

Lower-income neighborhoods associated with higher obesity rates

Obesity prevalence has increased significantly among adults and children in the U.S. over the last two decades. A new study appearing in the journal Nutrition Reviews reveals that characteristics of neighborhoods, including the area's income level, the built environment, and access to healthy food, contribute to the continuing obesity epidemic.

Researchers led by Jennifer L. Black of New York University's Department of Nutrition, Food Studies and Public Health critically reviewed ninety studies published between 1997 through 2007 on neighborhood determinants of obesity through the PubMed and PsychInfo databases.

They found that neighborhoods with decreased economic and social resources have higher rates of obesity. They also found that residents in low-income urban areas are more likely to report greater neighborhood barriers to physical activity, such as limited opportunities for daily walking or physical activity and reduced access to stores that sell healthy foods, especially large supermarkets.

In order to organize the different approaches to assessing neighborhood-level determinants of obesity, the authors present a conceptual framework. The framework is intended to guide future inquiry by describing pathways through which neighborhoods might influence body weight.

Consisting of three inter-related layers, the framework includes the influence of social factors, access to quality food and exercise, and individual factors including behavioral intentions. Each level has indirect and direct influences on behavioral choices and may ultimately impact weight.

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