

Researcher exploring why obesity strikes so hard among Mexican-American boys

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Fifteen percent of non-Hispanic white children in the United States are obese, but among Mexican-American boys the figure is a much more troubling 23 percent. With funding from the National Institutes of Health, Angelina Sutin, a researcher in the Florida State University College of Medicine, will spend the next three years untangling the roots of that disparity.

She'll need loads of data on children's and parents' health, height, weight, personality, family dynamics, economic history, social history and more. The good news is that the information already exists: California Family Project researchers have gathered eight years' worth on nearly 700 adolescents of Mexican origin and their parents. Originally collected to study substance abuse, now it's available to Sutin.

"It was a great opportunity to look at the interrelations between all these risk factors for [obesity](#) in the context of adolescent development," said Sutin, an assistant professor in the college's Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine.

The NIH awarded Sutin a three-year grant totaling more than \$450,000 to analyze and interpret the information. It was collected in California, which, like Florida, has a large population of Hispanic Americans.

"We will have an advisory committee in Immokalee," said Sutin, referring to the Southwest Florida community that's home to thousands of Hispanic farmworkers. The focus on Hispanic health is directly

relevant to the College of Medicine's mission to serve minority and underserved communities. "To what extent do we find things in the population in California similar to the population in Immokalee? What can we take from that to develop more effective interventions?"

Part of what researchers look at is environment. Economic environment includes family income and financial stresses. Social environment includes neighborhood safety and discrimination. Then there's the "built" environment.

"When we talk about obesity, you hear a lot about aspects of the built environment—access to greenspace and parks, access to fast food vs. healthy food. But that is generally talked about devoid of the individual's psychological functioning," Sutin said. "In this study, instead of just saying 'It's the environment' or 'It's the individual,' we can look at the interplay between how the individual's interacting with the environment."

Her research will address global questions about obesity but will also have a particular focus on Mexican Americans, especially first- and second-generation immigrant children.

"There's one very consistent finding—and this seems to be true of all immigrant groups—that the more generations your family is in the U.S., the heavier you get," Sutin said. "Are there any protective factors that we can identify from the home culture?"

It's an important question. Mexican Americans are a rapidly growing segment of the U.S. population. And, as Sutin notes, childhood obesity often leads to severe adult obesity. Obesity in adulthood costs the country an estimated total of \$147 billion (in 2008 dollars) because it increases the risk of coronary heart disease, Type 2 diabetes, certain cancers and other conditions, according to the Centers for Disease

Control.

"There's such a great need for a better understanding, particularly in adolescence, which is a really critical period that sets the child's weight trajectory for the rest of their life," she said. "We know that just telling people 'Eat less and exercise more' doesn't work. There are deeper factors, and that's what this project will investigate."

Sutin is the principal investigator. Two of her team members are faculty colleagues from the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Social Medicine: Suzanne Johnson, an expert in [childhood obesity](#), and Henry Carretta, an expert in geographic information systems. Teaming up with her from Immokalee is Clinical Assistant Professor Javier Rosado, who has worked for several years to reduce obesity among Immokalee children and their parents.

The project also has a training component.

"I will be teaching undergraduates and master's students in our Bridge program how to evaluate the literature, how to do research," Sutin said. "Even if they don't go on to do research, they will have a much better understanding of the needs in our community."

Provided by Florida State University

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