

*Annual Review of Public Health*Sugar-Sweetened Beverage  
Reduction Policies: Progress  
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**Keywords**

sugar-sweetened beverages, SSB, sugary drinks, policies, health equity, impact, feasibility

**Abstract**

Evidence showing the effectiveness of policies to reduce the consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) is growing. SSBs are one of the largest sources of added sugar in the diet and are linked to multiple adverse health conditions. This review presents a framework illustrating the various types of policies that have been used to reduce SSB exposure and consumption; policies are organized into four categories (financial, information, defaults, and availability) and take into consideration crosscutting policy considerations (feasibility, impact, and equity). Next, for each category, we describe a specific example and provide evidence of impact. Finally, we discuss crosscutting policy considerations, the challenge of choosing among the various policy options, and important areas for future research. Notably, no single policy will reduce SSB consumption to healthy levels, so an integrated policy approach that adapts to changing market and consumption trends; evolving social, political, and public health needs; and emerging science is critical.

## INTRODUCTION

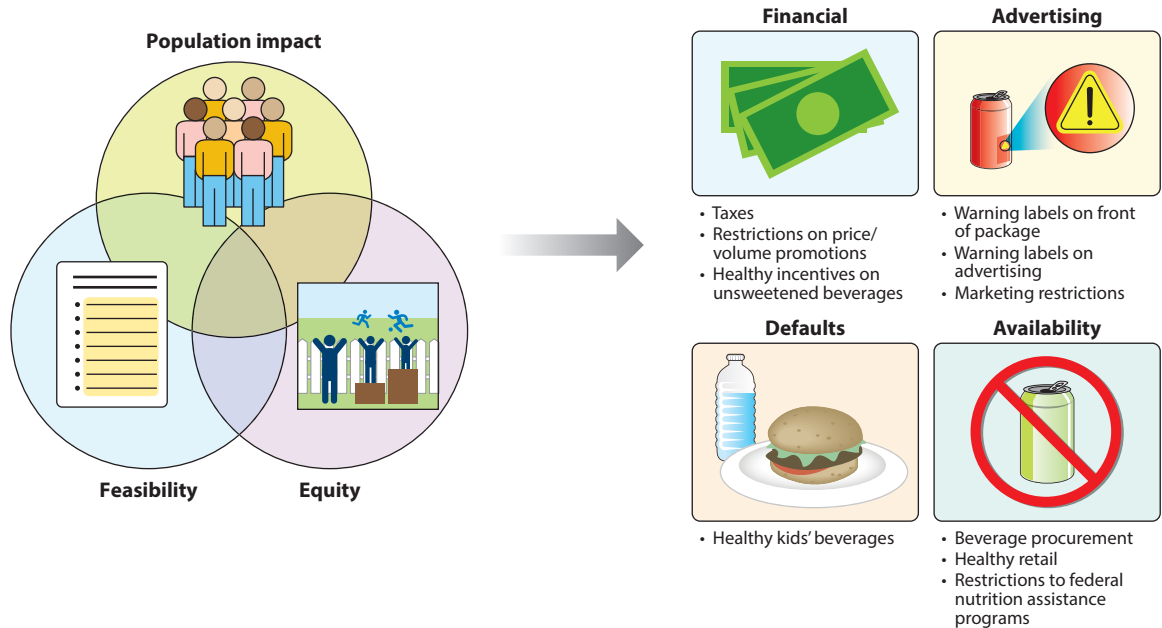
Sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) are one of the largest sources of added sugars in the American diet (147) and include sodas; fruit, sports, and energy drinks; and sweetened coffees and teas. Consumption of these drinks is strongly associated with excess mortality (90), obesity (88), and multiple chronic diseases (27, 91). In 2012, approximately 50,000 heart disease and type 2 diabetes deaths among US adults were associated with the consumption of sugary drinks (96); these diseases are more likely to cluster among racial/ethnic minorities and low-income populations (10, 79). One study found that adults who drank two or more servings of sugary drinks per day had a 31% higher risk of death from heart disease, compared with people who drank less than one serving of sugary drinks per month (90). A second study found that increasing total sugary beverage intake (including both SSBs and 100% fruit juices) by >0.50 serving per day over a 4-year period was associated with a 16% higher type 2 diabetes risk among adults (43). Consumption of 1 sugary drink per day increases the risk of developing type 2 diabetes by 26% among adults (92). Soda consumption is associated with nearly twice the risk of dental caries in children (131).

Intake of SSBs increased dramatically during the last half of the twentieth century (46) and remains at historically high levels despite recent decreases. In 2014, SSBs were consumed at least once per day by 61% of children and 50% of adults, down from 80% and 62% in 2003, respectively (14). Although soda consumption has declined, consumption of other SSBs such as energy drinks has increased (148). SSB consumption is highest among racial and ethnic minorities such as Blacks and Hispanics (14, 65) and among people with low incomes and less wealth (65, 156).

Recent data suggest a possible plateauing of consumption. According to unpublished author analyses of national survey data from 2015 to 2016, the proportion of SSB drinkers has remained relatively constant since the prior wave of data collection in 2013–2014. This trend is consistent with evidence from industry analyses, which show modest, consistent declines in beverage calories per person per day from 2000 to 2013, a leveling off through 2017, and a small decline from 2017 to 2019 (78).

Policy makers, public health officials, and advocates have developed a variety of approaches to reduce exposure to and consumption of SSBs. This review provides a framework for the types of policies that have been used for SSB reduction (**Figure 1**) and organizes policies into four categories: financial, information, defaults, and availability. Financial policies increase the price of SSBs relative to healthier options and include taxes, restrictions on price or volume promotions (e.g., buy-one-get-one-free offers for soda), and incentives for purchase of unsweetened beverages (e.g., lowering the price of unsweetened beverages relative to sweetened ones). Information policies seek to reduce the public's exposure to marketing of SSBs or increase awareness of the health risks that SSBs pose. These policies include front-of-package and advertising warning labels and marketing restrictions (e.g., no advertising during children's television programming). Default policies, such as requiring a healthy drink in kids' restaurant meals, make the choice of a healthy beverage automatic. Availability policies decrease access to SSBs or reduce portion sizes. They include beverage procurement (e.g., purchase or placement of beverages within various settings) and healthy checkout aisle (e.g., lanes at the grocery store that display healthier options) policies. The policy examples provided in each category are illustrative; a wide variety of approaches within each could be used for SSB reduction.

For each policy category, we provide a specific example and evidence of impact. We then discuss three key crosscutting policy considerations—feasibility, impact, and equity—and the challenge of choosing among the various policy options. We conclude with consideration of important topics for future research. Evidence for this review was obtained from peer-reviewed scientific research, gray literature, white papers, websites of government agencies and nongovernmental



**Figure 1**

Policies to reduce sugar-sweetened beverage purchases and consumption.

organizations, and media coverage. Whenever possible, we used peer-reviewed, empirical studies. In the absence of real-world data, we included results from simulation studies.

## POLICY AREAS

### Financial: Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Taxes

SSB taxes are viewed as one of the most effective policies for SSB reduction (3, 100). They are attractive to policy makers because they both reduce sales of SSBs and raise revenue, although they face strong opposition from the beverage industry. As of August 2020, seven US cities and more than 40 nations across the globe have adopted SSB taxes (58). The design of SSB taxes varies by jurisdiction with respect to the tax basis (taxing sugar content versus volume), tax rate (as percentage of price), included beverages [e.g., whether beverages with nonnutritive sweeteners (NNS) are included], and whether the rate is indexed to inflation (25). In the United States, all seven of the taxes are volume-based excise taxes ranging from one to two cents per ounce. Globally, tax designs include tiered sugar-density volume taxes, which can include multiple tiers (e.g., the United Kingdom taxes beverages with 5–8 g of sugar per 100 ml at 18 pence per liter and those with a higher sugar content at 24 pence per liter) or linear rate beyond a first tier (e.g., South Africa taxes beverages at 0.021 rand for every 1 g sugar per 100 mL above 4 g).

Available evidence suggests that SSB taxes increase the price and reduce the sales of taxed beverages. In the United States, the proportion of the tax that is passed on to consumers in the form of increased prices ranges from 43% to 120% (19, 115, 117, 121, 130). The decrease in sales volume varies from 21% to 39% after accounting, when feasible, for tax avoidance from shopping in neighboring areas (20, 115, 116, 121). These ranges mask important differences across and within jurisdictions, suggesting that tax effects depend on factors such as tax rate, baseline SSB

**Volume-based excise tax:** an excise tax in which the tax rate is based solely on the volume of a product

**Excise taxes:** taxes collected directly from manufacturers or distributors; may or may not be passed through to prices paid by retailers and/or consumers

**Tiered sugar-density volume tax:** a volume-based excise tax in which the tax rate varies based on sugar content (g/volume) of the taxed beverage

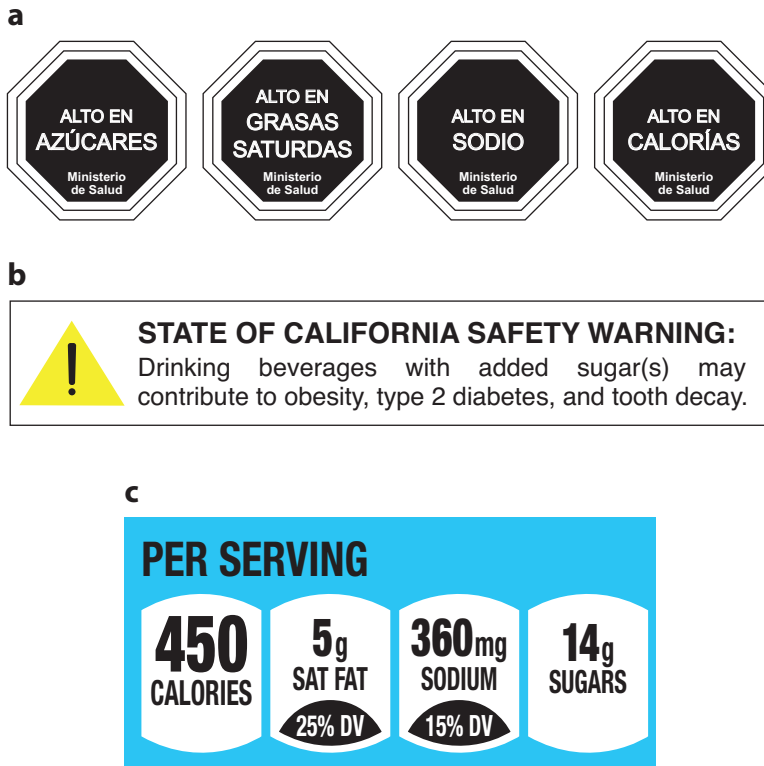
consumption, store type, type of beverage taxed, and population demographics (20, 32, 50, 93, 130, 132). In Philadelphia, a 1.5-cent-per-ounce tax on beverages sweetened with sugar or NNS was associated with a 38% decline in the volume of taxed beverages sold by large retailers one year after implementation, after accounting for tax avoidance (121). Analyses of sales data in Berkeley, Seattle, and Cook County have also shown decreases, although of lesser magnitude (115, 116, 130). However, purchases in Oakland, as measured by an intercept survey among a smaller convenience sample, did not change significantly (18). In contrast with these consistent findings from studies using objective measures of SSB sales, studies examining the influence of SSB taxes on consumption are mixed (17, 18, 51, 83, 122, 130, 158). This variation may be due to the use of self-reported and imprecise consumption measures and insufficient sample sizes. Some of the variation in impact may also be due to differences in tax implementation across jurisdictions—some governments have provided minimal guidance to retailers (e.g., press releases from city offices), whereas others have provided more intensive assistance (e.g., on-site visits, well-developed websites, and communications campaigns) (28).

SSB taxes in the United States have raised substantial revenues: \$135 million per year across the seven US cities (70). Each city has allocated revenues to meet its specific needs and has focused investments on low-income communities. Many tax-funded activities are health focused, such as increasing access to healthy food and water, educating about nutrition and healthy beverage choices, providing health services, and expanding opportunities for physical activity. Others address social determinants of health such as early childhood education or maintenance of libraries, parks, and recreation centers. The extent of community influence on tax revenue allocation decisions is limited in some jurisdictions, whereas community advisory boards have a primary role in awarding funds through grant making in others.

Outside of the United States, evaluation of the UK tiered sugar-density volume tax suggests that it has led to reformulation of beverages with lower sugar content (6, 124). It is likely that sugars are being replaced with NNS. Early evaluations of the South African tax found reductions in the amount of sugar from beverages purchased, likely due to reductions in the volume of taxed beverages purchased and sugar-reduction reformulations by industry (S.W. Ng, personal communication) (136; N. Stacey, I. Edoke, K. Hofman, R. Swart, B. Popkin, S.W. Ng, manuscript under review).

Assessing the health impact of beverage taxes will be difficult. The long lag between tax implementation and potential health effects and the multiple factors that contribute to health conditions associated with SSBs make attribution of observed changes in health outcomes to taxes problematic. Microsimulation models predict significant reductions in obesity and cardiometabolic diseases (85, 106, 123).

Opponents have argued that SSB taxes result in job losses, but the evidence to date does not support this claim (64, 82, 92a, 104). Opponents also argue that they impose a unfair tax burden on people with low incomes. While people with lower incomes likely do pay more taxes than people of greater economic means, emerging evidence suggests that beverage taxes may actually be progressive and advance health equity. Emerging empirical data and economic simulation models suggest that beverage taxes reduce SSB purchases more among people with lower incomes or lower educational attainment than among those with higher levels (2, 12). People with low incomes have higher SSB consumption rates (65) and a greater likelihood of being affected by adverse health conditions associated with SSB consumption (79). Consistent with this evidence, health outcome microsimulation models (84, 85, 106, 123) show greater tax-related health benefits among people with lower incomes. Finally, in the United States, nearly all cities with SSB taxes have invested



**Figure 2**

Examples of front-of-package labels. (a) Nutrient warning implemented in Chile calling out “high-in” nutrients of concern (sugar, saturated fats, sodium, and calories). (b) Health warning proposed (but not adopted) in California in 2019. (c) Industry-developed Guideline Daily Amounts (GDA, also referred to as Daily Intake Guide) in Australia, Clear on Calories in Canada, Facts Up Front in the United States, and “Checa y Elige” in Mexico.

tax revenues in programs that explicitly benefit low-income and other marginalized populations. Taking all these factors into account, the net effects of taxes appear to be progressive (2).

### Information: Warning Labels

SSB warning labels on beverage containers or outdoor advertising provide consumers with easy-to-understand nutrition information to support healthy beverage choices and industry with an incentive to reformulate products. Two main types of warning labels are used: nutrient warnings (indicating a high amount of sugar) and health warnings (describing health harms of SSBs). See **Figure 2** for examples. The expectation is that warning labels (especially those implemented nationally) may have a larger impact on consumer purchasing behavior than the numeric nutrient information found in the Nutrition Facts Panel on the back or side of packages (37, 151). They may also counteract misleading nutrition claims on beverages (1, 135).

More than 40 countries have implemented voluntary or mandatory warning labels, which vary in appearance and application (155). In the United States, San Francisco passed an ordinance in 2015 requiring a health warning on outdoor SSB advertisements (111). The ordinance was ruled

unconstitutional by the US Court of Appeals in 2019 and the city council passed a revised bill in 2020, which is now the subject of litigation; the trial is not expected until 2021 (S. Adler, personal communication). Laws requiring health warnings on SSB advertising, containers, packaging, menus, or vending machines or at the point of sale of unsealed drinks have been proposed, but not adopted, in seven states and one additional city.

Simulation and empirical studies suggest that warning labels, compared with numeric nutrient information, are more likely to be noticed, cause stronger emotional reactions, elicit more thinking about the health effects of SSBs, and lead consumers to choose healthier products (76) while avoiding unhealthy ones (35, 61, 137). A simulation study of a US national mandatory SSB health warning policy found that it would reduce average SSB intake by 25.3 calories per day and total energy intake by 31.2 calories per day, reducing obesity prevalence by 3.1 percentage points over 5 years. The study found larger benefits for racial/ethnic minority and lower-income adults (62). Warning labels also encourage manufacturers to improve the nutritional quality of their products to avoid negative labels (128, 150).

Chile's adoption of its Food Labeling and Marketing law in 2012 presented the opportunity to evaluate a real-world warning label policy. The law mandates warnings for products high in sugar, saturated fats, sodium, or energy based on nutrient threshold values (35). Purchases of beverages with "high-in" labels fell by 23.7% after implementation, with similar reductions across all income groups (138). Subsequently, Peru, Mexico (in 2019), and Israel (in 2020) passed or implemented similar legislation, and other countries, such as Brazil and Uruguay, are actively considering following suit.

The food and beverage industry has aggressively opposed warning labels. It has often promoted voluntary Guideline Daily Amounts (GDA) labels (**Figure 2**) as an alternative. However, numerous independent studies have demonstrated poor GDA performance on a number of dimensions, including degree of consumer attention (24, 114), ease of understanding (39, 133), time needed to assess (11, 129), and intentions to consume unhealthy products (15, 44, 45, 74, 129, 139). Moreover, the GDAs are often combined with positive health or nutrient claims on the package, which further confuses consumers (1, 135, 140). In the United States, industry opposition to warning labels has focused on First Amendment challenges (110), claiming that warning labels infringe on commercial free speech. Legal experts suggest that it is possible "to enact food labeling laws within First Amendment parameters" (109, p. 1986), but "future case law is needed to answer outstanding legal questions, and future research is needed to ensure warnings are effective and not burdensome" (111, p. 5). Warnings on packages and at the point of sale may pose fewer First Amendment concerns than warnings on advertisements (111).

### Defaults: Healthy Beverage Defaults in Restaurant Meals

SSBs are widely available in restaurant meals marketed to children. In 2019, 61% of the top 50 restaurant chains (ranked by revenue data) had SSBs on their children's menus (119). These menus bundle SSBs with meals or make them the default option, which normalizes and increases the likelihood of consuming SSBs when eating out (119). Defaults strongly motivate behaviors in many contexts (e.g., retirement plans, organ donation, as well as food choice) (154). In restaurants, customers are likely to select the default (41). An analysis of the nutritional quality of children's combination meals at large US chain restaurants found that substituting a lower-calorie beverage (e.g., water) for a sugary drink would reduce calories in a default meal by 100 calories and 20 g of sugar (47). Improving beverage offerings in children's restaurant meals may have larger impacts among children from lower-income households and children of color as compared with children from higher-income households or white children. On a typical day, just over one-third (36.3%) of children and adolescents eat in a fast-food restaurant (56). While higher-income families eat

out more often at fast-food restaurants, children from lower- and middle-income families consume more calories (118). Additionally, fast-food restaurants are more prevalent in lower-income communities (53).

Some restaurants have made voluntary pledges to offer healthier beverages (e.g., water, milk, 100% juice) as the default option in children's meals. While these voluntary efforts have yielded some improvements, they are inconsistently implemented. For example, restaurant personnel offered at least one healthier drink option with more than 80% of children's meal orders at McDonald's, Burger King, and Subway restaurants, but with only 56% of orders at Wendy's and KFC and 33% at Dairy Queen (67). Another evaluation found that 32% of parents who ordered a children's meal from large fast-food restaurant chains continued to receive a sugary drink, despite the restaurants' commitment to offer healthier beverages (68). The beverage calories available with children's meals at 45 chain restaurants did not differ between restaurants participating in the industry's voluntary Kids LiveWell Initiative (<https://restaurant.org/kidslivewell>) and nonparticipating restaurants. Sugary beverages accounted for 80% of children's beverages served in these restaurants, with flavored milks replacing regular soda (97).

State (e.g., California, Hawaii, and Delaware) and local (e.g., eight California jurisdictions, Baltimore, New York City, Philadelphia, and others) governments have passed laws to improve the healthfulness of beverages in children's meals (23). The impact of these children's meal policies is emerging. An early evaluation of California's policy found that more restaurants included a compliant beverage on menu boards, and fewer restaurants listed sweetened beverages after the policy was implemented (74a). However, the same study found no change in Wilmington, Delaware, suggesting additional efforts may be needed to support the implementation of policies after they are passed.

### Availability: Healthy Beverage Policies and Guidelines

The policies that determine the availability of sugary drinks through federal nutrition programs affect millions of Americans. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) administers a suite of 15 nutrition assistance programs that together have a budget of nearly \$100 billion (105). The vast majority of these funds is spent on five programs (described in the Supplemental Appendix): the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which alone accounts for 68% of expenditures (105, 145); the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC); the National School Lunch Program (NSLP); the School Breakfast Program (SBP); and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).

Recent policy actions have limited access to SSBs (broadly defined to include flavored milk) in most of these programs by aligning them with the Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGAs) (Table 1). For example, the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act (HHFKA) of 2010 required the USDA to align NSLP, SBP, and CACFP with the DGAs (40). SNAP was not affected, although households receiving benefits spend about 9% of food dollars on SSBs (compared with 7% among non-SNAP households) (57) and about half of SNAP households support restricting SSB purchases with SNAP benefits (55).

Data on the effectiveness of SNAP restrictions is limited. Evidence from the only randomized controlled trial (conducted among individuals eligible or nearly eligible for SNAP but not participating) found that pairing incentives for purchasing more fruits and vegetables with restrictions on the purchase of less nutritious foods (e.g., SSBs, candies) reduced daily energy intake and improved diet quality compared with no incentives or restrictions (66). Evidence from simulation studies indicates that restricting SSB purchases in SNAP could reduce consumption by an average of 24 calories per person per day, reduce the prevalence of obesity and diabetes, and be cost

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**USDA:** United States Department of Agriculture

**SNAP:** Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

**WIC:** Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children

**NSLP:** National School Lunch Program

**SBP:** School Breakfast Program

**CACFP:** Child and Adult Care Food Program

**DGA:** Dietary Guidelines for Americans

**HHFKA:** Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010

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**Supplemental Material** >

**Table 1 Summary of reimbursement and availability of sugary drinks in major federal nutrition assistance programs**

Program	Beverage type			Notes
	Flavored milk	100% juice	Other sugar-sweetened drinks	
SNAP <sup>a</sup>	✓	✓	✓	Must be nonalcoholic
WIC <sup>b</sup>	✓	✓	✗	Milk fat level depends on age
NSLP/SBP <sup>c</sup>	✓	✓	✗	Flavored milk can be 0% or 1% fat; sugary and caffeinated drinks cannot be sold during school day
CACFP <sup>d</sup>	A	✓	A	SSBs can be served but not reimbursed; no juice for infants

Symbols and abbreviations: ✗, not allowed; ✓, reimbursable; A, available (but not reimbursable); CACFP, Child and Adult Care Food Program; NSLP, National School Lunch Program; SBP, School Breakfast Program; SNAP, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program; WIC, Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children.

<sup>a</sup>Last updated September 4, 2013 (143).

<sup>b</sup>Last updated November 27, 2013 (144).

<sup>c</sup>Last updated September 23, 2019 (146).

<sup>d</sup>Last updated July 16, 2013 (142).

**FSG:** Food Service Guidelines

saving (7, 8, 99). The reach of the five largest federal nutrition assistance programs suggests that expanded restrictions on SSBs would have a meaningful impact on population health, although it will be important to consider the potential impact of such a change on participation.

Federal policies establish the “floor” for SSB policy, as states and localities can make additional rules. For example, local educational agencies implementing wellness policies can include additional provisions regarding the availability of SSBs beyond federal policy mandates (40).

A second approach for reducing SSB availability is implementation of food service guidelines (FSGs). FSGs, both voluntary and mandatory, can decrease the public’s exposure to SSBs while making healthier beverages more accessible, affordable, and appealing. FSGs create nutrition standards for allowable foods and beverages or behavioral nudges such as pricing, placement, and promotion (22). These guidelines can be applied in a variety of venues (e.g., schools, worksites, hospitals, parks) and locations within those venues (e.g., vending machines, cafeterias, concession stands, and meetings) (22). Comprehensive FSG policies that include most venues and programs within a jurisdiction have been enacted in a small number of US sites, including New York City (103) and Philadelphia (108), the counties of Los Angeles (86) and San Diego (36), and the states of Massachusetts (94) and Washington (152).

Research examining the impacts of FSGs on beverage availability and consumption is limited, but early evaluations are promising. Boston passed a healthy beverage policy in 2011, eliminating the sale of SSBs on city property and mandating nutrition standards for vending machines and city-managed food or beverage service programs (including cafeterias and cafes) (95). Two years after implementation, a single-arm evaluation found that average energy per beverage sold decreased by 48.6 calories and average sugar content decreased by 13.1 g (38). One study of a workplace SSB ban at a California hospital found that employees who were regular SSB drinkers reduced their daily intake by about half and had significant reductions in waist circumference (48). Other evaluations have been mixed. For example, two years after Philadelphia adopted a comprehensive FSG policy for its government agencies in 2014 (108), a single-arm evaluation found that sales of healthier beverages increased 33%, total beverage sales did not change, and less healthy beverage sales experienced a nonsignificant 10% decline. Revenues from sales of all beverages dropped by 21% (107).



## CHOOSING A POLICY OPTION

There are many proven and promising policy approaches for reducing purchases or consumption of SSBs. Next, we discuss three key considerations—equity, impact, and feasibility—for determining which approach or combination of approaches to use.

### Equity

Health equity means that “everyone has a fair and just opportunity to be as healthy as possible” (16, p. 2). Health inequities are differences in health that are not only avoidable but also unfair and unjust. They are rooted in the social conditions that increase the risk of poor health in marginalized communities.

Equity considerations are important throughout the policy process, including issue identification, policy design, agenda setting, adoption, implementation, and evaluation (80). Equity is more likely to be considered if policy makers and advocates share power with the community, beginning early in the policy process during the problem definition phase (101). Rigorous evaluation methods that draw on community-based participatory research approaches are important for understanding policy equity impacts (81, 101). These equity considerations are key for crafting just policies; those that are poorly designed and insufficiently evaluated can have the unintended consequence of exacerbating health inequities.

SSB reduction policies with broad reach among populations most affected by predatory industry marketing and the diseases associated with SSBs have the greatest potential to increase equity (81). For example, federal nutrition assistance programs reach about one in four Americans each year and help primarily lower-income individuals (105). Therefore, reducing availability of SSBs in these programs may help to reduce disparities in SSB consumption among a large population. SSB taxes, which affect everyone living in a jurisdiction, also reach large numbers of people. By increasing prices, taxes may counter industry marketing and pricing strategies that target people of color and lower-income communities (60, 87). Other fiscal policies with the potential for broad reach, such as restricting price promotions on SSBs, could also yield greater benefits for lower-income populations, who are often the targets of such promotions (60).

Policy impacts may differ across subpopulations in ways that promote equity. SSB taxes are a good example of a proequity policy (29). Evidence points to larger declines in sales among people with lower incomes and people of color, who are at higher risk for SSB consumption and associated health issues (26, 102). For example, in Philadelphia, the absolute declines in the volume of taxed beverage purchases among customers shopping in lower-income neighborhoods and among people with lower education levels were slightly larger (−6.78 ounces and −6.41 ounces, respectively) compared with the overall decline (−5.76 ounces), and consumers with lower education purchased significantly more untaxed beverages (e.g., water) (12). In Mexico, SSB purchases during the second year of tax implementation fell 14.3% among people of lower socioeconomic status while decreasing 5.6% among those of higher socioeconomic status (30, 31). In the United States, cities have invested tax revenues primarily in programs that serve these populations, adding to the proequity nature of SSB taxes. Investing revenues in lower-income communities also redistributes resources from wealthy to poor people (9, 127), thus mitigating concerns about fiscal regressivity (i.e., that the tax is a larger percentage of income for lower-income households).

Some policies may inadvertently exacerbate inequities. For example, text-based health warnings or front-of-package labels written in English may exclude non-English readers. Icon-based labels may be equally accessible regardless of language and offer a more proequity policy approach.

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**Dose of a policy:** the amount and duration (and hence intensity) of a policy's implementation

**Preemption:** legislative or regulatory action by a higher level of government that eliminates or reduces the authority of a lower level of government over a specific issue

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## Impact

The impact of a policy is a function of both the number of people it reaches and its effect size (157). With respect to reach, some policies touch large numbers of people (e.g., taxes, warning labels, nutrition assistance programs) while others affect a smaller proportion of a population (e.g., healthy kids' meals and food service guidelines, given the smaller share of total SSB intake or purchases from these sources). Notably, the geographical boundaries of a policy can affect reach. For example, shoppers in some, but not all, jurisdictions may avoid a beverage tax by making purchases in a neighboring nontaxed jurisdiction, thus reducing reach (20). A tax policy implemented nationally will have the greatest reach but may not be as feasible politically as a local tax.

With respect to effect size, there is also considerable variation. For example, effect sizes on reducing sales volume of targeted beverages are large for warning labels (20–35%) implemented nationwide (61, 138) and for local SSB taxes (21–39%) in the United States (121, 136, 141). Effect sizes are unknown for children's meal defaults, FSGs, and healthy checkout aisles.

The "dose" of a policy also affects impact. For SSB taxes, an example of a higher-dose approach would be one that uses a higher tax rate (e.g., 2 cents per ounce rather than 1 cent) and/or includes a wider range of taxed beverages (e.g., beverages sweetened with NNS). For front-of-package labels, a higher-dose policy would use larger or more graphic warning labels. Therefore, assuring that a policy has an adequate dose should be an important consideration in the policy selection process.

## Feasibility

Even the highest-impact policy will not reduce SSB consumption unless it is feasible to implement. Feasibility has several dimensions. Political feasibility includes the acceptability of a policy to decision makers and the public (i.e., political will) as well as the strength of the opposition. If the public and policy makers view SSBs and their marketing as unhealthy, unjust, and irresponsible, political will increases and policy change becomes more feasible (59, 73). Legal feasibility refers to whether a policy conforms to existing law. Most relevant to SSB policy is whether a jurisdiction has the authority to adopt the policy. Preemption of local authority by a higher level of government denies this authority (112). Feasibility of policy implementation refers to barriers to putting the policy into effect, such as implementation costs, burden to affected parties, challenges to enforcement, political opposition, and risk of repeal.

Taxing SSBs is an example of a high-impact policy that may not be feasible in all jurisdictions. Opposition from the public, elected officials, and the beverage industry or competition from policies higher on decision makers' and advocates' agendas may reduce political feasibility. Legal feasibility may be jeopardized by state preemption of local taxation (112) or industry lawsuits. In Philadelphia, a beverage industry suit that attempted to block tax implementation, on the grounds that it was an unconstitutional local tax duplicating a state tax, was unsuccessful (153).

Warning-label policies may have high impact but face legal challenges. The First Amendment's protection of commercial speech, and against compelled speech, has hindered adoption of warning labels on outdoor advertising (111). While certain high-impact front-of-package warnings may suffer from similar legal feasibility issues, factually accurate warnings may be feasible at the federal level (111). State- and local-level labeling policies are limited by the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990, which preempts states from requiring nutrient content labels that are not identical to federal requirements (109). However, safety warnings are not similarly preempted. In countries that have adopted front-of-package labels, implementation challenges have included identification of covered products, trade considerations, and the time needed by industry to update packaging and reformulate products (35).

Excluding SSBs from SNAP purchases is another example of a potentially high-impact policy. However, this topic is hotly debated with regard to concerns about stigma, fairness, feasibility, and effectiveness of restricting benefits (125). The USDA requires a state waiver to implement this policy as a pilot project; to date, all state waiver requests (e.g., Minnesota, New York, Maine) have been denied and, in some cases, multiple times (13).

In contrast, FSGs, which are often adopted by administrative orders, tend to face fewer feasibility barriers, but their impact is uncertain. They can be politically more feasible because they do not require a vote by a legislative body and are not usually opposed by industry. Special interests and customers of vending machines and cafeterias affected by the guidelines may oppose them, but these parties have less influence than a well-funded industry campaign. However, implementation may present challenges because enforcement can be difficult, customers may resist changes to menu and vending offerings, and vendors may not offer desired healthy products (72).

Requiring healthy default beverages in children's meals is another example of a feasible yet potentially lower-impact policy, given the relatively small proportion of children's SSB consumption that occurs in restaurants. Together, quick service restaurants and full-service restaurants account for 25% of SSBs consumed by children; most (60%) of the SSBs consumed by children are purchased from stores (42). Moreover, fruit drinks are the primary type of SSBs consumed by young children (5), and these are not usually included in kids' meals (soda is the typical SSB included with a kids' meal).

Industry efforts to shape public policy can reduce the feasibility of adoption. Evidence is emerging of the sugar and beverage industries' attempts to influence policies they consider harmful to their interests through mischaracterizing scientific evidence, launching public relations campaigns, operating through front organizations, lobbying, shifting the blame away from their products, and highlighting corporate positive actions (33, 54, 75).

Feasibility can be increased. As the number of SSB reduction policy efforts has grown, lessons about factors associated with success have emerged. Successful campaigns have increased public awareness of the health and equity issues associated with SSBs, built strong multisector coalitions, included leaders from communities of color and economically marginalized communities in leadership roles, fielded effective grassroots organizing efforts, launched effective communications strategies to control the framing of the policy debate early on, articulated clearly the purpose of the policy and who will benefit, secured the support of elected officials, and arranged adequate funding. They have allowed sufficient time to develop the groundwork for the campaign, beginning many months or years prior to launching it (28). Resources that describe considerations for fielding successful SSB reduction policy campaigns are available (69, 71, 149).

Another approach that can increase legal feasibility is opposing or repealing state preemption of local policies because policy innovation is often easier at the local level. Engaging stakeholders affected by policy implementation in the policy design and administration can reduce barriers to implementation (49).

## **DISCUSSION**

Many proven and promising policy options for reducing SSB consumption are available to policy makers and advocates. The decision regarding which approach or combination of approaches to use should consider equity, impact, and feasibility. Will the policy advance equity? Is there sufficient evidence for impact? Is the policy politically feasible, legal, and practical to implement? Is it best to implement the policy at the local, state, or national level? The answers to these questions will differ across policies and contexts. Beverage taxes may be feasible in one jurisdiction but not another, may advance equity more in a jurisdiction with a larger lower-income population, and may produce greater declines in beverage sales in places with higher baseline consumption and

less opportunity for cross-border shopping. Therefore, determining the best policy options for SSB reduction requires sophisticated consideration of a jurisdiction's specific social and political context; a one-size-fits-all approach will not suffice.

Rigorous policy evaluation can support the passage of effective policies, discourage adoption of ineffective policies, and point out policies with unintended consequences (e.g., increasing inequities). In some cases, the latter may be mitigated through thoughtful policy design and implementation. In other cases, trade-offs between unavoidable negative outcomes need to be balanced with likely benefits.

No single policy will reduce SSB consumption to healthy levels. Therefore, multiple policies at different levels (organizational, local, state, or national), along with communications campaigns and other types of interventions, should be integrated to leverage synergies, reinforce healthy norms, and maximize impact (134). Carefully crafted countermarketing campaigns, which have reduced SSB sales in the United States and Australia (52, 98), could complement any SSB policy. Together, these interventions would send a clear and coherent message to the public and industry and address SSB exposure in the many places people live, work, learn, and play.

Emerging evidence suggests adopting a suite of policies rather than relying on any single policy. Chile's Food Labeling and Marketing Law provides an excellent example of policy integration (35). The law is the first national policy to jointly mandate front-of-package warning labels, restrict child-directed marketing, and ban sales in schools of foods and beverages high in added sugars, sodium, or saturated fats. Implementation of these policies was accompanied by guidance to industry, schools, and early-childhood centers, as well as mass media campaigns on using the warning labels (35). In the United States, the Howard County Unsweetened campaign, which combined a public awareness campaign with organizational and public policy changes, was associated with significant decreases in sales of soda and fruit drinks (126).

We note variation in the level of government adopting SSB policies. The United States is distinct from most other countries in that it currently has only local and state SSB policies. It is not uncommon for innovative food policies to be incubated at the state or local level first before being implemented nationally. Political feasibility is often greater at the local or state level, where agreement on policy adoption may be more attainable and political will is greater. While implementing national SSB policies may be possible in the United States, checks and balances (e.g., bicameral legislature, presidential veto power) and powerful interest groups present significant obstacles.

Ideally, policies to reduce SSB consumption should be dynamic, adapting to changing market and consumption trends as well as emerging science. For example, industry is increasingly adding NNS to packaged beverages (113). The impact of such potential reformulation on health is currently unknown (see the sidebar titled Nonnutritive Sweeteners and Health; 43, 89). If negative health consequences were to occur, they might blunt the positive effects of taxes or warning labels, and policies that discourage reformulation might be needed. Evidence continues to emerge about the health effects of beverages other than SSBs. Some studies have raised concerns about an association between 100% fruit juice and type 2 diabetes, although findings are currently mixed and inconclusive (4, 34, 63). Should evidence of harm from 100% juice become more compelling, allowing juice to count as a fruit serving in US food assistance programs or excluding it from SSB taxes may merit reconsideration.

Policies must also respond to broader public health trends. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has changed the context for SSB policies. Local and state governments facing serious budget shortfalls are seeking revenues. This need for revenue may create an opportunity for accelerating adoption of SSB taxes, perhaps even a national beverage tax, but it could also lead these governments to deposit revenues into general funds rather than dedicating their use to addressing SSB-related health issues and health inequities. If school closures persist, food from

## NONNUTRITIVE SWEETENERS AND HEALTH

The number and types of nonnutritive sweeteners (NNS) used in packaged beverages and foods are increasing, in part as a response to sugar reduction initiatives. NNS are also referred to as low-calorie or nonsugar sweeteners. They provide sweetness to products while adding few if any calories. Examples include aspartame, saccharin, rebaudioside-A (found predominantly in Stevia), and sucralose. Current evidence regarding the associations of long-term exposure to NNS with health outcomes such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular disease is inconclusive (43, 89). Whether the mixed findings are due to problems with reverse causality, inadequate assessment of exposure, or failure to distinguish potential varying effects across types of NNS is unclear. For example, the health effects of each type of NNS could differ because each has its own unique chemical structure and therefore sensory properties (e.g., sweetener intensities, mouth feel) and physiological effects. More studies assessing the health effects of each type of NNS and their interactions with each other, as well as with the rest of our diets, are needed. Exposure to NNS varies across demographic groups, and further research is needed to quantify this variation and its impacts on population health.

schools will comprise a smaller portion of children's diet, suggesting the need for more emphasis on policies in other settings. Thus, school closures may increase obesity risk. A recent study suggests that, for children living in poverty, obesity risk would have been 47% higher in 2018 had not the HHSFKA been implemented (77), which established policies to improve the nutritional quality of foods and beverages served to US children (e.g., more whole grains, fruits, and vegetables).

Evaluation of proven (e.g., beverage taxes, front-of-package warning labels) and promising (e.g., healthy beverage defaults in kids' meals, healthy retail, FSGs, and outdoor advertising warning labels) SSB reduction policies, individually and in combination, is essential. Policy design varies substantially across jurisdictions, which supports the value of context-specific evaluation data informed by community perspectives to deepen understanding of equity, feasibility, and impact. Future evaluation (see also the Future Issues box below) should address known issues in evaluating SSB policies (e.g., collecting baseline data in the limited time between policy adoption and implementation, securing a valid comparison site, fully accounting for temporal trends and confounding factors, and reducing bias from self-reported beverage consumption). Although an end goal for SSB reduction policies is the prevention of adverse health outcomes, it may be difficult to demonstrate this effect, given the long lag between change in exposure to SSBs and disease incidence as well as the influence of many other disease risk factors in addition to SSBs. Evaluations should therefore focus on intermediate outcomes such as changes in consumer and industry behavior, particularly for short-term studies.

SSB policy adoption faces considerable opposition, and advocates typically have fewer financial, lobbying, and other resources that they can bring to bear. However, partnerships among advocates, communities, and policy makers can help to counterbalance the financial weight of industry opposition during policy adoption campaigns (21, 120). Evaluators can contribute to policy adoption by disseminating findings about policy impacts and lessons learned regarding policy design. They can also codesign evaluations with policy makers and advocates. Advocates and policy makers, in turn, can keep evaluators informed about emerging opportunities for evaluation as policies are considered for adoption.

In conclusion, existing SSB policies are a proven policy approach for reducing the sales (and, in some subpopulations, consumption) of SSBs, and many promising policies are emerging. Continued progress in this area will require scaling and integrating effective policies and testing innovative ones with the goal of maximizing equity, impact, and feasibility. Opposition may slow progress,

but coordinated efforts by policy makers, advocates, communities, and independent evaluators to advance policy action, design, and science will allow SSB policies to realize their full potential for improving health and health equity.

### SUMMARY POINTS

1. The rates of sales and consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs), which are associated with poor health outcomes, have declined since 2000. However, they remain unacceptably high and may have leveled off more recently.
2. Evidence for the effectiveness of four categories of policies to reduce exposure to and consumption of SSBs is growing: financial, information, defaults, and availability. Within these categories, some evidence is strong (e.g., beverage excise taxes) and some evidence is emerging (e.g., healthy beverage defaults).
3. As policy makers choose among approaches for reducing SSB consumption, policy equity, impact, and feasibility should be critical considerations.
4. Because policies to reduce SSB consumption often face strong opposition, ground-softening activities (e.g., grassroots organizing and SSB public awareness campaigns) can help to increase political feasibility.
5. No single policy will reduce SSB consumption to healthy levels. Current and future policies should be dynamic, adapting to changing market and consumption trends as well as to emerging science.
6. Scaling SSB policies with demonstrated effectiveness, testing innovative approaches, and implementing multiple policies concurrently will help to maximize impact.

### FUTURE ISSUES

1. More information is needed to inform an evidence-based approach for the adoption of SSB reduction policies, including evidence on impact (e.g., differential effects by race/ethnicity or income, comparative cost-effectiveness of policy alternatives, the combined impact of multiple SSB reduction policies), unintended consequences (e.g., possible substitution by NNS or other sweetened products), shifting norms (e.g., changes in population norms about SSB consumption), industry opposition (e.g., tactics to defeat taxes, influence on the policy-making process), other benefits beyond reducing SSB consumption (e.g., improved education outcomes attributable to revenue investments), and health effects of beverages not currently considered SSBs (e.g., association of 100% fruit juice intake with potential adverse health outcomes).
2. Future research should be informed by community perspectives to deepen understanding of policy equity, feasibility, and impact.
3. For SSB reduction policies that raise revenue (i.e., SSB taxes), it will be important to document any additional economic (e.g., job creation from revenue investments) or health impacts. This is especially important in light of COVID-19, as resource gaps may raise policy makers' interest in SSB taxes.

## DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

J.K. is employed by Healthy Food America, which has organizational policy positions and advocates for some of the policies included in this article. He has received grant support for the evaluation of sugary drink taxes and of a sugary drink countermarketing project from Healthy Eating Research, a program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. He has received funding from Voices for Healthy Kids/American Heart Association to develop recommendations for the design of equitable sugary drink tax policy and from the Panta Rhea Foundation to provide technical support for adoption and implementation of sugary drink taxes. S.N.B. has received research grant funding from Bloomberg Philanthropies, which has funded advocacy and mass communication campaigns supporting SSB taxes. S.S. is employed by the American Heart Association, which has organizational policy positions and advocates for some of the policies included in this articles. Her views are independent and are not intended to represent those of the American Heart Association. S.W.N. has received research grant funding from Bloomberg Philanthropies and Arnold Ventures, both of which have funded advocacy and mass communication campaigns supporting SSB taxes.

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- Center for Science in the Public Interest. <https://cspinet.org/library>
- Harvard CHOICES project. <https://choicesproject.org/>
- Harvard Nutrition Source. <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/nutritionsource/>
- Healthy Food America. <http://www.healthyfoodamerica.org/resources/>
- Tufts University Food-PRICE Initiative (Food Policy Review and Intervention Cost-Effectiveness). <https://www.food-price.org/>
- University of California San Francisco Sugar Science. <https://sugarscience.ucsf.edu/>
- University of Connecticut Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity. <https://www.sugarydrinkfacts.org/default.aspx>
- University of North Carolina Global Food Research Program. <http://globalfoodresearchprogram.web.unc.edu/resources/>
- Voices for Healthy Kids. <https://voicesforhealthykids.org/>
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