

# More education, not income, fights obesity

September 13 2013, by Stephanie Stephens

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Educational status may protect women living in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas against obesity, finds a new study in the *American Journal of Health Promotion*.

The study adds to previous studies showing an inverse association between [body mass index](#) (BMI) and socioeconomic status (SES). Generally, researchers have discovered that [women](#) in areas with fewer economic resources have higher BMIs than women in more affluent communities.

Income and education are frequently used as markers for studying [health inequalities](#), although they are "conceptually distinct," said the new report's authors. "It is possible that education is a marker of an individual's access to health information, capacity to assimilate [health](#)-related messages, and ability to retain knowledge-related assets, such as nutrition knowledge."

"Education is particularly important for women with low incomes who live in deprived areas," said lead author Lauren K. Williams, Ph.D., formerly of the Centre for Physical Activity and Nutrition Research, School of Exercise and Nutrition Sciences at Deakin University in Victoria, Australia. Williams said the research team mailed surveys to a large random sample of more than 4,000 women, ages 18 to 45, living in low-income towns and suburbs in Victoria. Women reported height, weight, education and personal income.

The authors wanted to examine the role of amplified

disadvantage—defined in the study as having a disadvantage in both education and income—and of status inconsistency, defined as disadvantage in either education or income, on BMI, Williams said.

Women of amplified disadvantage, those living in disadvantaged neighborhoods with both low education and personal income, may be at higher risk for high BMI, the authors determined. Those factors "should be at the forefront of [obesity prevention](#) initiatives," they wrote.

"This is a carefully conducted analysis of Australian data," said Frederick J. Zimmerman, Ph.D., who is the Fred W. and Pamela K. Wasserman Professor and Chair of the Department of Health Policy & Management in the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health. "Because only low-income women were studied, it isn't clear to what extent the results would apply to higher-income women, to men or to non-Australians. It has often been suggested that obesity happens because low-income people cannot afford high-quality food. Yet this study's results suggest an alternative narrative: that it is education, and not income, that constrains people's ability to eat healthfully."

Provided by Health Behavior News Service

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