

CHILDHOOD OBESITY AND THE IMPACT OF CUTS TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT SPENDING ON SURE START CHILDREN'S CENTRES

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Since 2010, large cuts to English local authority budgets have forced many councils to reduce spending on Sure Start children's centres, which deliver a wide range of services to support parents and young children.

These spending cuts may have influenced childhood overweight and obesity, contributing to the observed widening of the obesity gap between least and most deprived children over recent years, and reversing improving trends seen in some areas prior to 2010.

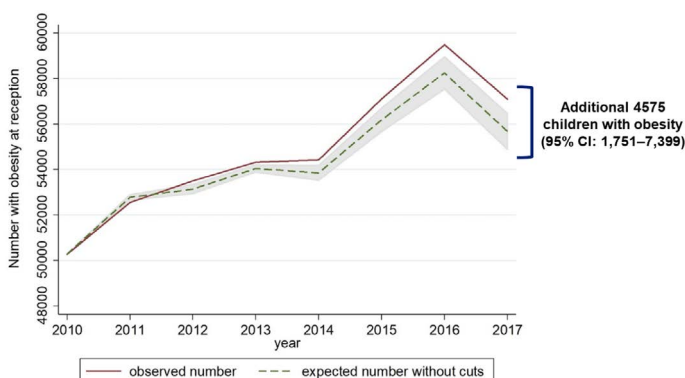
Previous studies evaluating effects of Sure Start on various child health and development outcomes focussed on the rollout and scale-up of the programme, and were not designed to investigate the impact of cuts to spending on these services under the recent austerity programme.

We investigated whether childhood obesity prevalence has increased more in those areas of England that experienced greater cuts to spending on Sure Start.

KEY FINDINGS

- Cuts to Sure Start spending after 2010 were associated with increased prevalence of obesity at school reception (age 4-5 years)
- The more a local authority cut Sure Start spending, the greater the increase in the prevalence of childhood obesity in that area
- We estimate that an additional 4,575 children were living with obesity at the start of school (95% CI: 1,751–7,399) compared with the expected number if spending had remained at 2010 levels
- The impact of spending cuts on obesity appears to have been greater in areas that had been making progress in reducing childhood obesity prior to 2010
- Reinvesting in Sure Start children's centres may be one way to address some of the root causes of childhood obesity and inequalities in obesity

Observed number of 4-5 year olds with obesity vs number expected in the absence of Sure Start spending cuts



“The reductions in number and change in approach of Sure Start and Children's Centres are likely to have had a significant impact on inequalities in health and other outcomes”.

MICHAEL MARMOT,
Health Equity in England:
The Marmot Review 10 years on

RELEVANCE FOR LIVERPOOL'S CHILDREN

Although Liverpool City Council has so far managed to keep most of its children's centres open, **Sure Start and Early Years spending has been cut by about two-thirds since 2010**, meaning substantial cuts to the breadth and depth of services available to young children and their parents in Liverpool.

The results of our England-wide study suggest these cuts to spending in Liverpool are likely to have contributed to more young children becoming obese than if spending had been maintained.

The benefits of Sure Start extend beyond childhood obesity. Several studies have linked children's centres to a range of positive health and development outcomes.

To restore Sure Start funding in Liverpool to 2010 levels would cost about £10m per year.

Helping to provide children with a good start in life must be a priority for any Child Friendly City.

The research evidence from our study and others suggests that finding a way to reinvest in Sure Start could make an important contribution to a good start in life for Liverpool's children.

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POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Across England, cuts to spending on Sure Start services may have led to increased levels of childhood obesity
- Restoring investment in Sure Start services would have a range of benefits for Liverpool's children, and these benefits are likely to include limiting increases in childhood obesity prevalence
- Tackling childhood obesity, and inequalities in childhood obesity, is important for Liverpool and needs to involve a multi-faceted, whole-system approach. Children's Centres can play a role in that

FURTHER INFORMATION

Mason et al (2021) Impact of cuts to local government spending on Sure Start Children's Centres on childhood obesity in England: a longitudinal ecological study. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 75: 860-866.

Full paper available online: bit.ly/30F6cXF

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ABOUT LIVERPOOL'S CHILD FRIENDLY CITY PROGRAMME

- > **Liverpool City Council's Child Friendly City plans**
- > **Email: cfc@liverpool.gov.uk**
- > **UNICEF Child Friendly City initiative**
- > **Email: cfc@unicef.org.uk**
- > **Liverpool Health Partners CFC page**