

Childhood Obesity in the UK: Is Fast Food a Factor?

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Abstract

The incidence of childhood obesity in the UK is rising steadily and with its adverse health consequences it constitutes one of the biggest challenges for public health. Several recent papers from the US claim to have identified a causal link between the proximity of a fast food outlet to a child's school on childhood obesity. This paper examines if there is any confirming evidence of this link in the UK. As contextual evidence three cohorts are analysed to track the changes in childhood obesity over the period 1962-1986 by examining the Body Mass Index (BMI) of three birth cohorts, born in 1946, 1958 and 1970. The first cohort grew up in a period of food rationing up to 1954 and the last grew up in an era of rapid fast food outlet expansion - whilst the 1970 cohort can be thought of as a 'control group' with no treatment. These cohorts are used to track the broad changes in BMI over the post war period. The paper examines the relationship between childhood obesity and the proximity to fast food restaurants to a child's home, in some detail for the 10 and 16 year old children from the British Cohort Survey of 1970. Since we also know the precise location and date of opening of each fast food outlet - unlike other papers - we can measure the exposure to the fast food treatment with precision. The results of our investigation suggest that there is no causal impact of fast food on childhood obesity. This finding poses a serious threat to conventional wisdom and we explore possible explanations for this finding and its consequences and policy implications.

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