Sarah Kuil, Student Participant

Ogden High School, IA

Tipping the Scales: Obesity Among the Poverty Stricken in America

Obesity in America is a topic which has been of great interest to people around the world for many years. With the number of obese adults in America rising to 59 million in 2002, scientists are still struggling to determine the causes of obesity. In this paper, I will address some of the factors that lead to obesity, particularly, poverty, and how those factors relate to the United States of America. I believe that there is a direct relationship between income and waist size. I understand that there are exceptions to all theories, but in this paper I will explore the effect poverty has on the weight of American families, specifically availability of fresh foods, and money for workout plans. *"There's not a paradox, actually," Sanford, director of the Memphis Food Bank, said. "Lack of money to buy nutritious foods is one of the causes of obesity."* Obesity can be directly related to many things such as genetics, predisposition, and family life. I believe that it can also be related to poverty and will attempt to prove my theory in this paper.

The typical American family in the scenario I'm about to discuss consists of a mom, dad, and usually two or three children. The family would probably live in a rural area of the United States, possibly in the Southern region. Both parents would hold low-income jobs without benefits, and their children would attend public schools. They would barely earn enough money to make ends meet every month. With a lower income, they are forced to shop in a discount store, and even still cannot afford to buy fresh fruits and vegetables, because they are more expensive. Processed, canned, and frozen foods are much more affordable and more convenient. Typically, said family wouldn't be educated. The parents probably never went to college and the children likely struggle in school. They cannot afford to buy things like bicycles for their children, and certainly can't afford to go to a gym, so physical activity often is limited. The lack of physical activity combined with the poor quality of food leads to obesity. This trend is passed from parent to child, and on again with the children's children. Most likely, the children of this family will grow up overweight and stay that way.

Poverty can greatly affect the way people eat, and not just in the way you normally think. A large number of the poor in America are actually obese, not underweight. Lack of a good income means that the family cannot afford to buy healthy foods. And that can make a huge impact when dealing with weight. For example, a single serving of skim milk has 90 calories, and the gallon costs around four dollars. A can of pop sometimes contains 200 calories, and a twelve pack can cost two dollars. So one's healthier, but the other is more affordable. People with lower incomes are more likely to go for the cheaper, not healthier, foods. Also, junk food contains empty calories. Empty calories are ones that aren't necessary for your body to function properly. Healthy foods contain calories needed for energy, and contain "good carbohydrates", which are actually beneficial to your diet. The more affordable junk food, which can be bought in bulk, contains preservatives to make them stay fresh longer and lots of empty calories. Many people living in poverty aren't thinking about empty calories and "good or bad" carbohydrates. They're thinking about how they're going to get food on the table, and keep everyone from being hungry. According to an article associated with the Food Research and Action Center, "*In order to cope with limited money for food and to stave off hunger, families try to maximize caloric intake for each dollar spent, which can lead to over consumption of calories and a less healthful diet.*" There is also a link between education and income that can directly affect people's diets.

The average American with a high school education earns about $20,968, whereas a high school dropout earns only $10,838. That's a big difference. And many people who are living in poverty do not

have a high school diploma. Without one, it's hard to get a good job. Not only do people without diplomas live in poverty, often they live in ignorance. They've never been taught about proper nutrition or exercise habits. That can lead to obesity as well. So not only can they not afford healthy food, but many poor people wouldn't know what to buy if they could afford it.

We live in a society today that favors convenience over just about everything else. We want things faster, better, tastier, and we want them now. There are many psychological problems that are associated with poverty. For teens that live in poverty, it's shame. They want to fit in at school, and often times, that means wearing the right clothes and buying all the expensive stuff. These teenagers cannot do that, so many are depressed and compensate with food. Also, when they go to school, they want to be like everyone else, so they buy sodas and junk food at school. Adults also use food as comfort. If there are bills to pay, but no money to pay them with, many people turn to food to get away from the stress of it all. Poor people can't go on vacation to get away from it all, so they have to find other ways.

In American society today, people are constantly bombarded with advertisements telling you about the new soft drink with, "zero carbs", and the new snack cookie that all the celebrities are eating. It's hard to get away from all the advertising. A lot of companies actually focus on impoverished areas because they know that more than likely, the poor will be less educated than the rich, and therefore will be more easily manipulated into buying any new craze the industry can come up with.

Combining the low income, lack of education, ignorance to healthy eating and exercising, and advertisements constantly being shoved in people's faces, not to mention the pressure from society to succeed and fit in, it's pretty much impossible for poor people to escape the craziness and lead a healthy life. That being said, there are things that people can do to fight back against all the odds.

Approximately 32.9 million Americans today are living in poverty. That's a lot of people. And that means that not only are there poor people in the rural Southern region of the country, but also in the suburbs of Iowa, and in the urban areas of Washington D.C. and New York City. This means that in order to lower the number of obese people to less than half the population of the United States, everyone is going to have to help out. A thirty five year old man, weighing 180 pounds who is 6 feet tall should consume around 2200 calories a day. Most American men today consume twice that amount. To lose a pound, you must burn off 3500 calories more than you take in. So in order to lose weight, you must lower the caloric intake and increase physical activity. This is hard to do in our society today. There seems to be a drive-thru window for just about every convenience you could possibly need.

So why get out of your car when you don't have to? Because just the sheer act of getting out of the car to walk into the fast food restaurant, or the pharmacy, or the bank, could make a huge impact on your health both now and in the future. Walking is an awesome form of exercise, so even if it's only a difference of 500 feet, it's worth it. You also might be asking yourself, "If people are poor, how can they afford to go to fast food restaurants?" Well, almost all fast food restaurants today offer dollar menus and/or value meals. To someone who is low on cash, this seems like a great deal. You get a lot of food for a little money. But then we come back to the same problem of empty calories. The fast food on the dollar menu is very unhealthy. So people do get a lot of food, but it's not food that is good for them, and may harm them more in the end, then not having any food at all.

Americans today just aren't motivated to exercise. "Why do any more work than you absolutely have to?" This seems to be the attitude of a lot of people in the U.S. today. But that could be an unfair assumption. True, there are some overweight people that are just plain lazy, but then you also have to take into consideration the issue of genetics and lack of availability when it comes to healthy food. There are many different issues affecting obesity. Poverty is just one of them. So in order to fix this problem, there are many things the country as a whole can do.

One thing would be to get rid of generalizations and prejudice against both the poor and obese in the United States. You can't just assume that people are fat because they're lazy. The poor of America can't afford the healthy foods they need. According to USA Today's Nanci Hellmich, research has shown that, *"The Atkins diet would cost about one hundred dollars a week if you make all the meals at home, and the South Beach diet would cost almost ninety dollars a week."* That's a lot of money for people to spend on a diet. Exercising is another problem. It's a proven fact that people tend to have more success losing weight and keeping it off, when they use a personal trainer. However, if you are one of the thousands of people in America who can't afford it, you won't get those benefits.

Grocers could strive to make healthy foods more readily available at a more reasonable price. This would help all people trying to lose weight. The government could offer free programs teaching obese people, rich and poor alike, how to properly prepare foods, and what a good diet should consist of. Gyms could be open that would be funded by the government, so they would be available to those who couldn't afford to pay to go to a regular gym.

I think the only way we're going to break the cycle of poverty and obesity in America is to start with the young children of our country. Start educating them in kindergarten about what foods they should eat, and which ones they should avoid. Give them ways to remember things, like tell them which foods are "anytime foods", and which are "sometimes foods". Physical education programs should tailor more towards keeping kids in shape, rather than playing competitive sports that some kids don't even get to participate in. If you're in a class full of soccer players, and you play soccer in P.E., chances are, you won't get the ball very much.

I think our society as a whole needs to focus more on educating people about the necessity of a healthy lifestyle. Referring back to the model family I used earlier in this paper, here's a plan that I would suggest for my family living in the South.

The parents need to be educated on what foods they should buy for their children, and how to prepare them. True, diets do cost a lot of money, but there are some substitutes you can use for certain foods in the diet and still get a benefit from it. Children should be encouraged to play outside, instead of inside watching television and playing video games. If they cannot afford to go to a gym, take nightly walks together as a family. Go out for ice cream once a month, but other than that, don't eat out. Limit snacks to one per day, and watch portion size for meals.

The national government needs to be involved in the issue of obesity and poverty. Government programs can be started targeting the poor living in our country. Food stamps are one that's already in effect. Maybe some of the food stamps could be used for healthy foods. Whether that means giving people more food stamps, or lowering the prices of healthy foods for people paying with food stamps, something needs to be done about this. Federally funded programs exist all over the United States. One could be made that would prepare meals for families that are really in need. Maybe farmers need to not charge so much for their produce. Maybe we should start charging double for foods rich in carbohydrates and low in nutrients. I think more awareness needs to be raised about the risks and effects that eating poorly can have on people.

I believe that the Food and Drug Administration could play a big role in fixing the problem of obesity in America, not only among the poor, but all the obese people in America. By more strictly regulating the quality of food, by limiting the use of preservatives, and by putting their foot down when it comes to approving new more convenient preservative filled foods, the FDA could greatly improve the national situation.

Obesity is not only a problem in America, it's a problem worldwide. To fix it, we're all going to have to work together as one giant nation of people concerned about the state of the world we live in. To get results, we need to raise awareness to the issue. If more jobs aren't available, people will not be able to afford the foods they need to eat to be healthy. Education needs to be pushed early on about healthy eating and exercising habits. Also, teachers should strive to make sure that every student gets a high school diploma, because with the knowledge that comes with a diploma, students also get the benefit of higher paying jobs with benefits.

There are many things that the national and state governments can do to help rectify this problem, but I think that the solution starts at home. If the individual does not want to lose weight, or change their lifestyle, no amounts of federal programs or healthy foods are going to change their minds. I think the focus of our country needs to shift back to exercising and leading a good life. Right now, everyone's focused on convenience and availability. "How fast can I get what I want, how cheaply can I get it, and how easily?" Our attitude as a country needs to change before we as a society can begin to grow, or in the case of obesity, shrink, to what we were originally living for. In conclusion, I believe that obesity is a national crisis in the United States today, and I believe that many different things are responsible for it. Some of these things are changeable, but some are not. Poverty is one of those that can be changed. To improve the situation, we either need to offer more jobs for the poor, make healthy food more affordable for them, or educate children while they're young and prevent poverty from happening at all.

In our society there will always be an upper and lower class, but hopefully we can close the gap enough so that everyone has enough food to eat and a warm place to sleep. Until we achieve that, I still consider us to be a developing country. Poverty and obesity are both very serious problems when they are separate. When you put them together, they're even more serious. They actually become potentially life-threatening problems. We, society as a whole, need to work together to raise awareness, and to come up with a solution that will work for the poverty-stricken in America.

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