

Walking to school is not enough to prevent obesity

20 January 2020, by Rob Noonan



Credit: NadyaEugene/Shutterstock

More children are overweight or obese nowadays because they don't get enough exercise, it is often claimed. One of the UK government's goals in the [Childhood Obesity Plan](#) is to increase the number of children who walk to school. Walking is certainly healthy, but is it enough to combat childhood obesity? [Our latest study](#) suggests it isn't.

Using data on over 7,000 11-year-olds born in England, we found that children living in the most deprived neighborhoods in England were most likely to walk to and from school and were also at the greatest risk of being overweight or obese. The most deprived children were also most likely to not take part in sport, spend lots of time in front of TV and computer screens and most likely to have an [unhealthy diet](#) (lots of sugary drinks and not much fruit).

We're not suggesting that walking to school leads to childhood obesity, but that living in a poor neighborhood and being poor does. Combating childhood obesity needs more than simply getting children to walk to school more often. That's because [many factors](#) influence a child's weight, including economic and environmental ones that affect physical activity and diet.

Right to a healthy environment

For too long behavioral intervention programs that focus on education and personal responsibility have been seen as the answer to unhealthy lifestyles (physical inactivity, unhealthy eating) and [childhood obesity](#). We focus on treatment instead of prevention and wonder why we have a revolving door system—one that's not working.

Behavioural intervention programs are mostly ineffective in the long run and do little to [tackle health inequities](#) when the policies and the social and environmental conditions that promote unhealthy eating and inactivity are left untouched. Even when behavioral intervention programs are successful, there's a new group of children waiting to take part in the next one.

Children have a right to live in a healthy environment. Combating [childhood obesity](#) and its inequalities will only be achieved when the neighborhoods children live in support physical activity and healthy eating. We need policies that ensure there's a level playing field in terms of the accessibility and pricing of healthy [food](#) and active leisure opportunities. It should come as no surprise that [childhood obesity](#) is [highest](#) and increasing at the [fastest rate](#) in the most deprived neighborhoods.

The facilities that support [physical activity](#) and healthy eating are typically less common in deprived neighborhoods. Deprived neighborhoods have the [fewest parks and green spaces](#) and the fewest shops selling [affordable fresh food](#).

Households in deprived neighborhoods often have little disposable income, which makes accessing [active leisure opportunities](#), such as sports clubs, difficult. It also makes it harder to have a [balanced diet](#) – the poorest households in England would need to spend [74% of their budget](#) on food to achieve Public Health England's healthy eating

advice.

Impact of austerity

The government's Childhood Obesity Plan recognizes that the environment needs to change, but little is being done at a policy level to see this through. Children face [diminishing opportunities](#) to take part in active leisure as a result of cuts in public funding. [Public swimming and leisure centers](#), which were once free for all [children](#), face closure. Cuts to maintenance budgets and increased urbanization place public parks and green spaces [under threat](#), too.

The food environment isn't becoming any more supportive of healthy eating either. [Fast-food outlets](#) continue to be built in the [poorest neighborhoods](#) and next to schools as [healthy food prices](#) rise, and unhealthy foods become cheaper and more accessible. This is at a time when [child poverty](#) is rising in the UK and the [poorest families](#) in society are struggling to make ends meet due to rising living costs, low wages and cuts to welfare benefits. We're walking backwards not forwards.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

APA citation: Walking to school is not enough to prevent obesity (2020, January 20) retrieved 14 September 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-01-school-obesity.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.