

One out of every three children in this country is overweight or obese. Body weight is affected by our genes, our choices, the circumstances we were born into, the world around us, and more. Children spend most of their waking hours either at home or at school, yet not enough is known about the connection between how these different settings affect obesity and its related behaviors like diet and exercise.

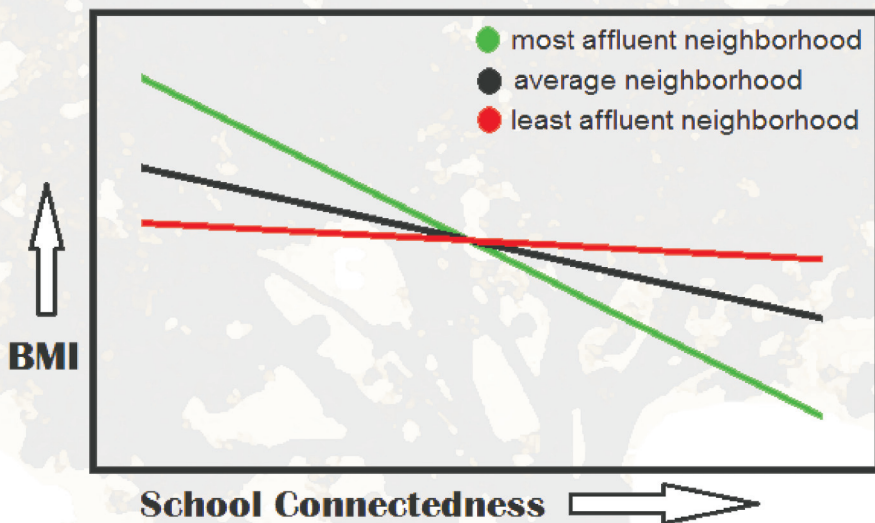
This study examines the associations that children’s neighborhoods and schools have with their body mass index (BMI). To do this, we linked weight and height, measured by trained research assistants, of 721 5th and 6th graders in 12 New Haven Public Schools, with two sources of information about their environments: (1) U.S. Census data about the average level of affluence in each child’s neighborhood, and (2) school climate survey data about the average level of “connectedness” felt by students at each of the 12 schools included in this study.

Key Findings

- On average, the greater connection a school has with its students, the lower a child’s BMI in that school is likely to be.
- This association between school connectedness and BMI is much stronger among children living in more affluent neighborhoods than among children from less affluent neighborhoods

Results

We found that, on average, the greater average “connectedness” felt by students at a particular school, the lower their BMIs are likely to be. We also found that this association between school connectedness and BMI is much stronger among children living in more affluent neighborhoods than among children from less affluent neighborhoods.



Recommendations

In the battle against childhood obesity, research and prevention efforts must include all aspects of a child’s life – their neighborhood, their school, and the diet and exercise habits they develop in each setting. Improving how schools engage and support their students can help to improve health. However, neighborhood wealth disparities also play a big role and need to be addressed in addition to the school environment to maximize child health.

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Neighborhoods, Schools and Body Weight. Findings from Community Interventions for Health 2009. New Haven, Connecticut: Community Alliance for Research and Engagement at the Yale School of Public Health. Manuscript under review for publication.