

# Poor mothers face greater scrutiny over their children's weight

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Credit: Marty from Manitou Springs, USA. Via Wikipedia.

Low-income mothers who use food assistance programs face a high level of surveillance over their children's health and weight, new UBC research suggests.

The study found low-income mothers, especially black and Latina

mothers, of children who are either overweight or underweight face greater accusations from doctors, nutritionists and social workers that they don't properly feed their children compared to mothers whose children are deemed to be a healthy [weight](#).

The mothers also worry about losing custody of their children if they are deemed to be inadequately feeding them, the study found.

"All parents face some scrutiny over their kids' bodies when they go to the doctor, but our findings suggest [poor mothers](#) experience more scrutiny," said Sinikka Elliott, the study's co-author and an assistant professor in the University of British Columbia's department of sociology. "The stakes are also higher for these mothers as many feel they will be reported to social services if their children are overweight or underweight."

For the study, researchers spent two years conducting interviews with 138 mothers and grandmothers of young children in low-income communities in North Carolina. They also spent a year observing 12 of the families, accompanying them to doctor's appointments and watching them prepare their children's school lunches.

The majority of households (76 per cent) had incomes below the poverty line. Forty-two per cent of the mothers were black, while 33 per cent were white and 22 per cent were Latina. The children in the study ranged from two to nine years old, with about half deemed to be a normal weight, three per cent underweight, 12 per cent overweight, and 32 per cent obese.

Among their observations, the researchers found that mothers felt their children's bodies— specifically, their sizes— were a reflection of how well they were feeding them, which put them at risk of being labeled uncaring or incapable. Black mothers in particular shared stories of

being accused of, or being afraid of, accusations of neglect on the basis of their children's weights or appetites.

"There's a common misconception that low-income parents of overweight children don't know or don't care about their children's weights, but that's simply not true," said Sarah Bowen, study co-author and associate professor in the department of sociology and anthropology at North Carolina State University. "The [mothers](#) in our study cared a lot about their [children's](#) health and weight. They knew that they should encourage their kids to drink more water, eat more vegetables, and be more active."

Elliott said the findings highlight a need for greater understanding and less stigma around body size and the challenges facing low-income parents.

"Many different factors affect how kids' bodies develop," said Elliott. "Their eating habits are shaped not just by what happens at home, but by the food that's available at school, peer pressure and even the commercials on TV. It doesn't make sense to praise or blame parents, yet we do."

**More information:** Sinikka Elliott et al, Defending Motherhood: Morality, Responsibility, and Double Binds in Feeding Children, *Journal of Marriage and Family* (2018). [DOI: 10.1111/jomf.12465](https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12465)

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