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# Investigating the Poverty-Obesity Paradox in Europe

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## Abstract

This paper investigates the effect of income- and wealth-based poverty on the probability of being obese for the elderly in Europe by analysing data drawn from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement (SHARE) and the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing (ELSA). We use early-life economic conditions and regional circumstances as instruments for poverty later in life to account for endogeneity issues. After controlling for a large set of covariates at the individual, household, regional and country level, the results show that poverty significantly increases the probability of being obese and the Body Mass Index (BMI), for men and women. The results show that, accounting for endogeneity with a bivariate probit model, poor individuals are from 10 to 20% points more likely to be obese than non-poor individuals. The effect on BMI ranges from 0.295 points (2.39 kg) to 0.395 points (2.75 kg). These results are robust to a series of checks and suggest that anti-poverty interventions might have positive side effects in terms of reducing food-related health inequalities.

*Keywords:* Obesity, BMI, Poverty, Bivariate Probit, Instrumental Variables

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## 1. Introduction

Poverty is usually associated with a lack of financial resources and the inability to secure food and adequate nutrition, conditions that are likely to produce underweight problems. This is generally what people have in mind when they think about poverty and the effects on nutrition and health. However, this seems to be just one side of the same malnutrition coin in more developed countries. Recently it has been observed that not only hunger but also obesity can be associated with low income. Although the correlation between unhealthy weight and low socio-economic status can be considered another expression of the well-documented health-wealth gradient, there is still no consensus about causality.

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