

Creating a Health Promoting Environment: The Role of Food Access

* *Richard Layte*

An analysis of international data on overweight and obesity shows Ireland in a very unflattering light. Along with the UK, Finland, Greece and the US, Ireland has some of the highest rates of adult and child obesity among developed countries and trends suggest that the situation is going to get worse. If so, today's children will probably have higher levels of diabetes and cardiovascular disease and live shorter lives than their parents, bringing to a halt three decades or more of increases in Irish life expectancy.

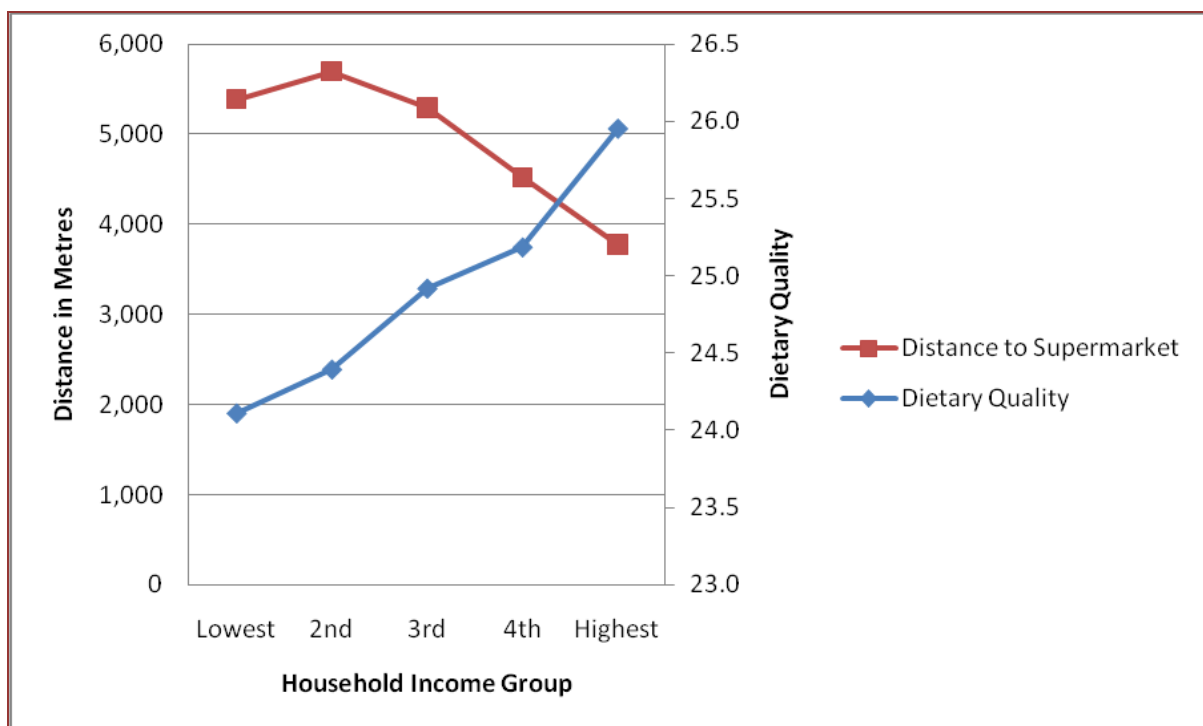
What's causing the rise in obesity? What policies should we adopt in response? Evidence suggests that individual diet and not enough physical activity are the principal causes of obesity and it could be argued that primary responsibility for staying healthy in this regard lies with individuals and families. That is probably true, but since human nature is pretty stable over time, it is likely that the principal causes of the increase in overweight and obesity in Ireland are to be found in our environment and society. If so, current problems may stem from a wide range of public policy choices in recent decades that have had unintended consequences for health and well-being. For example:

- Investing in roads and cars instead of public transport encourages people to drive directly to their destinations rather than walking. Allowing development of housing estates without considering the amenities that people will need to live healthy, productive lives such as local schools and shops.

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richard.layte@esri.ie

Some recent ESRI research[†] sought to examine whether the environment in which people live influences their behaviour and specifically, whether the food people eat is influenced by where they live. Previous research in Ireland has shown conclusively that individuals and families with less income or from a lower social class tend to have less healthy diets. This could be because they have less income to buy food or perhaps, because they like eating food with more fat, salt and sugar, but poorer people also tend to live in poorer neighbourhoods which have fewer food shops, particularly larger supermarkets. Supermarkets stock a wider range of fresh food than the more numerous but smaller convenience stores, so it is possible that at least part of the worse diet of poorer individuals may be due to the greater distance they need to travel to buy healthier food (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Distance to Nearest Supermarket and Dietary Quality



Layte and colleagues tested this by calculating the distance from each respondent's house to all of the food outlets in the country and deriving measures of the distance to the nearest supermarket and the density of supermarkets in the local area. They then estimated the impact which increasing

distance and number of supermarkets had on the diet of the person in the last year controlling for the person's own and their household's characteristics (income, age, car ownership etc). Their results showed that as the distance to the nearest supermarket increased it was accompanied by a small but significant decrease in the healthiness of the individual's diet.

This is the first time such an effect has been found in Ireland but more importantly, the first time such an effect has been found outside of the US. There, poor food access tends to be associated with the 'food deserts' found in some of the larger cities with pronounced racial segregation and concentrated social deprivation. Low levels of inward migration until comparatively recently mean that Ireland has nothing like the racial or ethnic segregation of the US. However, there has been a tendency since the 1960s for lower income and local authority housing in Ireland to be built in large estates on the periphery of the larger cities, with little or no infrastructure, including retail opportunities. The recent building boom, particularly in areas around major Irish cities, may have added to this, with housing built in formerly rural areas with little regard for the local infrastructure. It may be that the increased distances required to buy food and social segregation of Irish housing development has had a negative impact on the diets of Irish citizens and poorer Irish citizens in particular, and may therefore contribute to inequalities in health in Ireland.

[†]Layte, R., Harrington, J., Sexton, E., Cullinan, J., Perry, I.J. and Lyons, S. (2011). Irish Exceptionalism? Local Food Environments and Dietary Quality, *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*. Available pre-publication online as 10.1136/jech.2010.116749.