

Long-term childhood poverty contributes to young adult obesity rates

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Juan Carreño de Miranda's "La monstrua desnuda" (The Nude Monster) painting.

A new study from the University of Houston Department of Health and Human Performance (HHP) finds childhood poverty reaches into the lives of white, Hispanic and African-American young adult women, contributing to their propensity to be overweight and obese.

"We know that having a [low socioeconomic status](#) during childhood contributes to children being overweight or obese," said HHP's Daphne

Hernandez, who also is an executive board member of the UH Texas Obesity Research Center. "We've found a connection between the long-term exposure to [poverty](#) during childhood and obesity rates among young adult woman."

Hernandez examined how repeated exposure to poverty during childhood impacts a young adult's risk of being overweight or obese. The results are published in the *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*.

She examined nearly 4,000 [young adults](#) born between 1980 and 1990 and the number of years from birth to age 18 that they were exposed to family-level poverty. The data came from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth and the Young Adults files. She noted children who experience repeated exposure to family-level poverty generally reside in socioeconomically disadvantaged communities that are filled with stress.

"There are behavioral and physiological underpinnings associated with residing in stressful environments that are associated with weight gain, especially among women," she said. "Further, disadvantaged neighborhoods are associated with more [fast food restaurants](#), fewer grocery stores, lower levels of safety and fewer opportunities for physical activities. All of this can contribute to weight gain over time"

While the rate of obesity increased along gender and ethnicity lines for young women, the same was not true for young adult white men.

"Poverty is associated with adolescents gaining work experience as early as 13 years old. For boys, this may mean being involved in manual labor jobs which are related to greater levels of physical activity," Hernandez said. "The higher level of physical activity may act as a 'protective factor' against obesity among white children who experience repeated exposure to poverty during childhood."

Hernandez studies the impact of family dynamics on nutrition, health and obesity. She says this new research suggests that helping families get out of poverty may be valuable in lowering the percentage of white, African-American and Hispanic women who are overweight or obese in young adulthood.

"Although we are no longer in an economic recession, many families are still experiencing the lingering effects of the recession and living in poverty. Truly, helping families move out of poverty may improve the long-term health status of their children as they grow into adulthood."

Provided by University of Houston

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