

To read the full document (in Spanish) go to:
http://www.fundacionideas.es/sites/default/files/pdf/I-El_Reto_de_la_obesidad_infantil-pol.pdf

IDEAS Foundation for Progress publications

Reports: analyses undertaken at greater length by teams of scientists and experts in which the IDEAS Foundation sets out its position.

Working Papers: briefer analyses undertaken by teams of scientists and experts in which the IDEAS Foundation sets out its position.

Discussion Papers: documents drawn up by scientists and experts at the IDEAS Foundation and outside contributors, not necessarily reflecting the positions of the Foundation.

Policy Analysis Papers: documents which set out the political position of the IDEAS Foundation regarding significant issues on the political agenda.

Analysis and Opinion Articles: short articles in which the author(s) freely express(es) personal perspectives on a specific issue, without necessarily reflecting the positions of this Foundation.

Published by IDEAS Foundation

Gobelas 31, 28023 Madrid

Telf. +34 915 820 091

Fax. +34 915 820 090

www.fundacionideas.es

ISBN: 978-84-15018-91-9

Authors

This report has been drawn up by the Politics, Citizenship and Equality Department of the IDEAS Foundation, with the involvement of:

Coordination

Irene Ramos Vielba, Head of the IDEAS Foundation Politics, Citizenship and Equality Department.
Manuel García Goñi, Professor of Applied Economics, Universidad Complutense, Madrid.

Contributions from the IDEAS Foundation team

Jesús Caldera, Executive Vice President.

Carlos Mulas-Granados, Executive Director.

Reyes Maroto, Senior Researcher, Economy, Sustainability and Welfare Department.

Marta Plaza, Junior Research Fellow, Politics, Citizenship and Equality Department.

Johannes von Stritzky, Junior Research Fellow, Economics, Sustainability and Welfare Department.

Casilda Cabrerizo, Junior Research Fellow, Economics, Sustainability and Welfare Department.

Acknowledgements

The IDEAS Foundation wishes in particular to express its thanks for the contributions made by a range of experts in the **fields of health, nutrition, education and health economy** who took part in various working groups organised by the Foundation in developing this paper.

FEN (Spanish Nutrition Foundation).

AESAN (Spanish Food Safety and Nutrition Agency), Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equality.

FIAB (Spanish Food and Drink Industry Federation). Thao Foundation: Thao Child Health Programme.

With the aim of contributing to awareness about childhood obesity, the IDEAS Foundation has published a comic, included as an Annex to this report and available via [this link](#), to be distributed among schoolchildren in Spanish towns and cities committed to combating what is an illness with serious social and economic consequences.

Executive Summary

Obesity is a particularly expensive and costly illness in economic and social terms both for those who suffer from it and for public healthcare institutions. As a consequence, over recent decades a number of international and national organisations have expressed considerable concern at its implications, and it is now viewed as a genuine social problem.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has gone so far as to describe it as the “21st-century epidemic”, given the scale it has acquired and its impact on morbidity, quality of life and health expenditure. This is the first time that a non-infectious process has been categorised as an epidemic. European institutions have also reacted to combat obesity, in the form of the European Commission’s White Paper on Nutrition, Overweight and Obesity (2007), confirming a gradual decline in the quality of the nutrition, a lack of physical activity across Europe’s population as a whole, and the risks of comorbidity associated with such unhealthy habits.

Obesity and overweight are the result of an imbalance between nutritional intake and energy spent. The causes are numerous and complex, mainly involving a combination of inappropriate dietary habits and physical inactivity. In-depth knowledge of these interrelationships is essential in order to modify the defining factors. Regular physical activity together with a balanced diet and extensive social interaction are probably the most appropriate way of tackling the issue, resulting in increased longevity and a healthily ageing population.

One of the most serious problems results from the fact that society remains unaware that obesity is an illness. It undoubtedly is so, and its consequences are devastating: it reduces the quality of life of patients and leads to an increase in the probability of additionally suffering from other chronic conditions.

The health expenditure generated by an obese adult is 36% higher than for an individual of recommended weight, while pharmaceutical costs are 77% higher. There is, meanwhile, a direct relationship between mortality and the prevalence

The Challenge of Childhood Obesity

The Need for Collective Action

of obesity. The direct economic cost of treating obesity, together with the other associated clinical conditions, is estimated at around 7% of health expenditure, which in Spain would account for at least 0.6% of GDP¹. The resulting sum of expenditure is significantly higher than that estimated in other neighbouring countries.

Attention has been focused on childhood obesity because, given the age of the sufferers, the sooner the problem is checked the greater the savings derived from the measures taken, and also the impact on quality of life. Given the scale which this social problem has attained, we now need to deploy a comprehensive strategy based on public policy. The most efficient way of combating the phenomenon is to tackle childhood obesity, for various reasons. To begin with, it represents the best way of predicting prevalence among the future adult population. Meanwhile, the social and psychological cost of obese children is much higher, and also socially more sensitive because of their inability to defend themselves and the fact they represent our future as a society.

The existing data regarding the impact in Spain are limited and scattered over time. They are also drawn from sources employing different methodologies and samples, making comparison and monitoring difficult. We have aimed in this paper to clarify the available information and set out an approximate measuring of childhood obesity in Spain over the last 25 years, along with an estimate as to its future evolution.

According to the WHO, Spain is one of the EU countries with the greatest prevalence of overweight children² (including obesity), with figures standing at 33% of the population aged between 5 and 17, while in Europe one in every four children is overweight or obese. Spain is also one of the countries which has seen the greatest rise in this illness (during the 1980s the prevalence of overweight children stood at 15%).

Efforts to combat childhood obesity over recent years in this country have been promoted by a range of institutions, employing different programmes and strategies: EnKid³, NAOS⁴ and at the school level PERSEO, or Thao⁵. This report is based on these

1 Spain's health expenditure in 2008 was 9% of GDP (OECD, 2010).

2 Report by the International Obesity Taskforce (IOTF, 2005).

3 Study designed to evaluate the nutritional habits and status of Spanish children and young people, with data obtained between 1998 and 2000.

4 Strategy for Nutrition, Physical Activity and the Prevention of Obesity, launched by the Ministry of Health and Consumption in February 2005.

5 National child obesity prevention pilot programme undertaken at the municipal level.

programmes and the studies conducted into this population (including the 2006 National Health Survey and ALADINO⁶ 2010-2011) and sets out the recommendations made by specialists within these initiatives⁷.

The next step forward being taken in Spain through the Food Safety and Nutrition Act passed in June 2011 is a significant one. To begin with, the new legislation provides a basic shared legal framework applicable to all initiatives and public authorities supervising food safety and the introduction of healthy nutritional habits and lifestyles. The Act rules that schools must be free of food and drink advertising. Likewise, food and drink provided by educational institutions by any means must comply with the nutritional criteria set out in the regulations. With regard to trans fatty acids, the new legislation establishes that industrial food companies must provide the public authorities with information regarding the content of such fats in their products. Lastly, there is support for self-regulatory codes of conduct regarding the content of food and drink advertising⁸.

Main conclusions

- **The impact of inaction.** If action is not taken to combat childhood obesity, according to IDEAS Foundation estimates practically **36% of children in Spain (one in three) will suffer from problems of overweight or obesity by 2020**, while the prevalence of obesity and overweight among the adult population could reach levels of 50% over the coming decade.
- **The biggest losers.** Childhood obesity in Spain affect all ages, genders and social strata, but above all the **population with the lowest socio-economic and educational levels**. This was confirmed by the Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equality's ALADINO 2010-2011 study. In Europe childhood obesity is also linked to the parents' low socio-economic status. Meanwhile, the level

6 The Spanish acronym corresponds to ALimentación, Actividad física, Desarrollo INfantil y Obesidad (Nutrition, Physical Activity, Child Development and Obesity). Study undertaken by the AESAN (Food Safety and Nutrition Agency) of the Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equality.

7 At two working groups held in April and October 2010 at the IDEAS Foundation headquarters the experts involved set out their vision from a range of perspectives (healthcare, nutrition, education, economics), calling for a report to be drawn up in order to help raise social awareness about this illness and its serious consequences, along with the adoption of effective measures to alleviate the problem. We are particularly grateful for their stimulus and support in effectively embarking on a study of childhood obesity.

8 In this regard, within the context of the Ministry of Health and Consumption's NAOS Strategy, the FIAB (Food and Drink Industry Federation) launched the PAOS code (2005) with the aim of establishing a set of guidelines for signatory companies in the development, execution and presentation of advertising messages focusing on children and young people.

The Challenge of Childhood Obesity

The Need for Collective Action

of income inequality or the relative poverty index are also linked to such prevalence. This situation demands a public response with a **particular focus on and support for underprivileged social groups**, as they are more vulnerable to the illness.

- **The path undertaken.** The IDEAS Foundation estimates that full implementation of the measures set out in the **Food Safety and Nutrition Act** passed in June 2011 **could succeed in reducing childhood obesity by up to 30% in Spain**, which would bring the rate of prevalence of overweight down to 20% by 2020 (the current figure is 33%).
- **The commitment for the future.** It is incumbent on the public authorities to safeguard the well-being of children in order to provide them with greater life expectancy at a moment in history when the epidemic in childhood obesity could lead the next generation in Spain to be **the first to live shorter lives on average than their parents**.
- **Chain of economic impacts.** If we arrest the increase in obesity, particularly among children, we would also expect, as a consequence of the reversal in this trend, to see a subsequent increase in the economic output of the population, **as obesity can lead to reduced participation in the labour market, with a consequent loss in productivity** of up to 15%⁹, thereby considerably limiting their life opportunities, ultimately leading to social exclusion.
- **Intensify efforts in the medium term.** Given the need to continue with systematic evaluation and detailed analysis following on from the entry into force on the Food Safety and Nutrition Act allowing us to assess the achievements made and the new targets set, it is felt that **within five years**, coinciding with the review of the NAOS Strategy, it would be relevant to observe **possible new additional actions introduced by the public authorities** which could serve to underpin the lines of operation already begun in order to assist in working towards this future goal, following consideration in light of the results achieved of the potential for progress with a view to achieving even greater reductions in

9 Various studies, including Gates et al., 2008, set out evidence regarding the loss of productivity associated with obesity. According to a report by the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2005), inappropriate nutrition at work may lead to losses of up to 20% efficiency and productivity in the workplace. Results published in the American Journal of Health Promotion (2009) revealed that obese people with type 2 diabetes lost between 11% and 15% of working hours (some 5.9 hours per week) as a result of health problems, compared with 9% (around 3.6 hours per week) in the case of those of normal weight. According to El Economista (2010), obesity and overweight in Mexico account for productivity losses of 23 billion pesos and 40 billion pesos per year in the health sector.

childhood. The main **task** would involve the implementation of supplementary measures in an attempt to cut childhood obesity by half, which would lead to levels of overweight among children **below 20% by 2020**.

- **Towards a comprehensive strategy.** In order to deal with the problem we must adopt a **multidisciplinary, multisectoral and multifactorial focus**. Advances in public policy need to be integrated within a comprehensive strategy binding together measures by converging different approaches, **involving a broad spectrum of connected actors** (public institutions, families, schools, health and education professionals, the food industry, associations, etc.). We can only combat the deficit in social awareness by presenting this as a true problem on a considerable scale and with serious consequences against which **we must all dedicate efforts within our own spheres**.
- **Types of combined measure.** The report's findings identified three major blocks where lines of action need to be concentrated simultaneously and in unison.

1. Support for a balanced diet

- The main aim of any policy to combat childhood should be to limit inappropriate intake in children's diets.
- Continued work is needed to improve the nutritional quality of school menus, an approach which has already begun through a range of programmes and institutional strategies.
- The most underprivileged require specific support programmes to strengthen school meal voucher schemes for such beneficiaries, together with a programme of education, physical and nutritional extracurricular activities.
- Particular support for those likely to be more heavily affected will serve to extend and consolidate healthy habits throughout the day, encouraging overspill into the family context while also fostering equal opportunities.

2. Education and information for healthy eating

- It is essential to strengthen education from a very early age, teaching children about the properties of all types of food and the way they should be combined in accordance with levels of physical activity.
- The vital importance of the nutritional habits of pregnant women in the prevalence of chronic illnesses in their children likewise demands an improvement in prenatal nutritional education for expectant mothers during pregnancy.
- It would be beneficial to implement projects to promote physical activity, with an emphasis on sport and strengthened cooperation among schools, teacher training bodies, the various tiers of government and sports clubs.
- Limits on the exposure of children to advertising by various media should be supplemented by means of public authority campaigns and programmes to reinforce positive nutritional habits.

3. Synergies and leadership to reduce childhood obesity

- More effective monitoring is required in order to establish precise data regarding the prevalence of childhood obesity for the purpose of quantitative and qualitative evaluation, along with the results of the programmes implemented and future public policy.
- The Observatory for Nutrition and Obesity Study referred to in the Food Safety and Nutrition Act (Article 38) should represent decisive progress as an information system for the periodic analysis of the position of the population in terms of nutrition and physical activity, and the evolution of obesity in Spain.
- Coordinated joint action by the Ministries of Education and of Health, Social Policy and Equality, together with the autonomous regions' Departments of Health and Education, could make use of positive synergies across the available resources on the basis of a transversal framework agreement. This effect could be reinforced through the extensive participation of civil society bodies (scientific societies, foundations, associations, etc.).
- The Special UN Summit on Non-Communicable Diseases¹⁰ (September 2011) represents the perfect forum to propose globally structured joint actions Spain must play a key role in the international debate on improving nutritional habits and lifestyles.

¹⁰ To be organised under the auspices of the UN General Assembly, with the support of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the World Health Organisation (WHO).

