

Obese neighborhoods: Disparities in access to food
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There is growing evidence that the national obesity epidemic is not a failure of biological systems - but a socio-economic phenomenon. Disparities in physical and financial access to healthy diets may help explain why higher obesity rates are observed among food-insecure, lower-income, and some minority groups. Higher rates of obesity and type 2 diabetes are linked to indices of both individual and neighborhood deprivation. However, few studies have mapped the geographic distribution of obesity rates by neighborhoods, ZIP code areas, or census tracts. There are limited data on the geographic and economic disparities in retail food access, or on the impact of SEP variables on diet quality, dietary energy density, and energy cost. Obesity researchers have yet to take full advantage of the new GIS-based approaches to the study of the food environment. We need a new trans-disciplinary approach to the obesity epidemic, drawing on new methodologies and expertise from nutrition, epidemiology, economics, geography, transportation, public health policy and urban design.

Obesity rates in the US have been rising steadily for all ages, races, education, and income levels. However, purely biomedical approaches to obesity research do not fully explain the impact of SEP variables on obesity rates. The hypothesis that the obesity epidemic has roots in the social and physical environment deserves more research attention. One way to address this issue is to map the distribution of obesity rates at a finer geographic scale and link them to area-based measures of poverty and wealth. Mapping obesity rates by geographic location will allow for a finer analysis of both physical and financial access to foods. A spatial atlas of obesity and diabetes will provide valuable data for policymakers, allowing for environmental solutions to the obesity epidemic.