Cross-posted at CPRBlog.

No one seems to like the idea of regulation these days. Nudges, alternatives that try to get people to voluntarily alter their behavior by changing the context in which they make decisions, have been widely touted as a better approach. Cass Sunstein, Obama's "regulatory czar" in the Office of Management and Budget, is a leading proponent of the "nudging" idea, and the co-author of a popular book promoting the concept that people should be gently helped to make better decisions for their health and welfare, rather than ordered to do so.

No one is against incorporating nudges into policy, at least no one I know. But the proponents of nudging sometimes make it sound like nudging should entirely replace more coercive approaches. A new report from the UK's House of Lords Science and Technology Committee throws some cold water on that idea. The report concludes that nudges in isolation are often not as effective as a combination of voluntary and regulatory measures, and that the enthusiasm for nudges is not backed up by much evidence of success.

From the report's summary:

> Our central finding is that non-regulatory measures used in isolation, including "nudges", are less likely to be effective. Effective policies often use a range of interventions.
>
> We concluded that it is important to consider the whole range of possible interventions when policy interventions are designed. We place particular emphasis on this conclusion because the evidence we received indicated that the Government's preference for non-regulatory interventions has encouraged officials to exclude consideration of regulatory measures when thinking about behaviour change. Though there is a lack of applied research on changing behaviour at a population level, there is other available evidence that the Government need to use to better effect. We were therefore disappointed to find that, although we received some examples of evidence-based policies, such as policies on energy-efficient products and smoking cessation services, we were also given many examples of policies that had not taken account of available evidence, including policies on food labelling and alcohol pricing.

> We also found that a lot more could, and should, be done to improve the evaluation of interventions. This is not only good practice but would help to build a body of research that could inform effective policies targeting population-level behaviour change.

(Hat tip: Science Insider.)