A COMPARISON WITH OTHER RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUPS IN LOS ANGELES

OBJECTIVE: While mother’s perception of child’s weight is important for the success of early childhood obesity prevention programs, few studies have examined that of Asian Americans. Our study examined their perception and compared it to that of mothers of other racial/ethnic groups.

DESIGN: Cross-sectional study of 2,051 randomly selected mothers of children aged 2–5 years living in Los Angeles County who were enrolled in the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women Infants and Children (WIC).

MAIN OUTCOME MEASURE: The primary outcome was mother’s perception of child’s weight.

RESULTS: We found that Asian American mothers were 2.12 (95% CI: 1.27–3.54) times as likely as Hispanic mothers to accurately perceive their children’s weight, adjusting for child’s age, sex and birthweight, and mother’s age and education. However, this relationship disappeared after adjusting for mother’s BMI. We did not find differences in perception of child’s weight among non-Hispanic White, non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic mothers.

CONCLUSION: It appears that Asian American mothers’ increased accurate perception of child’s weight status can be partially explained by their lower prevalence of obesity. Our findings suggest that early childhood obesity prevention programs should consider the weight status of mothers.

KEY WORDS: Children, Obesity, Asian Americans, WIC, Perception of Weight Status

INTRODUCTION

A quarter of Asian American preschool children are currently overweight or obese. Childhood obesity tracks into adulthood and is associated with a number of chronic health conditions in adulthood and childhood. It is estimated that by 2050 there will be 40.6 million Asian Americans, thus preventing obesity in this young minority group is an important strategy for addressing the current obesity crisis. Diet and physical activity are the two behaviors that directly determine energy imbalance, the proximal cause of obesity or excessive weight gain. In children, these behaviors are directly influenced by their parents (or primary caretakers) who have a critical role in early childhood obesity prevention. How parents shape these behaviors are determined by many factors including nutrition knowledge, socioeconomic resources, and their perception of their children’s weight status. Our study investigates how Asian mothers compare to mothers of other racial/ethnic groups in perceiving the weight status of their young child in an ethnically diverse group of low-income immigrant families living in Los Angeles County, home to the largest number of Asians in the United States, and where early childhood obesity rates have been especially high among immigrant families.

While the majority of parents underestimate their child’s overweight/obese status, racial/ethnic differences in parental misperception of child’s weight have been observed. Investigating these differences is helpful for developing effective child obesity prevention programs. Studies have examined perception of child’s weight status in Hispanic and African American mothers but few have focused on the perception of Asian American mothers. Asian Americans tend to be ignored in studies of obesity since they have the lowest rates of obesity. However, their risk of developing obesity increases with subsequent generations. Further, Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial/ethnic group in the United States. Boutelle et al found that Asian and non-Hispanic White mothers were more likely to accurately perceive their adolescent’s weight compared to African American, Hispanic, and other mothers, but to our knowledge no studies have looked at the perception of Asian American mothers of very young children.

Parental perception of child’s weight status may be affected by the cultural norms regarding what constitutes a healthy body size for a child. For example, African American and Mexican American mothers tend to prefer larger babies and young children, believing that they are healthier than skinnier children. Furthermore, racial/ethnic groups with higher prevalence of overweight and obesity may be more likely to consider overweight and obesity normal thus increasing the likelihood of underestimating weight status. Because race and ethnicity are closely linked to socioeconomic status in the United States, it is important to differentiate the contributing role of culture to child obesity development from that of socioeconomic status.

Our study uses data gathered from a randomly selected sample of participants of the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) to determine whether mother’s perception of child’s weight status varies by race or ethnicity in a low-income population.