

# Research Policy Brief

## Family Economics Research Coordinating Committee (NCCC052)

### Family Stressors and Child Obesity

**The issue.** Over one in three children in the United States is obese or overweight. This prevalence has increased three-fold over the last three decades. Like other adverse health outcomes among children, child obesity has negative physical, psychological, and social consequences that extend into adulthood and may ultimately lead to reduced life expectancy. Beyond negative health outcomes, there is some evidence of increased economic costs related to childhood obesity as well.

Obesity is a complex, multifactorial condition that includes both genetic and environmental factors. One environmental factor that has received relatively limited attention is children's exposure to undue stress, and more specifically, family stress. Children can face a myriad of stressors that are associated with poor health and well-being. This study examines six categories of family-level stressors (family disruption and conflict, mental and physical health problems, housing issues, health care struggles, financial strain, and lack of cognitive stimulation and emotional support) affecting children using data from the Child Development Supplement (CDS) of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID).

**According to our research.** Family stressors are positively related to overweight and obesity in children with impacts varying by age group. Among younger children, living in households lacking cognitive stimulation and emotional support is positively associated with being overweight and obese. For older children, both residing in households with members who are experiencing mental and physical health problems and residing in households with greater financial strain are positively related to being overweight and obese.

**Policy conclusions.** A clear public health implication from this research is that assisting families to reduce family-level stressors may have the further benefit of reducing child obesity.

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The NCCC052 committee, functioning under the National Agricultural Experiment Station System, facilitates collaboration among family economics researchers nationally and internationally. The committee provides a forum to examine research methodology and family economic issues in depth from a multidisciplinary perspective. The committee fosters development of research related to the economic well-being of individuals and families that is of interest to multiple institutions across the nation. For more information, see <http://nimss.umd.edu/homepages/home.cfm?trackID=7036>