

# The prevalence of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents aged 5 to 19.

Name: Victoria Ruan

Class: ZEL

Date: 21 June, 2018

Project: HTC Write Up

Teacher: Ms. Cullen and Mr. Smart

## **Summary:**

Obesity refers to the condition in which excess body fat has accumulated to the extent that it may negatively affect health. People are considered obese when their body mass index (BMI), measured by dividing a person's weight by the square of the person's height, is over 30 kg/m<sup>2</sup>. According to World Health Organization, the number of obese children and adolescents aged five to 19 years worldwide has risen tenfold in the past four decades (WHO). If current trends continue, more children and adolescents will be obese than moderately or severely underweight by 2022. Obesity has become an epidemic all over the world.

## **Causes and Consequences:**

Obesity is caused by an increased intake of energy-dense foods that are high in fat, and an increase in physical inactivity due to the increasingly sedentary lifestyle. However, obesity is not simply a matter of children and parents with too little willpower to stop eating or being too lazy to be active. There are also other hidden factors. One of the most prominent factors is the socioeconomic status (SES). Given the definition provided by American Psychological Association, SES is the social standing of an individual or group, which is often measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation. The obesity rates in children and adolescents have “soared globally”, and continue to do so in low-income countries (Ezzatim, Majid). Since nutritious foods are too expensive, poor families in the low SES have to choose cheap but unhealthy food. The other crucial cause is the surrounding environment. Adolescents are exposed to electronic devices and aggressive junk food advertisements. Therefore, the majority of teenagers are easily addicted to the unhealthy habits, which lift up the probability of obesity.

Childhood obesity leads to severe physical suffering as well as mental problems. Obese children run a greater risk of cardiovascular diseases, type II diabetes and cancers (Encyclopedia

Britannica). In addition to the increased future risks, obese children always experience breathing difficulties, hypertension, and fractures (Wells, Nancy M.). Meanwhile, obesity also contributes to a mental health crisis. Close to 25 percent of obese Americans have been diagnosed with depression (Fenimore, Pia). Due to their unpopular appearances, obese children are subjected to fat-shaming. Fat-shaming is the act of telling someone they are worthless, useless, lazy, or disgusting because they are overweight. Fat-shaming destructs overweight adolescents' self-esteem, and that induces a more serious overeating, depression, inflammation and in stress hormone levels. Thus, a vicious circle is created. Overweight and obese adolescents 10 to 17 years old have a 74% chance of becoming an overweight adult (National Business Group on Health, Institute on Innovation in Workforce well-being).

### **Evidence:**

Over 340 million children and adolescents aged 5-19 were overweight or obese in 2016 (WHO).

The prevalence of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents aged 5-19 has risen dramatically from just 4% in 1975 to just over 18% in 2016. The rise has occurred similarly among both boys and girls: in 2016 18% of girls and 19% of boys were overweight (WHO).

### **Continuity and Change:**

In economic rich countries, like the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, the percentage of the obese population continues to grow. Nevertheless, the increase rate has plateaued. In contrary, many low-income countries have reached the high obesity percentage. For example, the obesity percentage of African countries like Libya and Algeria have approached to United States', which is about 33.7% (Renew Bariatrics). The obesity crisis begins among the wealthier and

spreads to poorer countries. In high-income countries, a strong inverse correlation emerges between wealth and obesity. In the UK, obesity levels are beginning to decline in children from wealthy backgrounds and are now well below those in deprived families (Cookson, Clive).

## **Ethical Judgment:**

Is it justified to target junk food marketing to kids?

Each year, the world's food and beverage companies spend billions on marketing and advertising their products to children and teenagers (Ramrayka, Liza). The overwhelming majority of these products are high in calories, added sugar, saturated fat, and sodium. Even though marketing is essential for business, it is not justified to choose kids as the target of the junk food. Provided the research by American Psychological Association, children are not skeptical and easily influenced by the appealing advertisements, no matter how smart or sophisticated they may appear (Wilcox, Brian). The food companies make use of youngsters' immaturity, so the children are at the mercy of their intention. Utilization of advertisement itself is justified, but using advertisements to manipulate children's food preference and undermine their health to increase the sales is not. This kind of brainwashing impresses the wrong eating concepts on children. Thus, it is unwarranted to inculcate the unhealthy eating pattern into children's mind through advertisements.

## **Historical Significance:**

The significant rise in obesity rate serves as a wake-up call for many countries. Many governments realize that if they take no actions, the slow-motion disaster will ruin citizens' health eventually. Confronting this health issue, different countries take different actions. Australia and New Zealand use the Health Star Rating system, a front-of-pack labeling system that rates the overall nutritional profile of packaged food along a scale of one-half to five stars. It provides a quick, easy, standard way to compare similar packaged foods: the more stars, the healthier the

choice (Willis, Olivia). In UK, USA, Denmark and many other countries, the governments tax on sugary soft drinks and snacks that high in calories (Pan American Health Organization). In Paraguay, recent years' efforts include a campaign to promote breastfeeding which helps to reduce the risk of childhood obesity, as well as a diabetes law that requires two hours of physical activity per week for children in schools (UNICEF). Due to the efforts different governments made, civilians' obesity rate has slowed down in these countries, according to the 2018 ranking of worldwide obesity report (Renew Bariatrics).

## **Historical Perspectives:**

In ancient times, the earliest depictions of human beings are fabulously fat. A number of the famed Venus figurines, palm-size statuettes carved between 20,000 and 30,000 years ago, depict women with corpulent thighs, buttocks, breasts, and bellies, and estimated body mass indexes well over 30. Since food was extremely scarce at that time, obese people were thought to be given "supreme power" that fought against hungry (Howard, Jacqueline).

In contrary, the early Christians looked scornfully upon the obese, counting gluttony as one of the seven deadly sins (Jammie Gillespie).

In non-Western cultures, fatness often was associated with high status. Dr. Watson of Harvard said that when he began doing fieldwork in Hong Kong in the 1960's, women who were slender would not have been marriageable. Neither would highly muscular young men. Men who were heavily muscled were considered the lowest of laborers because "they were the ones who had to lift backbreaking loads for a living, and their prospects were dim" (Angier, Natalie).

With the rapid development in agriculture, food processing, and labor-saving innovations, food becomes more abundant and more calorie-dense than ever before. As a consequence, thinness turned out to be a symbol of high status, which means they were well educated and learned about how to eat healthily.