Many low-income children are the beneficiaries of federally subsidized food programs, whether through a family’s use of food stamps (now called Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP), subsidized school breakfast or lunch programs, meals served in federally supported child care centers, or the Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). In fact, as of 2008, one-half of all U.S. children will participate at some point in SNAP alone, including 90 percent of African American children.

Rachel Tolbert Kimbro and Elizabeth Rigby, in their RIDGE paper (later published as a note in Health Affairs), find that the programs do have an effect on childhood obesity, but the effect depends largely on the cost of living in the city or town where one lives.¹

Past Findings Are Mixed on Whether Food Assistance Programs Contribute to Obesity

The nation’s food-security programs are designed to help low-income families stretch their food budgets. The SNAP program, for example, loads a debit card with a set amount each month that eligible families can use to buy groceries. Through the WIC program, low-income mothers of infants can receive formula and food packages as well as information on breast-feeding, diet, and other health issues concerning their children. Later, as low-income children enter their preschool years, they can receive healthy snacks and meals at certain child care centers through the Child and Adult

¹ Rachel Tolbert Kimbro and Elizabeth Rigby, “Federal Food Assistance and Nutrition Information Series

The High Price of Food Exacts a High Price on Low-Income Children’s Weight

Research by Elizabeth Rigby, The George Washington University, and Rachel Tolbert Kimbro, Rice University

Amid growing concern over childhood obesity, policymakers have begun to wonder what role federal food programs can play in combating obesity in children. Approximately one-third of U.S. children are overweight and 16 percent are obese. Low-income children are at particular risk, as income has long been associated with obesity.
One of the unique components of this study is that the authors take cost of living into account in their examination of the association between food assistance programs and obesity.

### Food Programs Are Linked to Higher Childhood Obesity in High-Cost Cities and Lower Obesity in Low-Cost Cities

Indeed, the authors find that food assistance programs as a whole may contribute to childhood obesity only in cities with high food prices—specifically for those families with the lowest incomes (less than 130 percent of the poverty line). Children in families with incomes at 185 percent of the poverty level see no effect of food assistance programs on their BMI.

In contrast, in cities with low food prices, food assistance programs help reduce obesity for the lowest income families. Again, those with incomes at 185 percent of the poverty level see no effect of food assistance programs.

### Programs with Dietary Mandates Are More Effective in Combating Obesity

Certain programs are more influential than others. Specifically, the snacks and meals provided at day care centers or school lunches are effective in reducing obesity among children, in both families at the lowest income (130 percent of poverty) and slightly higher incomes (180 percent of poverty). In cities with low food prices, the school programs are most effective in reducing obesity among children. In contrast, for the lowest-income families, SNAP is associated with greater childhood obesity in cities with low food prices. It has no effect on children in low-cost cities. WIC has no discernible effects on childhood obesity in either high- or low-cost cities. Overall, the findings suggest that in cities where food is more expensive, federal food assistance programs (and in particular SNAP) may be contributing to early childhood obesity. In low-cost cities, they may be deterring it.
Policy Implications

Clearly, when talking about the effects of food assistance programs, it is important to distinguish between programs and between places. Certain programs, such as the school lunch and child care meals, are helping children to keep their weight in check. Subsidizing meals with set dietary guidelines therefore appears an effective policy in helping to reduce obesity, at least for young children.

To have an impact on childhood obesity, other policies might include greater outreach to child care providers, given the effectiveness of the food assistance programs. Currently, many do not participate in the Child and Adult Care Food Program. Providing schoolwide presumptive eligibility for Title I schools (those with large low-income populations) and instituting summer food programs for school-aged children and their families are other options. Further increasing the nutritional value of food in all assistance programs also seems warranted.

Finally, any efforts to stem childhood obesity must take into account the cost of living in cities. Currently, SNAP benefits are higher in extremely high cost-of-living areas (Alaska, Hawaii, Guam), but the Food and Nutrition Service, USDA may wish to explore cost-of-living supplements in higher-cost cities as well. In addition, programs that subsidize the purchase of fruits, vegetables, and other healthy foods for SNAP recipients may be warranted.

Study Description

The authors examine the effects of food programs on children ages three to five from 20 of the largest cities in the United States. The children were part of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Survey, which followed a group of low-income children from birth to age 5. The authors generated a measure of any form of food assistance plus three additional measures for each program: WIC, SNAP, and the child care/school meals programs. They estimated the effect of each type of food assistance program, controlling for simultaneous participation in other programs (to net out their effect on the results). Cities with high food prices were those that scored above 103 on the 2003 American Chamber of Commerce Researchers Association (ACCRA) grocery cost-of-living indices.

Want to know more?

Visit us online at http://srdc.msstate.edu/ridge or call the SRDC at 662-325-3207