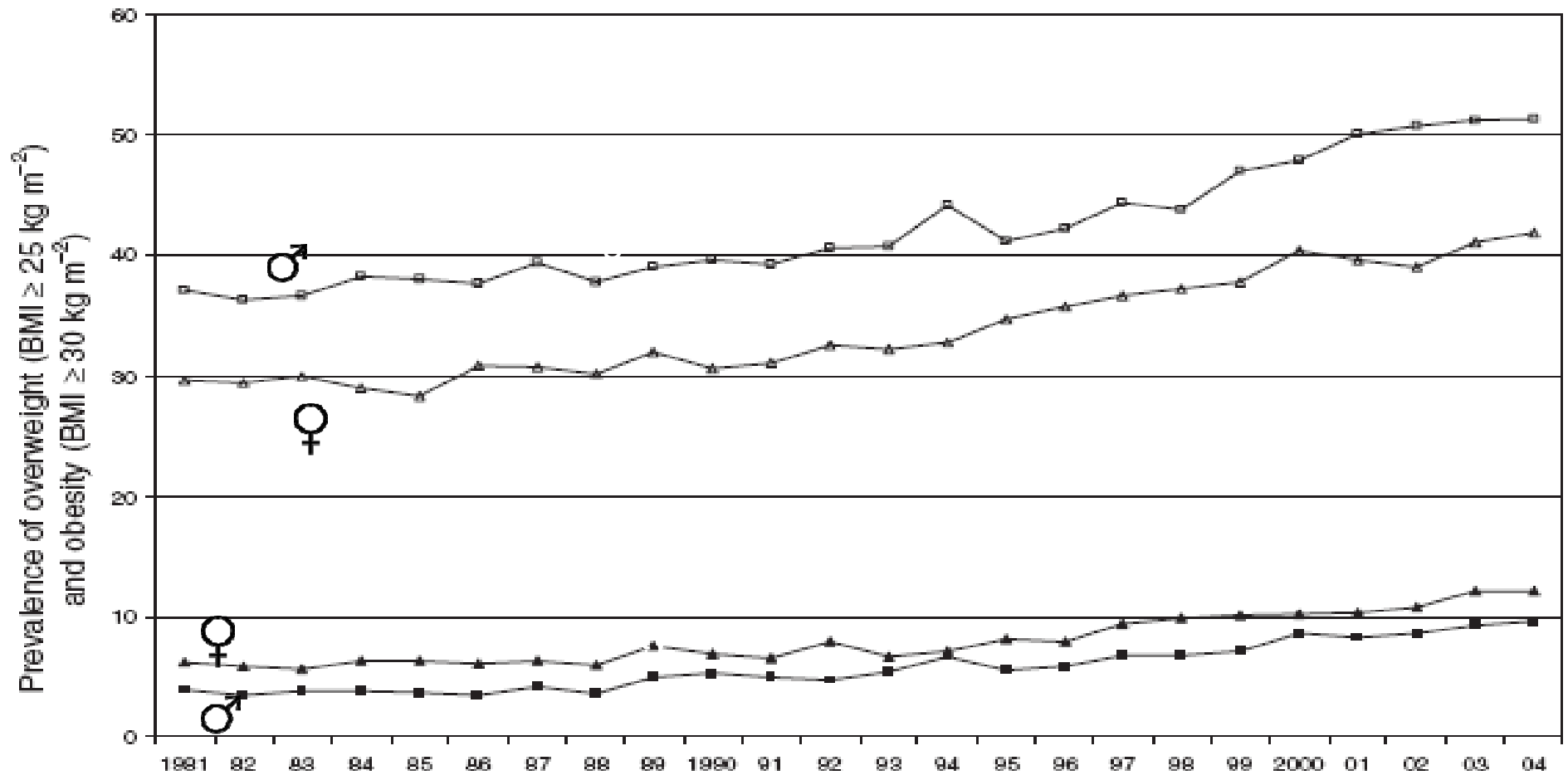


Fig 1a Estimated EU country prevalence of overweight and obesity



International Obesity Task Force in collaboration with the European Association for the Study of Obesity, 2002

# Overweight and obesity in the Netherlands 1981–2004, self-reported data



(Schokker et al, 2006)

# Range of prevalence of overweight and obesity in Dutch children, measured data from 1980, 1997 and 2002–2004 (Schokker et al, 2006)

<b><u>Boys</u></b>	1980	1997	2002-04
Overweight	3–11%	7–16%	9.2–17.3%
Obesity	0.1–1.0	0.5–1.6	2.5–4.3
<b><u>Girls</u></b>			
Overweight	6–10	8–16	14.6–24.6
Obesity	0.3–0.9	0.7–2.7	2.3–6.5

# The two faces of culture and obesity

1. Cultural background and its effects on behavior: the individual picture
2. The obesity culture and the illusion of choice: the big picture

# Cultural basis of health disparities

- Patient-based
  - Persistence of traditional beliefs and practices about disease and healing
  - Fear and mistrust of the western health system and its practitioners
- System-based
  - Communication issues, including health literacy
  - Lack of cultural sensitivity and competence

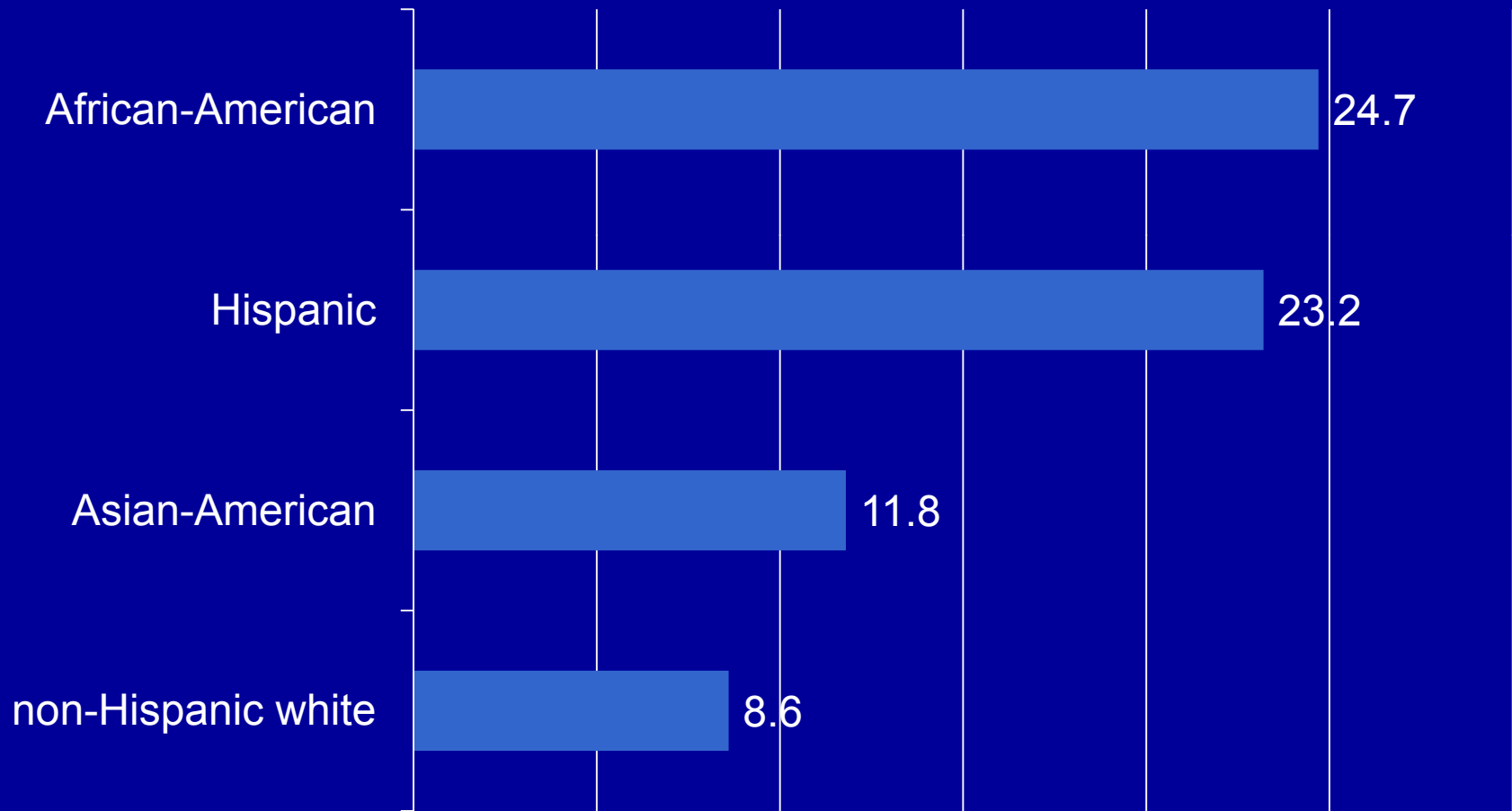
# Culture and weight-reduction programs

- White Americans may respond to individual-centered programming that focuses on the individual and his or her will power and self-reliance
- Group programs that focus on social learning may be present better outcomes in other cultural settings
- Generation effects may reflect degree of assimilation

# Competing values and attitudes in weight reduction interventions

- Kumanyika (2005): '...the ability to openly study, discuss, and ultimately solve the problem of obesity among black women [is] constrained by the sensitivities associated with obesity and the politics associated with being black in America'

# Interaction of poverty, race, and ethnicity (USA – 2008)



# The obesity culture

# Obesity and the illusion of choice

“Cultural context includes many unconscious and taken-for-granted circumstances that greatly limit individual choice and behavior. For example, some things are simply considered ‘normal’ and unquestioned parts of life including driving cars instead of walking, eating calorie-dense industrially produced foods, and watching television for hours per day. In the daily life of ‘normal’ people within the cultural mainstream, an individual’s daily choices primarily involve what car they drive or what route they take, which energy-dense food they eat, and what they will watch on television. The cultural and economic context, historically shaped by powerful socioeconomic forces like corporations, constrain individual choices in habitual behaviors. At the same time, a consumer oriented ... economy establishes an illusion of personal choice about work, diet and activity patterns. It is difficult for individuals to swim against the current of cultural forces that lead toward fatness; it is a culturally constructed ‘obesogenic’ environment “ (Krick and Brown, 2001).

# The obesity culture

- Political economy: The power politics of the obesity epidemic
- Social class: Health disparity and the obesity culture
- Individual behavior: Individual dieting and weight loss

# Political Economy

- Relationships between economic institutions and the systems of power of a society
  - To some: Marxist principles of the struggle for power as part of the class structure
  - To others: societal processes and the ongoing adjustments to the effects of a market-based economy
- The broad impacts of the internal workings of an economic system and their role in ensuing policy decisions

# Food marketing and consumption

- Processing/transformation
  - Fortification
  - A more appealing form
- Supermarket layouts
- “Pouring rights”

# Traditional and modern marketing



El Amparo, Guatemala



Buffalo, New York

# Urban layouts and patterns

- Single family homes, with large gardens
- Shopping malls and “big box” stores located on the periphery of urban areas
- Dependence on automobiles
  - The auto as a symbol of power, glamour, sexuality
  - Insufficient public transportation

# Physical activity and leisure time

## TV viewing(Kaiser Foundation, 2006)

- Average child/youth in the USA ( 2-17 yr) spends 5 yrs watching TV
- Exposed to 23,000 to 40,000 hours of TV commercials per year as the notes, they are.

## % reporting barriers to their children walking or biking to school in 1999 - CDC

<b>Distance</b>	<b>55%</b>
<b>Traffic</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Weather</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>Crime</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>School Policy</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Others</b>	<b>26</b>

# Obesity and poverty

- Stunkard et al, 1972
  - ‘We have now ... pinpointed a discrete population at particularly high risks [for obesity] : the children of the poor.’
- Sobal and Stunkard, 1989
  - Survey of 16 studies of adults and children in developing societies: a strong direct relationship between SES and obesity among men, women, and children

# Age-adjusted percentage obesity among persons 20 years of age and over by poverty status: USA, 1988–94, and 1999–2002

	1988-94	1999-2002
<u>Poor</u>	21.1	28.7
<u>Near-poor</u>	26.1	34.1
<u>Not poor</u>	28.1	34.7

# Obesity prevalence in New York City in 1994

<b>Ethnic group</b>	<b>&lt;\$25,000/year</b>	<b>≥\$25,000/year</b>
Black	28	23
Hispanic	25	23
White	18	12

## Other examples of health disparities among African Americans in the USA

- Infant death rate is still more than double that of whites
- Heart disease death rates are more than 40 percent higher than for whites
- The death rate for all cancers is 30 percent higher than for whites and for prostate cancer it is more than double that for whites
- Higher death rate from breast cancer despite having a mammography screening rate that is nearly the same as the rate for white women
- The death rate from HIV/AIDS is more than seven times that for whites and the rate of homicide is six times that for whites

# Examples of self-descriptions of weight-loss programs

## 1. Internet

- ‘Lose 20 lb in 3 weeks’
- ‘You lose 5 lb in 48 hours’
- ‘Lose 9 lb every 11 days with these 10 simple rules’

## 2. Medline

- ‘A cost benefit analysis of weight management strategies’
- ‘Consumption of whole-grain cereals during weight loss’
- ‘A randomized trial comparing human e-mail counseling, computer-automated tailored counseling, and no counseling in an Internet weight loss program’

# Aspects of weight loss programs in cultural minorities

- Weight loss interventions must be set within the proper cultural context
  - Individual vs. group-centered approaches
- Kumanyika: ‘...the ability to openly study, discuss, and ultimately solve the problem of obesity among black women [is] constrained by the sensitivities associated with obesity and the politics associated with being black in America’

# Approaches to solving the problem of the obesity culture

# Obesity - a reality check? Towards a deeper understanding

(RSM, 3 June, 2009)

“This conference seeks a deeper understanding of the problem. If we are to turn back this tide we need to understand the complex host of biological, psychological and environmental factors that are driving it. This conference looks realistically at the problems, and aims to start a dialogue that will lead to new ways forward.”

# Defining features of ill-structured problems\*

- More information than is initially available is needed to understand the problem and decide what actions are required for its resolution;
- No single formula exists for conducting an investigation to resolve the problem;
- As new information is obtained, the problem changes;
- One can never be sure that the 'right' decision has been made

\*Gallagher, 1997

# Problem-solving & Experimental Research Paradigms

## Problem-solving

1. Problem-driven
2. Cyclical
3. Engaged
4. Reflective

## Experimental

1. Hypothesis-driven
2. Linear
3. Detached
4. Objective

“The growth of children amongst the various groups which make up a contemporary society reflects rather accurately the material and moral condition of that society”

(James Tanner, 1986)

# Solving the problem of the obesity culture

- Francis Bacon (1561-1626) – progress is dependent both on the production and the use of knowledge
- John Dewey (1859-1952) – genuine learning occurs when human beings focus their attention, energies, and abilities on solving dilemmas and perplexities and, through reflection, increase their capacity for future intelligent thought and action
- Kurt Lewin (1890-1947) – if you want to know how things really are, just try to change them
- David Brower (1969) -- think globally, act locally