

Food insecurity and child overweight

Informing policymakers through research

The issue. The prevalence of childhood overweight in the United States is on the rise. About 1 of every 6 children is overweight. Concurrently, about 20 percent of children in the U.S. live in food insecure households, or households that do not have the financial means to access adequate food supplies on a regular basis. Together, childhood overweight and food insecurity lead to health risks and medical problems in children. However, research has provided mixed results on how overweight and food insecurity are related. Moreover, research has not been able to simultaneously examine the association between overweight and food security at the individual (child) level, which can better isolate the more direct impact of food insecurity on overweight.

According to our research. Food insecurity status was not found to increase or decrease the risk of overweight in low-income children. Although other risk factors mattered (e.g., food insecure children were less likely to eat dinner together as a family and to live in a household headed by a married couple) our results show that food insecure children were no more likely than food secure children to be overweight or at risk of overweight. However, an important point still remains; that is being overweight or at risk of overweight coexists with being food insecure among low-income children. In our sample, one-fourth of food insecure children were overweight and almost one-half were at risk of overweight.

We recommend. Policymakers may consider ways to modify programs that address the economic constraints that low-income households face in securing enough food and maintaining a healthy diet. In particular, the Food Stamp Program is uniquely positioned to help Americans acquire enough food. Although food stamps are designed to alleviate food insecurity, they are not designed to reduce obesity. Nevertheless, food stamps can play a role in helping to reduce childhood overweight by, for example, allowing

families to purchase healthier foods and helping to alleviate the stress associated with not having enough money.

Along with efforts within the Food Stamp Program, efforts to educate families may also be pursued to help ensure reductions in both food insecurity and childhood overweight. This education should recognize that, while low-income families face serious financial constraints, within any given financial situations, families do have some scope to choose healthy and nutritious foods while avoiding other types of foods (e.g. soda, salty snacks). One educational avenue to making healthier choices is through nutrition education programs. Such programs and other nutrition interventions have demonstrated success in addressing poor nutritional habits.

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This policy brief is based on published research: Gunderson, C., B. Lohman, J. Eisenmann, S. Garasky, & S. Stewart. (2008). Lack of Association between Child-Specific Food Insecurity and Overweight in a Sample of 10-15 Year Old Low-Income Youth. *Journal of Nutrition*, v138, 371–378.

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