

Poverty-obesity link is more prevalent for women than men, study shows

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Credit: Peter Häger/Public Domain

Adolescent girls living in economically disadvantaged families are more likely than their male counterparts to become overweight or obese, according to new research from The University of Texas at Austin.

The study, published online this month in the *Journal of Health and*

Social Behavior, shows long-lasting consequences of economic hardship in childhood for the risk of obesity in adulthood. The findings emphasize the need for programs and policies addressing the [adverse health effects](#) of socioeconomic disadvantage in childhood and adolescence, says Tetyana Pudrovska, assistant professor of sociology and lead author of the study.

Using data from the Wisconsin Longitudinal Study, the researchers tracked patterns of weight gain among more than 10,000 men and women from high school graduation in 1957 to later career stages in 1993. The findings show that [economic disadvantage](#) in early life is significantly linked to higher body mass at age 18 and a greater risk of obesity at age 54. This link is the strongest among women and absent or inconsistent among men.

In addition to health risks, obese and overweight women face multiple social and economic disadvantages, Pudrovska says. The study shows that [obese women](#) are less likely than their thinner peers to secure important social resources including education, occupational prestige and earnings. This socioeconomic disadvantage in adulthood further increased the risk of obesity, suggesting a vicious circle of obesity and compromised economic resources. According to the study, this effect was not evident among men.

"Girls born into socioeconomically disadvantaged families are exposed from [early life](#) to an unfolding chain of lower [socioeconomic status](#) and higher body mass," says Pudrovska, who is a faculty associate in the Population Research Center. "Women are more strongly impacted than men both by adverse effects of [low socioeconomic status](#) on obesity and by [adverse effects](#) of obesity on status attainment."

Why does obesity have such a strong and persistent adverse effect on women's social achievement? The simple answer is that big is not

considered beautiful, Pudrovska says.

"In our perpetual quest for female beauty, slenderness has become paramount," Pudrovska says. "Physical attractiveness is more closely tied to thinness and more strictly enforced for girls and women than boys and men."

To stop the cycle of poverty and obesity, Pudrovska urges the need for more public awareness of weight-based discrimination in the labor market.

"Because [obesity](#) is not a protected status under federal law, promoting legal protection of overweight and obese persons from unfair treatment in the workplace is important, especially among women," Pudrovska says.

More information: *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*,
hsb.sagepub.com/content/55/3/283.abstract

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