“What Evidence Matters in the Formulation of Federal Policies to Combat Childhood Obesity in the U.S.?”

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Nutritional sciences have an important role in guiding sound food and health-related policies, but policymakers’ use of such research evidence has been limited, inconsistent, and, at times, misinformed. While efforts to improve the supply and timely dissemination of relevant research evidence to policymakers can begin to close this gap, a more complete understanding of the common practices and norms, or routines, by which policy decision-makers acquire and use research evidence is necessary for improving the success of such efforts. This presentation reports findings from a funded research project designed to uncover the evidence use routines of legislators in the context of legislating U.S. federal policies to curb childhood obesity from 2000-2020. The project involved a theory-driven content analysis of a comprehensive set of policy documents (bills, hearings, floor debates, and policy reports) as well as interviews with legislative staff involved in the crafting of these policies. Key findings concerning the scope, type, nature, and timing of research and non-research evidence use by legislators will be presented and discussed.