



Why Poverty Leads to Obesity and Life-Long Problems

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The United States finds itself in the midst of an “obesity epidemic,” as many news outlets and public agencies have proclaimed. For good reasons, researchers and public health experts are especially concerned about obesity among children and adolescents. Over the last three decades obesity has grown almost three-fold among youngsters.

Obesity is a risk for all groups of Americans, but what is often left unsaid is the special vulnerability of the most disadvantaged groups. Obesity is especially rampant among Americans with the lowest levels of education and the highest poverty rates. Given the increasing economic insecurity facing many in our nation today, it is important to understand why and how poverty heightens the rise of obesity among youth. Only if we understand the causes at work can we effectively design strategies to reduce this major health risk to already vulnerable people.

Why the Risk of Obesity is Greater for the Poor

Eating right and engaging in regular physical activity are decisions all individuals in America can make to lower the risk of obesity and associated health problems. But of course the choices made by children and adolescents are strongly affected by the family and community environments in which they live. Impoverished living conditions matter especially for the young, because they throw up many barriers to engaging in healthy behaviors.

Poor families have limited food budgets and choices, and must often stretch supplies toward the end of the month, before another check or allocation of Food Stamps arrives. This leads to unhealthy behaviors in several ways:

- Families choose high-fat foods dense with energy – foods such as sugars, cereals, potatoes and processed meat products – because these foods are more affordable and last longer than fresh vegetables and fruits and lean meats and fish.
- Poor families often live in disadvantaged neighborhoods where healthy foods are hard to find. Instead of large supermarkets, poor neighborhoods have a disproportionate number of fast food chains and small food stores providing cheap, high-fat foods.
- Economic insecurity – such as trouble paying bills or rent – leads to stress, and people often cope by eating high-fat, sugary foods.

Options for regular physical activity can also be restricted for poor people:

- Families cannot usually afford to pay for organized children’s activities outside of school – and schools in impoverished areas are less likely to run sports or physical activity programs than schools with more resources.
- Due to inflexible work schedules, lack of transportation, or unmet needs for child care, poor parents, especially single mothers, may find it hard to support extra activities for their children. Leaving kids in front of the TV is often all stressed poor parents can manage.
- In many poor neighborhoods, parks, playgrounds, trails, and free public gyms are often not available or safe. Neighborhoods may be crime-ridden, and there may be no nearby indoor places for play or exercise. Ironically, parental efforts to keep kids safe and indoors may increase encourage sedentary behaviors such as watching TV and playing video games.

The Long-Term Downsides of Youthful Obesity

Compared to those who are not poor, adolescents in impoverished families and communities are more likely to be obese – or become overweight in young adulthood. And obesity in young adulthood is not usually temporary. It is a kind of lifelong sentence to ill health and socioeconomic disadvantages.

- Obese young adults are a high risk for ongoing health problems such as cardiovascular disease, depression and certain cancers.
- Being overweight in young adulthood is associated with unemployment, limits on educational attainment and lower levels of income.
- Because the bad consequences are long-lasting and recurrent, obesity needs to be prevented or reversed for poor youngsters. Policymakers are looking for the best ways to do just that.

What Can be Done?

To effectively prevent and reverse obesity among especially vulnerable poor people, we have to think of the issues in more than just individual terms. We must look for ways to begin to improve the social and physical environments in which low-income people live. Interventions in neighborhoods and community institutions can make a difference.

- For example, New York City is sponsoring a “Green Carts” program that uses mobile food carts to offer fresh produce in certain poor neighborhoods.
- New neighborhood resources are also needed to help people connect with one another for safe, organized activities conducive to good physical and mental health.
- Schools and Head Start programs can be key players too, because youngsters spend so much time in them and they are valued community institutions. Research shows that incorporating physical activities and good nutrition into school and pre-school offerings can make a real difference in the fight against childhood and youth obesity.

Investing in a diverse set of physical activities and nutritional programs in neighborhoods and educational institutions may be the best way to reduce the risk of obesity among poor youngsters. But such efforts need reliable funding from governments and charities to boost and leverage valuable programs in neighborhood centers and schools serving disadvantaged Americans.

Read more in Hedwig Lee, Kathleen Mullan Harris, and Penny Gordon-Larsen, “Life Course Perspectives on the Links between Poverty and Obesity during the Transition to Young Adulthood,” *Population Research and Policy Review* 28, no. 4 (2009): 505-532.