

In the past 25 years, the prevalence of overweight and obese children quadrupled, increasing from roughly four to sixteen percent (National Center for Health Statistics 2004). In line with the recommendations of the American Obesity Association, the term “obesity” is defined here as having a body mass index (BMI) at or exceeding the 95th percentile within age- and gender-specific groupings, and “overweight” as between the 85th and 95th percentiles. Although the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) discourage the application of the term “obesity” to children, the term “overweight” does not adequately convey the medical seriousness of having a BMI at or above the 95th percentile (Koplan, Liverman and Kraak 2004). Even in children, obesity has been linked to a number of health problems including hypertension, elevated blood pressure, and diabetes (Freedman et al. 2001; Dietz and Robinson 1998; Ogden et al 2002). The increases in the percentage of overweight children thus foreshadow an alarming public health crisis that warrants the attention of researchers and policy makers.

Our proposed research focuses on the prevalence and determinants of overweight and obesity among young children of immigrants. The health and well-being of children of immigrants is of great policy significance due to the tremendous size and growth of this population. Currently, one in five U.S. children is a child of an immigrant, and minority and poor children, many of whom are the children of immigrants, are at especially high risk of becoming overweight. For example, 27 percent of boys and 20 percent of girls ages 6-11 of Mexican decent were overweight in 1999-00, compared with 12 percent of non-Hispanic white boys and girls (National Center for Health Statistics 2004).

One contribution of our research is that it will explore the relationship between acculturation and children’s BMI. The high and growing levels of obesity among Hispanic and Asian children are often attributed to acculturation or “Americanization,” a process involving exposure to U.S. advertising, American youth culture, and school environments. In

addition to having relevance of the health and well-being of children of immigrants, research on acculturation focuses attention on the harmful effects of the U.S. environment on the health of *all* children, immigrant or native. However, prior work on the linkage between acculturation and obesity has yielded inconsistent results; a problem we argue derives from a failure to take into account the persistent socioeconomic disadvantages many children of immigrants face. By incorporating sociological theories and research on immigrant incorporation, we will bring fresh perspectives to the health literature on the relationship between acculturation and BMI. Rather than treating acculturation as a single hegemonic process, we focus on identifying the social and economic contexts in which acculturation leads to obesity as well as the contexts in which acculturation leads to healthier outcomes.

Another contribution of our research is that it will increase knowledge about the health and well-being of children in middle-childhood. Although obesity among adolescent immigrant children has been examined in prior research (Gordon-Larson et al. 2003; Popkin and Udry 1998), very little attention has been paid to young children of immigrants. This represents a serious research gap because the dietary and physical activity patterns of young children are more mutable than among adults or adolescents. By examining the determinants of BMI in young children in kindergarten, our research will focus on a population in which obesity poses a serious risk yet remains highly treatable.

To explore the prevalence and determinants of obesity among children of immigrants, we will rely on data obtained from the kindergarten cohort of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey (ECLS-K). The research has four specific goals: The first is to explore with descriptive statistics the prevalence of overweight and obesity as well as the risk factors associated with overweight and obesity (such as physical inactivity, irregular meals, constraints on free play, TV) among children of immigrants and children of natives broken down by a variety of social and demographic characteristics. The second goal is to explore

the relationship between acculturation and children's BMI, and examine how this relationship varies by parental socioeconomic status (SES). The third goal is to explore how the social and instructional contexts of the schools attended by children of immigrants affect BMI, and examine how school contexts condition the relationship between acculturation and BMI. The fourth goal is to explore the dual and potentially interacting influences of parental SES and school contexts on children's BMI.