

## Socioeconomic Status and Obesity<sup>1</sup>

### **Overview:**

- In developed countries, low socioeconomic status is associated with obesity for women.
- The socioeconomic status factors with the largest impact on obesity for women were occupation and education.
- This inverse relationship between socioeconomic status and body size has largely been consistent over time.

### **Study:**

This article provided a comprehensive literature review on the connection between socioeconomic status and obesity, identifying articles from the years 1988–2004. Researchers used the terms “obesity,” “socioeconomic status,” and synonyms to guide their search. They identified 333 published studies that represented 1,914 associations. The review only covered studies that included their statistical results and that focused on adults.

This study was an update to an earlier seminal review of the literature linking socioeconomic status (SES) and obesity from 1989, published by Sobal and Stunkard<sup>2</sup> and covering the period between 1960 through 1980. The authors hypothesized that their results would largely mirror earlier findings, but with decreased differences between developed and developing countries as a result of globalization of information and food markets, modernization, and economic growth.

### **Findings:**

Because this study built on the 1989 Sobal and Stunkard study, a review of the earlier findings is warranted. The earlier study found a consistent inverse association between obesity and socioeconomic status (SES), with poorer people reporting higher levels of obesity. The earlier study also found the opposite occurs in developing countries, where higher levels of obesity were found among those with higher socioeconomic status.

This review found that for women in developed countries, larger body size was associated with low SES. SES indicators with the largest impact included education and occupation. This effect was even more profound in aggregation of studies where body size was self-reported by low SES women. Men from developed countries, however, did not have significant results when comparing low SES and obesity. In comparison to the earlier study, low SES women in developed countries continued to have larger body size, but in less striking terms

### **NVTAC Insights:**

Several components of this review can impact your day to day work with veterans experiencing homelessness who enroll with HVRP, especially if you work with women veterans either through regular HVRP or the specialized HFVWF program. The research shows that popular belief about poverty and obesity (i.e. the belief that poor people are likely thin as a result of their poverty) simply does not translate to American poverty, where lower socioeconomic status is actually more closely connected to obesity. Armed with this knowledge, you can begin to build a framework in which the homeless women veterans in your HVRP are operating. If they are obese, they may feel guilty for their weight due to the cultural expectations of people in poverty and the American desire for thinness.

The findings that the major SES indicators impacting this inverse relationship are education and occupation show us that women with less education or lower-level employment experience may be more likely to experience obesity. Your HVRP program can play a huge role in helping these female veterans experiencing homelessness improve their education and occupational situation, thereby positively impacting their health. Your work is vital in more ways than one!

than in the earlier study (63 percent and 93 percent, respectively). The researchers attribute this shift to the growing obesity epidemic across the SES spectrum rather than to a decrease in obesity for low SES women.

<sup>1</sup> McLaren, L. (2007). Socioeconomic Status and Obesity. *Epidemiologic Reviews*, 29, 29-48. Accessed July 12, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Sobal J, Stunkard AJ. Socioeconomic status and obesity: a review of the literature, *Psychol Bull* , 1989, vol. 105 (pg. 260-75)