



MEDIA RELEASE

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STUDY FINDS POOR NEIGHBOURHOODS MAY PROMOTE OBESITY

The local environment is having a powerful influence on body weight in Melbourne with women and men in disadvantaged areas weighing about 3kg more than those living in rich areas.

A University of Melbourne study of 4913 men and women across Melbourne's high, medium and low income areas has found significant variations in body mass index (BMI) between areas. BMI is a widely used tool for measuring the healthy weight range in adults and children. The link between low socio economic position (SEP) and high rates of overweight and obesity is well known. But this is one of the largest Australian studies to pinpoint the importance of local area as an influence on body weight, as it has probed the quality of the local environment, physical activity opportunities and attitudes and residents' access to healthy food options.

"To date researchers have emphasized that people with lower income and lower education may be more likely to be overweight or obese but what this study shows is that living in poorer areas could be a more important factor than a person's individual socioeconomic characteristics," said Tania King, co-ordinator of the Victorian Neighbourhood Lifestyle Environment (VicLANES) Study.

"We found that a woman who was 1.65m tall who weighed 65kg would, if she lived in one of the most disadvantaged parts of Melbourne, be 3kg heavier than if she lived in one of the least disadvantaged areas. Likewise, a man who is 1.75m tall, weighing 75kg would be almost 3kg heavier if he lived in one of the most disadvantaged areas of Melbourne, compared with a man living in the least disadvantaged areas."

Using World Health Organisation definitions of overweight (BMI of 25 kg/m²) and obese BMI of 30kg/m²) the study found 55% of men and 40% of women were overweight or obese. (BMI is calculated as weight in kilograms divided by height in metres squared.)

VicLANES is funded by VicHealth (Victorian Health Promotion Foundation). Researchers collected data from 50 census collection districts across 20 local government areas in inner Melbourne. The next stage of data analysis will look at which characteristics of the local environment promote physical activity and people's access to, and the price of healthy and non-healthy food. A low SES area is defined by having a high number of households with an income of under \$400 a week.

Associate Professor Anne Kavanagh, a University of Melbourne chief investigator on VicLanes, said the high number take-away food outlets in low socio-economic areas could be to blame for the high obesity rates.

"Early findings from this study have shown a greater number of take-away food outlets in low SES areas and another Melbourne study has shown that people in low socio-economic areas have 2.5 times the exposure to fast food outlets," she said.

"There are also likely to be other factors such as the characteristics of areas that are important for physical activity. We have already shown that living in low socio-economic areas is associated with lower levels of physical activity. What we need to address now is why this is the case.

"We know that parts of Melbourne have much higher rates of certain diseases and death rates from cardiac disease. It is possible that some of these differences can be explained by our findings."

Dr Rob Moodie, CEO of VicHealth agrees individual behaviour is influenced by environmental and other factors. "Turning off the TV is a good start, but if you don't have a park or a playground within walking distance or a footpath to get you there, you are less likely to get off the couch," he said.

The study is published in the International Journal of Obesity (King, T. Weight and place; a multilevel cross sectional survey of area-level disadvantage and overweight/obesity in Australia, published online Dec 6, 2005. doi: 10.1038/sj.ijo.0803176)

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