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The relationship between childhood obesity and food insecurity: Variations and trends in core literature analyses

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Pediatric obesity is a pressing issue in the United States with recent studies estimating that 17.1% of children ages 2 to 19 years are overweight and an additional 16.5% are at risk of overweight. A landmark case study of a young child who experienced bouts of hunger and obesity simultaneously raised the question of whether food insecurity could cause or be associated with childhood obesity. Research that followed this case study has not been successful in reaching a consensus on direct relationship between childhood obesity and food insecurity. The goal of this study is to identify the core literature concerned with the social dimensions of this research question, find the variable dimensions, determine how these variations affect the outcome of each study, and identify areas for future research. To obtain the core literature, searches using the key words obesity, child, childhood, food insecurity, food insufficiency, and hunger were used in the online databases listed as follows: sociological abstracts, social service abstracts, PsycINFO, Academic Search Premiere, CQ Researcher, JSTOR, ERIC and googlescholar.com. In addition, the works cited of each article were examined to find other pertinent literature. Through these methods, twelve core articles were identified. The articles were then typologized based on key dimensions of age, gender, race, ethnicity, and location of the participants. The typologies identified trends in the literature of positive association between food insecurity and obesity in pre-schoolers, teenagers, and girls. Most current research is based on data derived from national longitudinal and cross-sectional studies. Future qualitative and quantitative research needs to include more attention to social interactions such as family dynamics and sociocultural practices. This research would allow physicians to understand challenges food insecure patients are facing and thus be better able to design programs to improve their health.