

Study examines link between poverty and childhood obesity

November 12 2012, by Amy Hodges

(Medical Xpress)—Children living in poorer neighborhoods are nearly 30 percent more likely to be obese than children in more affluent residences, according to a new study from Rice University.

The study by Rice [sociologists](#) Rachel Tolbert Kimbro, director of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research's Urban Health Program, and Justin Denney, associate director of the program, reveals that living in [neighborhoods](#) with higher levels of poverty and lower levels of education is associated with increased [child obesity](#) risk, regardless of family composition or other individual factors. The research also showed that living in neighborhoods with a higher proportion of foreign-born residents is associated with reduced child [obesity](#) risk.

The findings will appear in an upcoming issue of [Social Science & Medicine](#).

The researchers based their conclusions on a comparison of 17,530 5-year-old children living in approximately 4,700 neighborhoods nationwide. They found that children in poorer neighborhoods have 28 percent higher odds of developing obesity, and those in middle-class neighborhoods have 17 percent higher odds, compared to children living in affluent neighborhoods; these statistics take into account such factors as household socioeconomic status, maternal [education](#) and how much television the child watches. The researchers also found that children living in neighborhoods with a high proportion of foreign-born residents had approximately 20 percent lower odds of obesity.

[Childhood obesity](#) is a significant public health issue, with 31.7 percent of children ages 2-19 overweight or obese, and there is much to be learned about how communities influence the epidemic, Denney said.

"We know there are characteristics specific to families and individual children that are associated with obesity," he said. "Those relationships are pretty well understood at this point, but less well understood are community influences, such as the social and demographic characteristics of the places people live. Neighborhood poverty is associated with childhood obesity above and beyond the [poverty](#) status of the child's family and other individual and family characteristics. This tells us there is something about the community that is also influencing childhood obesity."

Kimbro said that while it's clear that neighborhood characteristics matter for obesity risks, policies have not been as concerned with this information or efforts to alleviate the epidemic that's "grabbing hold of kids in this country."

"There are literally thousands of funded individual-level interventions in childhood obesity being tested right now," Kimbro said. "We believe they are well-meaning but possibly misdirected."

Kimbro hopes this study will encourage exploration of neighborhood programs to address risk factors for childhood obesity.

"There have to be individual-level interventions, but this paper shows that there is something going on at the community level that's clearly very important to address," she said.

More information: "Neighborhood Context and Racial/Ethnic Differences in Young Children's Obesity: Structural Barriers to Interventions," *Social Science & Medicine*.

Provided by Rice University

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