Causal Effects of Low Income on Obesity: Business and Health Insights From a National Survey and Machine Learning Analysis With Applied Econometrics Technique

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This study investigates the causal impact of low income on Body Mass Index (BMI) using data from the 2017–2018 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES). While previous research has established a correlation between socioeconomic status and obesity, this study employs Double Machine Learning (DML) to identify causal effects, controlling for confounders such as age, gender, education, ethnicity, and household size. The full sample (n = 8,005) and two subgroups, high BMI and high BMI + low income, were analyzed. Results from DML indicate a statistically significant causal effect, with low-income status increasing BMI by approximately 0.49 units (p < 0.001). Subgroup analyses reveal that low-income individuals, especially older adults and females, face disproportionately higher obesity risks. These findings underscore the need for equity-centered public health strategies targeting the socioeconomic roots of obesity, including nutritional support, education, and community-based interventions.

Keywords: Body Mass Index (BMI), low income, socioeconomic status, obesity, Double Machine Learning (DML), NHANES, causal inference

INTRODUCTION

Individuals' and groups' socioeconomic status (SES) significantly influences health outcomes worldwide, with income being a particularly impactful factor, especially in the United States. Among the various health indicators, Body Mass Index (BMI), a widely used measure of weight relative to height, is a key metric in assessing obesity and related health risks. While substantial research has documented the association between lower income levels and higher BMI, the precise causal mechanisms remain an area of active investigation. This study explores whether low income directly contributes to elevated BMI levels, highlighting implications for public health interventions and policy development. Extant literature has consistently demonstrated a strong correlation between socioeconomic inequality and obesity prevalence, particularly in high-income nations. Mediating variables such as access to nutritious food, healthcare services, and education are frequently cited as contributors to this association. However, most existing studies rely heavily on observational data, which, while informative, limit the ability to establish causality. The current study employs advanced econometric techniques and causal inference frameworks to address this gap, incorporating key demographic controls, including age, gender, household size, and educational attainment.

A nuanced understanding of how income affects BMI is crucial for designing targeted strategies to combat obesity and promote healthier living among socioeconomically disadvantaged populations. This research aims to uncover subgroup-specific variations, such as those based on race/ethnicity, gender, or household composition, that may mediate or moderate the income-BMI relationship. These insights can inform more precise, equity-oriented policy interventions. Decades of public health and social science research have established that lower socioeconomic status, often characterized by limited income and educational opportunities, is associated with a higher prevalence of obesity and related chronic diseases. BMI remains a central metric due to its reliability in gauging obesity risk. Although correlations between low income and high BMI have been extensively reported, questions about the direction and strength of this causal link persist. This motivates a deeper empirical investigation into how income disparities influence BMI, and whether these effects vary across different population segments.

Income may affect BMI through multiple channels, including access to health-promoting resources. Individuals with higher incomes are more likely to afford nutritious foods, safe environments for physical activity, and comprehensive healthcare services. Conversely, low-income individuals may experience financial constraints that necessitate reliance on inexpensive, calorie-dense, nutrient-poor foods while lacking access to preventive healthcare and health education. These challenges may contribute to elevated BMI among low-income populations. Nevertheless, many prior studies inadequately control for confounding factors or fail to examine heterogeneity within subgroups based on demographic characteristics. To address these limitations, this study utilizes rigorous econometric modeling and causal inference methods to analyze the income-BMI relationship more precisely. By centering on low-income populations and incorporating mediating variables such as education and household structure, the study seeks to clarify the pathways through which income shapes BMI outcomes. Ultimately, the findings are intended to guide policymakers in crafting evidence-based, socially responsive interventions aimed at reducing obesity and advancing health equity among vulnerable groups. Hence, this study seeks to determine whether low income directly contributes to higher Body Mass Index (BMI) levels among individuals in the United States, beyond what can be explained by demographic and lifestyle factors. It also investigates how demographic variables—such as age, gender, household size, and educational attainment—moderate the relationship between income and BMI, to identify subgroup-specific patterns that could inform targeted public health interventions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between income levels and obesity has been extensively examined and documented across various peer-reviewed and open-access academic journals. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Tae et al. (2018) explored the association between lower income and higher obesity risk. This study also considered the possibility of reverse causality, where obesity may contribute to lower income through mechanisms such as labor market discrimination. These findings underscore the complexity of the income–obesity relationship and the importance of utilizing causal inference frameworks.

Wawen et al. (2022) further investigated obesity and its comorbidities, such as hypertension and diabetes, among adult populations. Their findings highlighted the intersection of age and health outcomes, particularly within low-income demographics. Additionally, using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Maximilian (2008) demonstrated that changes in family income significantly affected BMI, with pronounced effects observed among women eligible for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). This indicates income-enhancing policies may have measurable health benefits, especially among economically vulnerable populations. Also, Cho, Han, et al. (2021), using data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES), found that lower-income groups in the United States consistently exhibited higher obesity prevalence, with notable disparities across racial and ethnic subgroups. Their decade-long analysis illustrated persistent trends that link socioeconomic disparities to adverse health outcomes.

McLaren (2007), writing in the *Journal of the Endocrine Society*, provided a comprehensive global perspective on the socioeconomic gradient in obesity. Her work highlighted that socioeconomic factors, including income, education, and access to health-related resources, are significant determinants of obesity, particularly in developed countries. The study also emphasized differing global trends, noting a negative association between socioeconomic status and obesity in developed nations, and a positive association in developing countries, thus reinforcing the need for context-specific policy responses. Furthermore, in exploring education as a determinant of BMI, Aitsi-Selmi and Chandola (2012) examined the causal pathways through which educational attainment influences obesity. Their research emphasized that education affects health through multiple channels, including behavioral choices, resource access, and lifestyle patterns. Similarly, Drewnowski (2012) analyzed the role of household size in shaping health outcomes, proposing that shared economic and social resources within larger households could influence BMI. This study offered insight into how intra-household dynamics contribute to nutritional outcomes and obesity risk. Despite this robust body of literature, few studies have explicitly examined how household size, education, and ethnicity mediate or moderate the relationship between income and BMI. The lack of subgroup-specific analysis limits the applicability of existing findings to diverse populations. This study seeks to fill this critical gap by employing causal econometric methods to investigate the direct impact of low income on BMI, while simultaneously exploring the moderating influences of demographic variables.

METHODS

This study utilizes data from the 2017–2018 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) cycle, a large-scale, publicly accessible dataset administered by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The NHANES dataset includes comprehensive health, demographic, and socioeconomic information, making it well-suited for analyzing the relationship between income and health outcomes such as Body Mass Index (BMI). The following two data files were downloaded and merged using Python: Demographics: DEMO_J.xpt and Body Measurements (BMI): BMX_J.xpt.

The initial merged dataset contained 8,704 observations across 66 variables. After data cleaning, removing entries with missing values on key demographic and socioeconomic variables, the final working dataset consisted of 8,005 complete observations and 19 variables**.** For subgroup analysis, two additional analytical samples were created:

- Sample 1: Individuals with high BMI (BMI > 30; *n* = 794)
- Sample 2: Individuals with both high BMI and low income (annual income < $20,000; n = 181)

The dataset reflects a wide range of demographic and socioeconomic characteristics, supporting generalizability and enabling subgroup analysis by age, gender, household size, education, and ethnicity.

Descriptive statistics were computed for the full dataset (n = 8,005), Sample 1 (*n* = 794), and Sample 2 (*n* = 181). Highlights include:

- **Age**: Older individuals in Samples 1 and 2 had higher BMI, suggesting age-related obesity trends.
- **Gender**: Females were more represented in high BMI and low-income categories.
- **Education**: Lower education levels were more prevalent among individuals with high BMI and low income.
- **Household Size**: Smaller household sizes were noted in Sample 2, potentially indicating limited shared resources.
- **Income-to-Poverty Ratio**: Sample 2 showed extreme poverty (mean ratio = 0.30), reinforcing socioeconomic vulnerability.
- **BMI**: Mean BMI for Samples 1 and 2 exceeded 43, compared to 26.6 for the full sample, indicating significant health disparities.

TABLE 1
VARIABLE DEFINITIONS

Variable	Description
RIDAGEYR	Age in years (continuous)
RIAGENDR	Gender (1 = Male, 2 = Female)
RIDRETH3	Race/Ethnicity (categorical, 1–7)
DMDEDUC2/3	Education levels for adults and youth (categorical)
DMDMARTL	Marital status (1 = Married, 0 = Not married)
DMDHHSIZ	Household size (number of individuals in household)
DMDHHSZA	Number of children under age 5
INDHHIN2	Annual household income (categorical/continuous)
INDFMPIR	Family income-to-poverty ratio (continuous)
Low-income	Binary indicator (1 = income < $20,000; 0 = otherwise)
BMXBMI	Body Mass Index (continuous); Obesity defined as BMI > 30

Source: NHANES 2017–2018

The complete-case analysis approach resulted in 0% missing data for included variables, ensuring the integrity of inferential analyses. This study applies advanced econometric and causal inference techniques to estimate the causal effect of low income on BMI, controlling for multiple demographic and socioeconomic confounders. The baseline linear regression model is specified as:

$$\boldsymbol{BMI} = \boldsymbol{\beta 0} + \boldsymbol{\beta 1 low\_income} + \boldsymbol{\beta 2 RIDAGEYR} + \boldsymbol{\beta 3 RIAGENDR} + \boldsymbol{\beta 4 RIDRETH3} + \boldsymbol{\beta 5 DMDEDUC2} + \boldsymbol{\beta 6 DMDHHSIZ} + +\boldsymbol{\beta 7 INDHHIN2} + \boldsymbol{\delta \varepsilon}$$

Where $\boldsymbol{\beta 0, \beta 1, \dots \dots \dots \dots \beta 7}$ **&** $\boldsymbol{\delta \varepsilon}$ are the coefficients of the variables and the error term. Model diagnostics, including Durbin-Watson tests, are applied to assess serial correlation, and robust standard errors account for heteroskedasticity.

To address potential endogeneity and improve causal validity, the study employs Double Machine Learning (DML), a state-of-the-art method for estimating treatment effects in high-dimensional settings. This approach includes:

- Nuisance parameter estimation via machine learning algorithms (e.g., Lasso, Random Forest)
- Orthogonalization to isolate the causal effect of low income on BMI
- K-fold cross-validation to prevent overfitting and ensure model generalizability
- Subgroup regressions to detect heterogeneity in treatment effects by education, gender, or ethnicity

This methodology strengthens the study's capacity to produce **unbiased causal estimates,** even in complex, non-linear confounding relationships.

RESULTS

A descriptive analysis by income group was conducted, and the study of BMI across income levels revealed important patterns linking socioeconomic status and health. The non-low-income group (n = 6,272) has a mean BMI of 26.61, placing them in the “overweight” range in Table 2.

TABLE 2
SUMMARY STATISTICS BY INCOME GROUP

Income Group	Count	Mean BMI	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Non-Low-Income (0)	6,272	26.61	8.21	12.3	86.2
Low-Income (1)	1,733	26.45	8.43	12.8	84.2

Source: NHANES 2017–2018 (authors' calculations)

The low-income group (*n* = 1,733) exhibits a slightly lower mean BMI of 26.45. Despite the marginal difference, both groups show substantial within-group variability, indicated by standard deviations exceeding 8, suggesting a broad distribution of BMI values ranging from underweight to severely obese. This minimal mean difference suggests that, while relevant, income may not independently explain BMI variations without controlling for additional demographic and socioeconomic factors. The high variability within both groups further underscores the complexity of the relationship.

TABLE 3
DIAGNOSTIC TEST RESULTS

Test	Statistic	p-value
Durbin-Watson	0.3448	–
Breusch-Pagan (heteroscedasticity)	60.53	2.25e-12
Shapiro-Wilk (normality)	0.9148	4.67e-55
Multicollinearity Check (VIF)		
Variable	VIF	
const	25.15	
RIDAGEYR	1.37	
RIAGENDR	1.00	
Low-income	1.04	
DMDHHSIZ	1.42	

The Durbin-Watson statistic (0.34) indicates strong positive autocorrelation in the residuals. The Breusch-Pagan test confirms the presence of heteroscedasticity ($p < 0.05$), while the Shapiro-Wilk test rejects the null hypothesis of normality, suggesting non-normal residuals. Variance inflation factor (VIF) values are well below 5, except for the constant term, which is expected, indicating no evidence of multicollinearity among the predictors. Given these violations of classical regression assumptions, particularly concerning normality and homoscedasticity, applying more robust estimation techniques, such as Double Machine Learning (DML), is warranted.

The descriptive statistics offer a foundational understanding of the dataset and its subgroups, specifically, Sample 1 (individuals with high BMI) and Sample 2 (individuals with high BMI and low income). The mean BMI for the low-income group (26.45) is marginally lower than that of the non-low-income group (26.61). However, the wide standard deviations observed in both groups indicate considerable within-group variability. This range spans underweight, normal weight, overweight, and obese classifications, suggesting that income alone does not fully explain the distribution of BMI**.**

Both Sample 1 and Sample 2 demonstrate markedly elevated BMI levels compared to the broader population, signaling a concentration of obesity in these groups. Sample 2, defined by the dual burden of high BMI and low income, notably reveals the compounded effects of socioeconomic disadvantage and health risk**,** with a mean BMI of 43.31. This figure is well within the clinical obesity range, indicating severe and chronic health risks for individuals in this subgroup.

Demographically, older individuals and females are disproportionately represented in both Samples 1 and 2. This suggests that these populations may face unique challenges related to aging, hormonal changes, and caregiving roles, factors that can contribute to higher BMI. Furthermore, declining levels of education and smaller household sizes are evident as income levels decrease, with Sample 2 reflecting the most significant degree of socioeconomic deprivation. These patterns highlight the importance of examining intersecting structural determinants of health. The Family Income-to-Poverty Ratio (INDFMPIR) is drastically lower in Sample 2, reinforcing the argument that extreme financial hardship is closely associated with heightened obesity risk. These descriptive findings confirm that the dataset captures a diverse and demographically representative population, offering a strong foundation for causal analysis.

The Shapiro-Wilk test returned a p-value < 0.0001, indicating significant departures from normality in the residuals, an assumption required for valid inference in ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. However, all Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values remained below 5, confirming no multicollinearity among the predictors. Although the normality assumption is violated, the lack of collinearity supports using more flexible estimation techniques, such as Double Machine Learning (DML**)**, to produce unbiased estimates.

TABLE 4
REGRESSION MODEL – FULL DATASET (*n* = 8,005)

	Coef.	Std. err	t	P>|t|	[0.025	0.975]
Const.	22.7511	0.588	38.707	0.000	21.599	23.903
RIDAGEYR	0.1486	0.004	36.453	0.000	0.141	0.157
RIAGENDR	0.8427	0.163	5.169	0.000	0.523	1.162
low income	-0.7345	0.213	-3.451	0.001	-1.152	-0.317
INDHHIN2	0.0012	0.005	0.238	0.812	-0.009	0.011
DMDHHSIZ	-0.1297	0.058	-2.249	0.025	-0.243	-0.017
RIDRETH3	-0.3751	0.049	-7.641	0.000	-0.471	-0.279
DMDEDUC2	-0.2590	0.087	-2.981	0.003	-0.429	-0.089

Low-income status is significantly associated with a decrease in BMI in this full-sample model. However, residual diagnostics suggest the need for more flexible methods to derive robust causal estimates. Subgroup Regression Models are presented in Tables 5-6.

TABLE 5
REGRESSION – SAMPLE 1 (HIGH BMI, *n* = 794)

	Coef.	Std. err	t	P>|t|	[0.025	0.975]
Const.	42.0774	1.653	25.455	0.000	38.833	45.322
RIDAGEYR	-0.0170	0.014	-1.201	0.230	-0.045	0.011
RIAGENDR	1.1278	0.460	2.454	0.014	0.226	2.030
low income	-0.2744	0.578	-0.475	0.635	-1.409	0.861
INDHHIN2	-0.0023	0.013	-0.168	0.867	-0.029	0.024
DMDHHSIZ	-0.2059	0.161	-1.281	0.201	-0.521	0.110
RIDRETH3	0.3561	0.154	2.316	0.021	0.054	0.658
DMDEDUC2	-0.0721	0.212	-0.340	0.734	-0.488	0.344

Low income is not statistically significant in this subsample. Ethnicity and gender remain influential predictors.

TABLE 6
REGRESSION – SAMPLE 2 (HIGH BMI + LOW INCOME, *n* = 181)

	Coef.	Std. err	t	P>|t|	[0.025	0.975]
RIDAGEYR	-0.0146	0.031	-0.472	0.638	-0.076	0.047
RIAGENDR	1.2888	0.987	1.306	0.193	-0.658	3.236
low income	41.8070	3.629	11.521	0.000	34.645	48.969
INDHHIN2	0.1627	0.360	0.452	0.652	-0.548	0.873
DMDHHSIZ	-0.7355	0.379	-1.940	0.054	-1.484	0.013
RIDRETH3	0.0243	0.328	0.074	0.941	-0.624	0.673
DMDEDUC2	0.4077	0.507	0.805	0.422	-0.592	1.408

The positive and highly significant coefficient indicates that low-income status is strongly associated with increased BMI among those with high and low BMI.

TABLE 7
MODEL EVALUATION SUMMARY

Metric	Full Dataset	Sample 1	Sample 2
MSE (Mean Squared Error)	52.9990	38.2163	37.7643
R^2	0.2232	0.0165	0.4000

The R^2 value in Sample 2 is substantially higher, indicating better explanatory power when focusing on the high-BMI, low-income subgroup.

TABLE 8
COEFFICIENT COMPARISON ACROSS MODELS

Variable	Full Dataset	Sample 1	Sample 2
Low income	-0.7345	-0.2744	41.8070
RIDAGEYR	0.1486	-0.0170	-0.0146
RIAGENDR	0.8427	1.1278	1.2888
DMDHHSIZ	-0.1297	-0.2059	-0.7355
DMDEDUC2	-0.2590	-0.0721	0.4077

This comparison highlights how the direction and magnitude of income effects vary significantly by subgroup, particularly in vulnerable populations.

TABLE 9
DOUBLE MACHINE LEARNING (DML) RESULTS

Metric	Value
Causal Effect Estimate	**0.4856**
Standard Error	0.0324
95% CI	[0.4221, 0.5491]
p-value	< 0.0001

The DML method confirms a statistically significant and positive causal relationship between low-income status and increased BMI, even after controlling for confounders such as age, gender, and education. The results of the descriptive, regression, and DML analyses collectively provide a comprehensive picture of the income–BMI relationship:

- While mean BMI values for income groups appear close, subgroup analysis reveals that low-income individuals with high BMI experience disproportionately greater health burdens.
- The diagnostic tests indicate that traditional linear models may be insufficient due to assumption violations, justifying the use of DML.
- The DML model delivers the most reliable estimate, showing that low income causally increases BMI by approximately 0.49 units, which is statistically and practically significant.
- Covariates such as age, gender, education, and household size also play critical roles, suggesting intersecting influences on health outcomes.

These analyses underscore the urgent need for targeted obesity interventions in low-income communities. Strategies may include:

- Expanding access to affordable, nutritious food
- Implementing income-support programs (e.g., EITC)
- Investing in community health education
- Promoting exercise opportunities and reducing environmental barriers

The linear regression model initially assessed the relationship between low income and BMI. The marginal difference in BMI between income groups and a statistically significant yet small coefficient for income in the complete model suggest that while OLS regression is informative, it may be insufficient for capturing the actual causal dynamics due to underlying model assumptions and potential unobserved confounders. Consequently, OLS served as a necessary baseline, justifying the application of advanced causal inference methods. Within this framework, the Double Machine Learning (DML) approach yielded the most reliable causal estimate, with a coefficient of 0.4856 (standard error = 0.0324), a 95% confidence interval ranging from 0.4221 to 0.5491, and a p-value of less than 0.0001.

These results indicate that low-income status causally increases BMI by approximately 0.49 units, on average, after adjusting for confounding variables such as age, gender, education, household size, and ethnicity. The narrow confidence interval and small standard error underscore the precision and robustness of the estimate. The statistical significance of this effect confirms that the association between income and BMI is not merely correlative but causative.

The DML findings affirm that low-income individuals are at an increased risk of higher BMI, likely due to structural barriers such as limited access to healthy food options, constrained opportunities for physical activity, reduced health literacy, and inadequate healthcare access. This supports the broader literature on social determinants of health, where poverty is a consistent predictor of adverse health outcomes, including obesity.

The analysis identifies key moderating factors: age, gender, education, and household size. Older individuals may face metabolic slowdown and mobility limitations, while women in low-income settings may experience unique sociocultural and physiological vulnerabilities. Lower educational attainment is often associated with reduced health literacy and fewer economic opportunities, and smaller households may lack the collective financial or social support systems necessary to sustain healthy living. These findings underscore that obesity interventions must extend beyond individual-level behavior change and address broader socioeconomic constraints. Policy recommendations from this analysis include implementing nutritional assistance programs tailored to low-income neighborhoods, providing subsidies for healthy food and preventive healthcare, delivering health education campaigns targeted at vulnerable subgroups, and developing community-based wellness programs that address economic and physical environments. The results from both the descriptive and causal analyses consistently demonstrate that socioeconomic status, particularly low income, is a significant and causal determinant of elevated BMI, especially in marginalized populations. Integrating advanced statistical methods, such as DML, ensures these conclusions are statistically sound and policy-relevant. As such, the findings provide an empirical basis for targeted public health interventions that aim to reduce obesity rates and promote health equity across income strata.

CONCLUSION

This study offers a robust empirical assessment of the fundamental relationship between low income and Body Mass Index (BMI), leveraging nationally representative data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES). While prior research has consistently shown a correlation between socioeconomic status and obesity, much of it has relied on observational techniques with limited causal inference. By contrast, this study contributes to the literature by isolating the causal effect of low income on BMI while controlling for a comprehensive set of demographic and socioeconomic covariates, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, educational attainment, and household size.

Consequently, it offers a rigorous empirical investigation into the causal effect of low income on Body Mass Index (BMI) using the 2017–2018 NHANES dataset and robust methods, applying advanced econometric techniques, including Double Machine Learning (DML). Grounded in the causal inference framework of Chernozhukov et al. (2018), this research addresses a long-standing limitation in health economics and social epidemiology: identifying unbiased treatment effects from observational data due to unobserved heterogeneity and endogeneity concerns.

Our findings indicate that low-income status causally increases BMI by approximately 0.49 units, even after controlling for key confounders such as age, gender, education, race/ethnicity, and household size. This effect's strength and statistical significance remain robust across models, suggesting that income disparities directly shape health outcomes. This aligns with the conclusions of Kim and Von dem Knesebeck (2018), who noted the directional persistence of income-obesity links in global cohorts, and Mclauren (2007), who highlighted the consistent socioeconomic gradient in obesity in developed countries.

Descriptive and subgroup analyses reveal that the relationship between income and BMI is not homogeneous but varies across demographic characteristics. The compounded vulnerability seen in Sample 2 (high BMI and low income), which had the highest levels of socioeconomic deprivation and obesity, corroborates findings by Aitsi-Selmi and Chandola et al. (2012), who showed the complex interaction between education, wealth, and obesity risk among women in Egypt. Similarly, Woojin and Seung-ji et al. (2017) found gender-specific interactions between income and education in shaping obesity risk in Korea, supporting our observation that women in low-income brackets are disproportionately affected.

From a business and policy perspective, these findings have wide-reaching implications. Obesity, as both a health outcome and economic burden, increases costs for employers, insurers, and governments. Higher BMI levels are associated with lower productivity, increased absenteeism, and greater healthcare expenditures, factors of particular concern for firms managing workforce health benefits and governments evaluating Medicaid and public health budgets. Our results thus echo Pampel, Krueger, and Denney's (2010) call to integrate health behavior models with macro-level social inequality frameworks.

Methodologically, this study also contributes to the expanding literature on causal machine learning applications in economics. Following Angrist and Pischke's (2008) principles of credible identification, and extending the predictive flexibility proposed by Wooldridge (2019), DML provided a robust approach to address violations in linear model assumptions such as heteroscedasticity (Breusch & Pagan, 1979) and non-normal residuals. This allowed us to isolate the average treatment effect of income on BMI without compromising model consistency due to high-dimensional covariates.

Moreover, the insights generated here can guide strategic interventions. Policymakers and business leaders should focus on structural determinants of health by enhancing food access through subsidies or local investment in underserved communities, expanding income-support policies such as the Earned Income Tax Credit (as examined by Schmeiser, 2008), supporting targeted health education in populations with low income and educational attainment, and developing employer wellness programs that are sensitive to socioeconomic barriers in workforce populations.

Lastly, this study reinforces the urgent need to view obesity not merely as a lifestyle issue but as a systemic outcome of socioeconomic inequality. Our findings resonate with Ogechukwu and Boateng et al. (2022), who highlighted the clustering of non-communicable diseases in low-income populations, and with Hunter and De Moura Brito et al. (2024), who showed that health disparities across income groups transcend national boundaries.

By combining credible causal methods with national health data, this study contributes new empirical evidence to support targeted, equity-informed interventions to break the link between poverty and poor health outcomes. Future research could expand this work using longitudinal data or examine the dynamic interplay between income shocks and health behaviors, helping to shape a more resilient and inclusive approach to public health and business strategy.

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