

# Economic and social growth of developing nations may increase obesity

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Developing nations experiencing economic and social growth might also see growing waistlines among their poorest citizens, according to a new study from Rice University and the University of Colorado.

The researchers found that while growth of [developing countries](#) may improve conditions such as [malnutrition](#) and infectious disease, it may increase obesity among people with lower socio-economic status.

"It's a troubling finding," said Rice sociology professor Justin Denney, who co-authored the study with University of Colorado sociology professors Fred Pampel and Patrick Krueger. Their study will appear in the April issue of [Social Science & Medicine](#). The researchers examined data from the World Health Survey, an initiative of the World Health Organization aimed at collecting high-quality health data for people across all regions of the world. The researchers looked at data from 67 of the 70 countries surveyed during 2002 and 2003.

"In many cases, [developing nations](#) are still dealing with issues such as hunger and infectious disease, especially among the most disadvantaged segments of their population," Denney said. "At the same time, they're dealing with a whole new set of health issues that emerge as they continue to develop."

The study also showed that people with higher socio-economic status in developing countries are more likely to be obese, whereas people with higher socio-economic status living in developed countries are less

likely. Denney said that can be attributed to the different cultural values/norms at play in developing versus developed countries.

"In the developing world, being large comes with its own status and prestige, whereas in the developed world, being large is stigmatized," he said. "There's sort of a switching of cultural ideals, and these results are consistent with that."

Denney said the reasons for increased incidence of obesity among the socio-economically disadvantaged living in developed countries are twofold: There is a lack of education about health issues and a lack of access to high-quality, healthy (and in many cases, more expensive) food.

"Unfortunately, our research suggests that if a country develops to the state of the U.S., in all likelihood you'll see the same thing that's happening here in our country," Denney said. "Obesity is a major problem here in the U.S., but primarily for the most disadvantaged segments of the population."

Denney hopes the study will promote further research of the worldwide [obesity](#) epidemic.

"Social and economic development of a country helps many people, but it also brings these new issues that need consideration, particularly on a global scale," Denney said. "If we're going to start thinking about worldwide health policies, it might be beneficial for them to target specific groups of people."

**More information:** Obesity, SES, and economic development: A test of the reversal hypothesis: [www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0277953612000561](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0277953612000561)

Provided by Rice University

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