



A critique of the ‘Childhood Obesity: a plan for action’ English national policy using a social determinants of health perspective.

Naomi Griffin ¹, Sophie Phillips ¹, Frances Hillier-Brown ¹, Jonathan Wistow ¹, Hannah Fairbrother ², Eleanor Holding ², Katie Powell ², and Carolyn Summerbell ¹

About the research

Childhood obesity has been identified as a public health priority in high income countries globally. In response, countries have developed national and local policies, and have implemented numerous public health interventions in an attempt to ‘tackle’ the problem.

There is a well known relationship between social disadvantage and poor health. This relationship is also present for prevalence of childhood obesity (based on body mass index (BMI) data). There is a much higher prevalence of obesity in children from areas of high socio-economic disadvantage, and the gap between the most and least deprived is growing.

In England, the UK government published the policy ‘Childhood Obesity: a plan for action’ in two chapters (2016, 2018), and the preliminary Chapter 3 was published for consultation in 2019 (hereon collectively named ‘*The Policy*’). The stated policy aims were to reduce the prevalence of childhood obesity in England, addressing disparities in health by reducing the gap (approximately two-fold) in childhood obesity between those from the most and least deprived areas.

This research involved analysing *The Policy* using a social determinants of health perspective. Here we present some of the key findings and policy implications from our analysis.

“Stigmatising policy narratives can detract from structural factors within the [social determinants of health] which account for many adverse health outcomes and health inequalities that have been linked to obesity..., which is particularly concerning in the context of policy focussed on children.”

Griffin et al. 2021

Policy implications

Policy proposals should:

- Recognise the complex and contested nature of obesity as measured by BMI.
- Engage with the evidence base which illustrates the damaging effects of generalising links between weight status and health.
- Focus on structural inequalities and social determinants of health, including food security, poverty and the environment.
- Demonstrate how they will tackle inequality and ensure that what is proposed will not widen inequality through effective engagement with social determinants of health.

Barriers to healthy eating and physical activity, particularly those most impacted by health inequalities, regardless of weight, must be removed for healthier outcomes for all.



1- Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health, UK, 2- School of Health and Related Research, SchARR, University of Sheffield, UK.



Key findings

- Our review found that the overall problem framing of 'obesity' in *The Policy* risks reducing the important public health aims to encourage healthy diets and increase opportunities for physical activity for children (and the physical and mental health benefits of both) to weight management, to damaging effect.
- Our review critiques the individualising of responsibility to respond to systemic factors and structural inequalities, warning of the potential to perpetuate stigmatising narratives. The damaging effects of stigma can not be overlooked, recognising the barriers caused by stigma in reducing the opportunities for health promoting behaviours, to positive health outcomes, and to timely and appropriate treatment of health problems.
- We propose an alternative conceptualisation that the obesity rates shown by the social gradient in BMI trends at a population level are illustrative of inequality. Therefore, rather than 'obesity' being the 'problem', we propose that the 'problem' to be addressed is inequality.
- As the public health priority of childhood obesity continues to develop and implementation of *The Policy* continues to unfold, policy makers must seriously consider the damaging effects of the wider social determinants of health central to their proposals, to offer the greatest potential to promote better child health and reduce inequalities found in obesity measures.

Further information

Further information on this project can be found [here](#). This research has been published as a paper which can be found at: [Griffin, N., Phillips, S.M., Hillier-Brown, F. et al. A critique of the English national policy from a social determinants of health perspective using a realist and problem representation approach: the 'Childhood Obesity: a plan for action' \(2016, 2018, 2019\).](#)

Contact the researchers

For more information about the work presented here, contact [Dr Naomi Griffin](#)
Email: naomi.c.griffin@durham.ac.uk

About the School

The NIHR School for Public Health Research is a partnership between the Universities of Sheffield; Bristol; Cambridge; Imperial; and University College London; The London School for Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM); LiLaC – a collaboration between the Universities of Liverpool and Lancaster; and Fuse - The Centre for Translational Research in Public Health a collaboration between Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside Universities.

NIHR School for Public Health Research

Website: sphr.nihr.ac.uk

Twitter: [@NIHRSPHR](https://twitter.com/NIHRSPHR)

Email: sphr@ncl.ac.uk

Telephone: +44 (0)191 208 3829



This project is funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) School for Public Health Research (Grant Reference Number PD-SPH-2015-10025). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.