WEIGHT GAINS FROM TRADE IN FOODS: EVIDENCE FROM MEXICO

Mexico’s obesity rate has increased tremendously over the last decades. It is currently estimated at 23.2%. In the same period, trade with the U.S. in food and beverage (F&B) soared as well. In 2012, U.S. foods accounted for 79% of total Mexican food imports. Did Mexico import its obesity epidemic from the U.S.? Here’s what research found.

CAUSAL EFFECT
Up to 20% of the increase in obesity can be explained by exposure to U.S. food imports. Exposure to U.S. F&B imports led to an additional 2 million obese women.

Effect is driven by unhealthy F&B imports from the U.S.

RISING OBESITY
Average body mass index (BMI) of Mexican women increased 15% between 1988 and 2012, while the obesity rate rose from 10% to 23%.

Based on anthropometric data from National Surveys.

MORE U.S. F&B IMPORTS
U.S. food imports increased tenfold, driven by unhealthy foods. The highest increase was in food preparations which rose from $33.5 to $359 million.

Based on data from UN COMTRADE.

SPENDING ON U.S. IMPORTS
The share of U.S. imports in total Mexican household expenditure on food tripled, increasing from 2.5% to 8%.

Based on household-level surveys on expenditures.

THE PRICE EFFECT
Increased exposure to U.S. F&B imports led to relatively lower food prices for unhealthy food. This can increase food consumption and contribute to obesity.

CONCLUSION
Globalization can affect the health of populations in countries importing F&B. Health concerns should be considered in the determination of trade policies, particularly for trade in unhealthy foods. This is pertinent in light of the World Health Organization’s warning of a global obesity epidemic (“globesity”).

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