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Obesity, weight status and employability: Empirical evidence from a French national survey

Alain Paraponaris [a,b,c], Bérengère Saliba [b,c], Bruno Ventelou [b,c,*]

[a] *Department of Economics, University of the Mediterranean (Aix-Marseille II), 14 Avenue Jules Ferry, 13621 Aix-en-Provence Cedex, France*
[b] *Inserm Research Unit 379 'Epidemiology and Social Sciences Applied to Medical Innovation,' 232 Boulevard Sainte Marguerite, 13273 Marseille Cedex 09, France*
[c] *South-Eastern France Regional Center for Disease Control, ORS PACA, 23 rue Stanislas Torrents, 13006 Marseille, France*

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Abstract

We investigate the relationship between employability and obesity, particularly how obesity and overweight are associated with the percentage of working years spent unemployed and the ability to regain employment. Data for adults who responded to the 2003 Decennial Health Survey collected by the French National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies revealed that the percentage of time spent unemployed during working years is significantly higher for each kg/m^2 deviation from the mean body mass index (BMI) attained at age 20 and that the probability of regaining employment after a period of unemployment is much lower.

JEL classification: I120; J310; J700

Keywords: Obesity; Overweight; BMI; Employability; Unemployment; France

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +33 4 91 59 89 16; fax: +33 4 91 59 89 27.
E-mail address: ventelou@marseille.inserm.fr (B. Ventelou).

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1. Introduction

Obesity and overweight have been recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as major worldwide public health concerns, jeopardising health for adults as well as for children (WHO, 1997). More than 1 billion adults are overweight, at least 300 million of whom are clinically obese. Obesity and overweight are known to be major risk factors for severe chronic diseases, especially type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, stroke and certain cancers (WHO, 2003).

There is vast literature, both epidemiological and economic, about both the time trend of this worldwide epidemic and its costs to society. In the United States, the number of obese adults has grown by >50% since the late 1970s. A total of 65.7% of American adults are overweight or obese, 30.6% are obese and 5.1% are extremely obese (Hedley et al., 2004; Flegal et al., 2002). With 112,000 premature deaths caused each year in the United States by illnesses induced or worsened by excess body weight (Flegal et al., 2005), obesity has become a major cause of avoidable death (Sturm, 2002). In the United States, estimations of the economic cost of obesity range from 75 to 100 billion dollars (Finkelstein et al., 2004; Philipson et al., 2004; Wolf and Colditz, 1998), which represents up to 9.5% of total annual medical expenditures. In western European countries, except to some extent Great Britain, the prevalences of overweight and obesity are by far less than those in the United States (Seidell and Deerenberg, 1994; Vlad, 2003). In France, the rates of overweight and obesity increased only slightly, until 1990 (Maillard et al., 1999). In 2000, a total of 41.6% of French adults were overweight or obese, 11.3% were obese and 2.5% were severely obese (Basdevant et al., 2002). In 1992, the direct economic cost of obesity in France was estimated to be 0.6–1.1 billion euros (Detournay et al., 2000; Levy et al., 1995), which represented 0.7–1.5% of the country's total health expenditures.

Obesity and overweight have been found by a large number of previous studies in the United States (Chou et al., 2004; Robert and Reither, 2004; Zhang and Wang, 2004), Europe (Cavelaars et al., 2000; Wardle et al., 2002) and France (Maillard et al., 1999) to be strongly linked to socioeconomic status (SES). On the basis of these findings, obesity is considered to be one of the numerous socioeconomic factors correlated with health status (Fuchs, 2004; Smith, 1998), among which causal paths for many have yet to be identified (Adams et al., 2003). In 2001, as he addressed a research agenda, Philipson (2001) urged organisations to contribute economic resources that would help improve understanding of the worldwide increase in the prevalence of obesity.

The majority of the articles about obesity and overweight have focused on how low SES might be associated with excessive body mass index (BMI), particularly how low SES might cause obesity or overweight. But conversely, attempts to explore how obesity and overweight might affect the main economic features at the individual level are scarcer. The present article explores the extents to which obesity and weight gain affect employability. Indeed, in France more than in other countries, there is a significant risk of stigmatisation of and even discrimination against obese people (Drury and Louis, 2002; Puhl and Brownell, 2001) [and populations such as short men (Herpin, 2005)], which might be associated with the relative rarity of obesity, especially compared with the prevalence of this condition in the United States.