

Study shows participation in free school meals program cuts obesity prevalence

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Participation in the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) universal free school meals program reduces the prevalence of obesity among

students, according to a [study](#) published online March 18 in *Pediatrics*.

Anna M. Localio, M.P.H, from the University of Washington in Seattle, and colleagues calculated the prevalence of school obesity using [body mass index](#) (BMI) measurements collected annually between 2013 and 2019 for students in grades 5, 7, and 9 in California [public schools](#). The association of CEP with obesity was estimated using a difference-in-differences approach.

The analysis included 3,531 CEP-eligible schools; the [prevalence of obesity](#) was calculated from 3,546,803 student BMI measurements. The researchers found that 80 percent of the students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch at baseline.

The prevalence of obesity at baseline was 25 percent. There was a 0.60 percent net decrease in obesity prevalence after policy adoption for schools that participated in CEP compared with eligible, nonparticipating schools, corresponding to a relative reduction of 2.4 percent. In CEP-participating schools only, there was an increase in meals served during the study period.

"These findings add to the growing literature showing benefits of universal free school meals for child well-being," the authors write. "Such policies represent a promising strategy for addressing [childhood obesity](#)."

More information: Anna M. Localio et al, Universal Free School Meals Policy and Childhood Obesity, *Pediatrics* (2024). [DOI: 10.1542/peds.2023-063749](#)

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