Are federal food assistance programs part of the childhood obesity problem?

No, says new research by Rachel Tolbert Kimbro, Ph.D., and Elizabeth Rigby, Ph.D., published in the journal Health Affairs earlier this month. Responding to concerns that federal food policy, by subsidizing or providing meals to low-income children, might actually undermine efforts to prevent childhood obesity, this study examined the possibility of these unintended consequences. Instead, the authors found that federal food programs were more likely to be part of a solution to the childhood obesity epidemic, than serve as a key source of the problem. In fact, federal food policies may actually prevent early childhood obesity for low-income children — especially participation in the National School Lunch or Child and Adult Care Food Programs.

Kimbro and Rigby — funded by grants from the Baker Institute Health Economics Program, Rice Faculty Initiatives Fund and the USDA RIDGE program — collected food policy data across a period of five years. This information was merged with data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), which has followed about 5,000 children from 20 large U.S. cities since their births in 1998 and 1999. Focusing on children at age three and again at age five, a critical time point both for the receipt of federal food assistance as well as the development of weight trajectories, the authors found that participation in the National School Lunch or Child and Adult Care Food Programs was associated with healthier weight statuses across all cities. Although it is counterintuitive that increasing access to school food is a way to prevent obesity, school meals are required to follow nutritional guidelines, and it is likely that low-income children who do not get fed at school are eating poorly at home. Of course, school meals will do the most to prevent obesity when they consist of high-nutrition, healthy foods, and when they are available to the children who need them most.

One caveat to this good news about federal food policy was that the authors also found that participating in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) was associated with a higher likelihood of obesity for 5-year-old children, but only in cities with higher food prices — suggesting that participation in SNAP in these cities might make it more difficult for children to maintain a healthy weight.

Efforts to combat childhood obesity might be enhanced by increasing access to subsidized meals through a range of strategies. These efforts could include increasing outreach to child care providers not participating in the Child and Adult Care Food Program; providing schoolwide presumptive eligibility for Title I schools (schools with large low-income populations); and instituting summer food programs for school-age children and their families. Another anti-obesity strategy could be to increase the nutritional value of food provided by all of the federal food assistance programs, which would require strengthening nutritional guidelines for subsidized meals, as well as limiting access to food of minimal nutritional value as part of the supplemental food assistance programs.

The authors encourage policymakers to take advantage of the upcoming reauthorization of the Child Nutrition Act to further advance the anti-obesity goal of the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs. This goal was highlighted by USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack, who called on Congress to raise the reimbursement rate for school meals, as well as to link any increases to a requirement that the meals served to children meet higher nutritional standards. In addition, the administration has proposed a historic increase of $10 billion over the next decade to help schools pay for higher-quality foods, to expand the program to more children and to give local schools the resources they need to upgrade their kitchens, train school food workers and otherwise enhance nutrition and food quality.

Findings from this research clearly show that federal food policy can be an important part of the solution to our nation’s child obesity problem.

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