Author’s response to reviews

Title: Reductions in sugar sales from soft drinks in the UK from 2015-2018

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Reductions in sugar sales from soft drinks in the UK from 2015-2018
(Lauren Kate Bandy; Peter Scarborough; Richard A Harrington; Mike Rayner; Susan A Jebb)

Response to reviewer and editor comments

Please see the authors’ response to the reviewer and editor comments given below in blue. All line numbers refer to the final manuscript (with track changes).

1. Remove the total sales tables from the paper and put into the supplemental tables to simplify the presentation, interpretation and results.

Please see response to the second editor below
2. Remember that this is not a review of the SDIL but that the initial proposal for the SDIL and its passage preceded the SDIL implementation on purpose. These discussions led to major industry changes and shifting national demand. Concurrently the amount of all media focused on the SDIL truly started to shift demand and also reformulation of existing products and introduction of new lower sugar ones. This is critical for not incorrectly interpreting why these changes occurred.

The announcement and implementation of the SDIL is included in the introduction (lines 107-113), as is the increased media focus on sugar and soft drinks (line 120). We acknowledge that this paper is not an evaluation of the SDIL (line 403) and that our data were insufficient to “analyse how sugar levels changed immediately before and after the announcement or introduction of the SDIL” (lines 398). Lines 400-403 state “the rates of change in both mean sugar content and total sugar sales seem to have been accelerated by the announcement of the SDIL in March 2016 and its implementation in April 2018, and the sales of low sugar products (<5.0g/100ml) that are not subject to the levy have increased substantially.” We believe that we have attributed as much credit to the announcement and implementation of the tax as we are able to with these data.

3. Thank you for sharing how Euromonitor is measured in the UK. At the same time all studies on Euromonitor trends in high income as well as lower income countries find they do underestimate in any year total consumption and sales. But that the trends are quite true to reality.

The strengths and limitations of Euromonitor data have been discussed in lines 322-328 and 340-348.

Response to the second editor’s comments
'An interesting dilemma. My decades of experience suggests that you need both volume measures and per capita figures to adequately monitor trends in exposure. Volume (of sales) has an inherent public health meaning and is readily understood by those responsible for improving public health so I would definitely want to see it included, along with per capita consumption. As the authors point out, it is the distribution of per capita sugar consumption by social class or some other relevant population category descriptor, that is most important for policy, and those data are seemingly not available.

'I think a more prominent call for data collection systems to monitor the socio-economic or geographic distribution of consumption (per capita) would strengthen the paper in terms of the relevance of the analysis for public policy.

'So in summary, I agree with your assessment that the per capita additions made by the authors are about the best they can do towards responding to the Reviewer’s concerns, but they should equally be more outspoken about how data collections systems need to be refined to measure change in consumption patterns in different population subgroups.

One final note: the population of the UK has probably changed only marginally since 2015, so reduction in volume of sales is likely to be a very good measure of the impact of control policies. All the more reason to keep and focus on it!'  

Please do respond to the reviewer's remaining minor concerns as appropriate, and also consider adding a little discussion regarding data collection systems' refinement to measure consumption changes, which may make this paper even stronger.

We thank the editor for their input. As suggested, we have added lines to the discussion (lines 346-348) to make it clear that the dataset would benefit from the inclusion of demographic and other population factors, and that the per capita figures tell us nothing about the distribution of sales in the population and will include a large percentage of zero consumers.