East Tennessee Study Identifies Parental Education as Predictor of Adolescent Obesity in Appalachia

Dr. Liang Wang, Dr. Deb Slawson and Dr. Jodi Southerland were among the authors of a new study that identified the risk factors for adolescent obesity in southern Appalachia. The article “Prevalence of and Risk Factors for Adolescent Obesity in Southern Appalachia, 2012” was published in the journal Preventing Chronic Disease. Dr. Wang is in the Department of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, while Dr. Slawson and Dr. Southerland are in the Department of Community and Behavioral Health, both in the ETSU College of Public Health.

Southern Appalachia, an area with high rates of poverty, lack of educational achievement, and a high percentage of the population living in rural and medically underserved areas, also has one of the highest rates of obesity in the United States. The authors used data from over 1,400 adolescents that had participated in the “Team Up for Healthy Living” project. “Team Up” is an interprofessional obesity prevention project, led by the College of Public Health that uses college-based “peer educators” to target obesity prevention activities to high school students living in rural Appalachia.

The current study found that 26.6% of participating adolescents were classified as obese, and a further 19.8% were overweight. Boys were slightly more likely than girls to be obese. The study found that lower parental education was related to a higher likelihood of adolescent obesity, with parental education likely being a more accurate predictor of youth weight status than family income. Among boys, lower education by both mothers and fathers was predictive of obesity, while, among girls, only maternal education was predictive. These findings differ from other studies which have generally found that the father’s level of education was a better predictor of adolescent obesity than mother’s education.

Other co-authors on the paper included Dr. George Relyea from the University of Memphis and Dr. Youfa Wang, from SUNY Buffalo.

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