

Teachers may be cause of 'obesity penalty' on girls' grades

February 7 2017, by Brian Flood

While obesity is often thought of as a health problem, a new study by a University of Illinois at Chicago sociologist suggests that discrimination by body weight may be the more important factor for obese white female students' lower success in school.

The study, published in the latest issue of the journal *Sociology of Education*, indicates that the relationship between [obesity](#) and academic performance may result largely from educators interacting differently with girls of various sizes, rather than from obesity's effects on girls' physical health.

Even when they scored the same on ability tests, obese white girls received worse high school grades than their normal-weight peers. Teachers rated them as less academically able as early as elementary school, according to the report's author, Amelia Branigan, UIC visiting assistant professor of sociology.

Branigan analyzed elementary [school students](#) around age 9 in the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, and high school students approximately 18 years old in the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1997 cohort. The elementary school students were evaluated by teacher-assessed academic performance, while grade point average was the measured outcome used to assess the [high school students](#).

The study found obesity to be associated with a penalty on teacher evaluations of [academic performance](#) among white girls in English, but

not in math. There was no penalty observed for white girls who were overweight but not obese.

"Obese white girls are only penalized in 'female' course subjects like English," Branigan said. "This suggests that obesity may be most harshly judged in settings where girls are expected to be more stereotypically feminine."

Consistent with prior work on obesity and wages and other academic outcomes, no similar association was found in either math or English for white boys, or for black students of either sex. This may reflect findings that obesity is more stigmatized among white women than among white men or individuals of other races, according to Brannigan, who says social interventions for teachers may lessen the performance gap.

"As we continue to combat [childhood obesity](#), efforts to also counter negative social perceptions of [obese individuals](#) would have advantages in terms of both educational outcomes and social equity more generally," she said.

More information: Amelia R. Branigan, (How) Does Obesity Harm Academic Performance? Stratification at the Intersection of Race, Sex, and Body Size in Elementary and High School, *Sociology of Education* (2017). [DOI: 10.1177/0038040716680271](https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040716680271)

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