

Research Policy Brief

Family Economics Research Coordinating Committee (NCCC052)

Food Insecurity and Childhood Obesity

The issue. Recent estimates indicate that almost 1 in 5 children in the United States are considered obese. Another public health concern in the US is food insecurity. Approximately 1 in 5 children in the US lives in a food-insecure household as measured via the USDA Core Food Security Module (CFSM), with substantially higher rates for those below the poverty line. Both obesity and food insecurity have been shown to lead to a plethora of medical problems for children. However, the research on the relationship between food insecurity and childhood obesity has led to mixed results. Some studies have found a positive relationship, others have found no relationship, and others have found a negative relationship. Common to all these studies is the use of a child's BMI to delineate whether he or she is obese or not. Unfortunately, measures of BMI do not present a full picture of obesity, and the connections between obesity and child health outcomes can differ if alternative measures of obesity are used. Therefore, this study used multiple indicators of obesity (i.e. BMI, waist circumference, triceps skinfold, trunk fat mass, percentage of body fat) to understand the connection between food insecurity and obesity.

According to our research. Food insecure children were no more likely to be obese than their food-secure counterparts across all measures of obesity. Results are consistent with recent findings of no relationship between food insecurity and obesity, and demonstrate that findings from these previous studies may also be robust to other obesity measures. Moreover, it is still important to address the fact that food insecurity and obesity often coexist in low-income children; depending on the obesity measure and subsample assessed, approximately 12-57% of the food-insecure children in the study were also considered obese.

Policy conclusions. Alleviating food insecurity and childhood obesity have been priorities among policymakers. Our findings that food insecurity and obesity are not associated suggest that policymakers can address these two problems independently without worrying about possible negative spillovers from one to the other.

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The NCCC052 committee, functioning under the National Agricultural Experiment Station System, facilitates collaboration among family economics researchers nationally and internationally. The committee provides a forum to examine research methodology and family economic issues in depth from a multidisciplinary perspective. The committee fosters development of research related to the economic well-being of individuals and families that is of interest to multiple institutions across the nation. For more information, see
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