

IS WALKING TO SCHOOL ENOUGH TO PREVENT CHILDHOOD OBESITY?

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

In the UK, roughly 30% of children are overweight or obese. Obesity rates are much higher among children living in deprived neighbourhoods.

In England, there is a clear trend: the wealthier a child’s family is, the more likely the child is to be a healthy weight. And those who are a healthy weight during childhood are much more likely to be a healthy weight in adolescence.

One of the UK government’s goals in the Childhood Obesity Plan is to increase the number of children who walk to school. Walking is certainly healthy, but is it enough to combat childhood obesity? Our latest studies suggest it isn’t.

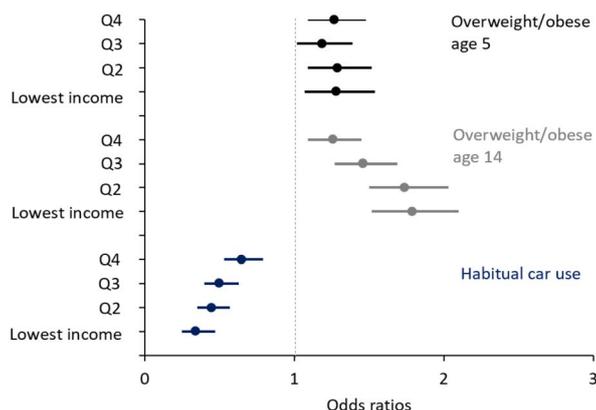
Study 1. Data were from 194 Liverpool children aged 9-10 years.

Study 2. Data were from 7262 11-year-old English children who participated in sweep five of the UK Millennium Cohort Study.

Study 3. Data were from sweep three, four, five and six of the UK Millennium Cohort Study. Subjects were 8494 UK children. Data were collected at age 5, 7, 11 and 14 years.

KEY FINDINGS

- Our Liverpool research found that children who lived in more deprived neighbourhoods were most likely to walk/cycle to school and most likely to have overweight/obesity.
- Across England, children living in the most deprived neighbourhoods were more likely to have overweight/obesity, walk/cycle to school, and participate in other unhealthy behaviours compared to children living in less deprived neighbourhoods.
- A steep income gradient in habitual car use for school journeys exists in the UK. The wealthier a child’s family is, the more likely the child is to be driven to school.
- Children living in the highest income families at age 5 were least likely to have overweight/obesity at age 5 & 14 years.
- Habitual car use for school journeys between age 5 & 14 years was not associated with overweight/obesity at age 14 years.



Study 3. Adjusted odds ratios for overweight obesity at age 5 and 14 years and habitual car use for school journeys between age 5 and 14 years by family income quantile. Reference category = highest family income quantile



RELEVANCE FOR LIVERPOOL'S CHILDREN

The take home message here is not that walking to school leads to childhood obesity, but that living in a poor neighbourhood and being poor does.

Combating childhood obesity in Liverpool needs more than simply getting children to walk to school more often. That's because many factors influence a child's weight, including economic and environmental factors that affect physical activity and diet.

The government's Childhood Obesity Plan recognises that the environment needs to change, but little is being done at a policy level to see this through. Children face diminishing opportunities to take part in active leisure as a result of cuts in public funding. **Public swimming and leisure centres**, which were once free for all children, face closure. Cuts to maintenance budgets and increased urbanisation place **public parks and green spaces** under threat, too.

The food environment isn't becoming any more supportive of healthy eating either. **Fast-food outlets** continue to be built in the poorest neighbourhoods and next to schools as **healthy food prices rise**, and **unhealthy foods** become cheaper and more accessible.

This is at a time when **child poverty** is rising in the UK and the poorest families in society are struggling to make ends meet due to rising living costs, low wages and cuts to welfare benefits. **We're walking backwards not forwards.**



"Walking to school is not the silver bullet to tackling childhood obesity".

Research has shown that deprived neighbourhoods have the fewest parks and green spaces, and shops selling healthy food.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Children have a right to live in a healthy environment. Combating childhood obesity and its inequalities will only be achieved when the neighbourhoods children live in support physical activity and healthy eating.
- We need local policies that ensure there's a level playing field in terms of the accessibility and pricing of healthy food and active leisure opportunities. It should come as no surprise that childhood obesity is highest and increasing at the fastest rate in the most deprived neighbourhoods.
- Environmental impacts of car use for school journeys include increased traffic congestion around schools, noise pollution and carbon emissions leading to greater exposure to pollutants. We need local policies to reduce car dependency for school journeys.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

Study 1. Fitness, fatness and active school commuting among Liverpool school children

Study 2. To what extent do unhealthy behaviour indicators explain the neighbourhood deprivation gradient in overweight among 11-year-old English children?

Study 3. Family income matters! Tracking of habitual car use for school journeys and associations with overweight/ obesity in UK youth

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ABOUT LIVERPOOL'S CHILD FRIENDLY CITY PROGRAMME

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- > [Email: cfc@liverpool.gov.uk](mailto:cfc@liverpool.gov.uk)
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