

Low-income mothers risk obesity to feed children

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Mothers who financially struggle to provide food for their families tend to put themselves at risk for obesity while trying to feed their children, according to Penn State sociologists.

Mothers who do not have enough money to provide adequate food for their families -- food-insecure -- are more likely to be obese or overweight than fathers who face [food shortages](#), as well as food-insecure, childless women and men, said Molly Martin, assistant professor of sociology and [demography](#). Over time, these food-insecure mothers also gain more weight compared to all food-insecure men and food-insecure women not caring for children.

"We often forget that [food insecurity](#) is happening in a country as rich as ours," said Martin. "Trying to protect children from food insecurity is not as rare as it once was, and it's been on the rise for the last two years, if not the last five years."

Mothers, who are often the food managers in the household, may take several actions to ensure that their children are fed, including [skipping meals](#) and eating cheaper, but less [nutritious foods](#).

"To make sure mothers can provide for their children, they may eat only once a day, for example, or they may eat erratically, which are all behaviors that are obesity risks," said Adam Lippert, graduate student in sociology, who worked with Martin.

Besides [gaining weight](#) from eating cheaper, less nutritious food, irregular eating can also cause a metabolic response that retains fat, according to the researchers.

Lippert said the women are consciously taking these actions to shield their children from hunger.

"What other studies show is that when it comes down to it, the kids come first," said Lippert.

The researchers, who report their findings in the current issue of [Social Science and Medicine](#), examined data on 7,931 participants in the Panel Study of [Income Dynamics](#). The biennial study, which has collected information on health and income levels of Americans since 1968, began collecting data on weight and food insecurity in 1999.

Women who have given birth tend to gain weight, but the researchers determined that pregnancy and childbirth did not explain the weight gain for the food-insecure mothers.

Martin said women who gain weight as they face food shortages may face social stigmas, as well. Women who are poor and overweight are often labeled lazy when this may not be the case, she said.

"People tend to look down on poor parents when the evidence suggests that not only are they doing their best, but some of the very things they are doing to protect their kids are actually making it worse on themselves," said Martin.

Martin said policies could be improved to help mothers facing food shortages.

"What this study suggests is that the relative safety net could be

improved," said Martin. "While food pantries and food stamps shore up family needs, a lot of families are still struggling to meet basic nutritional needs -- vitamins, minerals and key nutrients."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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