



Poverty and Obesity in America

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What causes obesity in America? There are common misconceptions about obesity; many assume it is caused by choosing food that isn't healthy for you. While that might be one cause, poverty is also a large component to obesity in the United States. There are many reasons why obesity and poverty are linked; the high price of healthy food, limited government subsidies to farms, and the lack of government programs to provide quality food to those in need make staying at a healthy weight difficult.

Have you noticed that less perishable foods like canned goods, chips, and cookies are cheaper than healthy, fresh foods such as vegetables and fruit? This is one of the main reasons the obesity rate in the United States is 27.7 percent, according to Gallup data. The same study revealed that 23 percent of Americans who make more than \$90,000 a year are obese, compared with 32 percent of people with an annual income of \$36,000 or less. In other words, poorer Americans have a significantly higher obesity rate. Low-income families are not choosing to buy "junk food"; they eat less-healthy foods out of necessity. High-fat foods dense with energy, like cereals, potatoes, and processed meat products, are more affordable and last longer than fruit, vegetables, and lean meats and fish.

Another issue is that healthy foods like fresh fruit and vegetables often aren't sold in low-income areas. But highly processed foods are easy to find because the government subsidizes the big farms that produce them. According to the Cato Institute, "More than 90 percent of agriculture subsidies go to farmers of five crops ... wheat, corn, soybeans, rice, and cotton." Corn, soybeans, and rice are main ingredients in "junk" foods.

In general, the food the government provides is low quality. Public schools in the United States offer breakfasts and lunches at a low price – or for free – to those who qualify. But according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a typical school lunch far exceeds the recommended 500 milligrams of sodium; some districts serve lunches with more than 1,000 milligrams. According to a study by *Good* magazine, U.S. prisoners are being fed better than students in public schools; inmate and student meals contain approximately the same amount of calories, but inmates are offered more fruits and vegetables. Studies even found that public schools are serving meat that falls short of the safety standards of many fast-food restaurants. The USDA tests McDonald's and Burger King's ground beef five to ten times more frequently than beef in schools. It's astounding to think that some children receive all their meals from public schools, considering how unhealthy it is. Childhood obesity is an epidemic in this country, and providing higher-quality food in public schools would help address this problem and improve children's health.

Some people believe that the government shouldn't be responsible for providing food to its

citizens, and that if people need help, they should go to nonprofit community agencies such as food banks and churches. But you don't see many nonprofit agencies handing out fresh fruit and vegetables either. Mainly they provide non-perishable food items, or foods that do not spoil quickly, which aren't healthy.

Obesity has both immediate and long-term effects on health and well-being. It can lead to heart disease, stroke, diabetes, and certain types of cancer – all leading causes of death. To combat obesity, we need to pay attention to the underlying issues, one of which is poverty.

Although the United States is the nation with the largest economy, it has more poverty than most countries with similar living standards, and its programs to help those in need are not as advanced. The minimum wage is too low to feed a family a healthy diet. We need to provide the resources for everyone in the country to eat well, by raising the minimum wage, having more government assistance programs, and making it easier and cheaper to buy healthy foods. Good food is something that everyone deserves.