

Obesity Among Poor Americans: Is Public Assistance the Problem?, by **Patricia K. Smith**. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2009. 197pp. \$22.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780826516367.

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Critics of welfare typically claim that public assistance leads to unintended consequences such as reduced work incentives, decreased marriage, and out-of-wedlock births. Patricia Smith argues that obesity has now earned a place on this list as well and aims to examine the extent to which the existing literature can offer empirical support for the claim that public assistance *causes* obesity. But to what degree is obesity actually being deployed as leverage against welfare in the United States, and to what degree has public assistance per se really been cast as a new and noteworthy culprit in the so-called "obesity epidemic"? Smith opens the introduction with the fact that Douglas Besharov of the American Enterprise Institute has argued, in testimony before a congressional committee, that the Food Stamp and National School Lunch programs contribute to obesity (p. 1). Beyond this point, however, the book does not offer much background on the current place or circulation of such arguments in policy or public health domains nor the extent to which they have achieved traction in debates over public assistance in particular. While it may very well be true that obesity is now propped up as an unintended consequence of welfare, more space could have been devoted to situating this claim and the sociopolitical controversy it inspires, mostly because it serves as the central motivation for the book.

Nevertheless, the causal question itself remains quite interesting, at least to this reader, and Smith does a wonderful job of engaging the empirical literature at hand. The volume of work that directly or indirectly relates to the basic question of whether public assistance causes obesity is large, so the project is ambitious and the author is to be commended for reviewing and organizing the literature from multiple disciplines

(e.g., economics, epidemiology, nutrition, psychology, etc.) in a careful, consistent, and highly thoughtful manner.

Smith employs a conceptual framework with four models or hypotheses, each of which would lead to the empirical observation of an association between public assistance and obesity: (1) public assistance causes obesity, (2) obesity causes public assistance, (3) poverty causes both public assistance and obesity, and (4) some "factor X" causes both public assistance and obesity. Each of these models is accorded a chapter in the book, and the author systematically summarizes and evaluates the existing evidence in support of each model. Moreover, sub-pathways are delineated within these models, which are also quite helpful in parsing out prior work.

For Model One, Smith concludes that programs such as the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and school food programs do not contribute to childhood obesity. For adults, Smith finds some evidence that participation in the food stamp program (FSP) is associated with a small-to-modest weight gain in women, likely through increased purchasing power and the monthly payment cycle, which can affect patterns of intake. Conclusions, however, remain tentative. For Model Two, there is sufficient evidence that obesity can function as a barrier to factors such as education, occupational attainment, earnings, and marital prospects among women, but no one has tested directly whether BMI affects the probability of being on public assistance. For Model Three, poverty leads to public assistance by definition. As for the influence of poverty on obesity, Smith focuses on how poverty influences food intake and physical activity. Potential mediators with varying degrees of empirical support include educational attainment, access to healthy foods, opportunities for physical activity, mental health, food insecurity, stress, and time preference. Lastly, Smith considers five possible "X factors" in Model Four: disabilities, mental illness, physical and sexual abuse, low intelligence, and high time preference. Only physical and sexual abuse garner empirical support as causes of both public assistance and obesity.

So what does one conclude? In the final chapter, Smith summarizes the evidence in a table showing that each of the four models finds some support, though some pathways are considered “possible” and while others are “probable” (p. 133). In particular, Model One, which taps the central concern that public assistance *causes* obesity, is “possible” in the case of women’s long-term food stamp receipt. But what is the relative contribution of each pathway (or subpathway) to the observed correlation between public assistance and obesity? Two pathways can be equally supported empirically but vary widely in significance or importance with respect to explaining population-level associations. Although it would have been helpful, Smith doesn’t really weigh in or speculate on this matter.

The issue of determining causality is raised throughout the book, and the author generally notes that random experiments would be ideal, but lacking such data, we need to focus on “studies that employ sound statistical techniques to adjust for the problems associated with nonexperimental design” (p. 6). A key contribution and strength of this book is that Smith is highly rigorous and systematic in her evaluation of the methodological strengths and limitations of prior work, making her overall assessment of each of the four models/hypotheses robust and well grounded. Given, however, the importance of methodological concerns in prioritizing one study over another, I think it might have been useful to include a short discussion of some of the techniques that are commonly used (e.g., fixed effects, instrumental variables, exogenous inputs, etc.). A variety of methods are frequently noted in passing without much explanation. On the other hand, it may be quite difficult to address these issues in a simple fashion, and a detailed discussion may be beyond the scope of this work.

Overall, the book is well written with clarity and consideration. Given the sheer volume of studies that are summarized one after another, however, the book can be a bit difficult as a front-to-back read. Nevertheless, some readers may have a particular interest in certain pathways, or subpathways, and for each component under consideration, the author provides a summary that is thorough

and an evaluation that is balanced and instructive. On the whole, Smith has taken on an immense volume of literature from several domains, and the overall review is really quite impressive. Mostly importantly, I think she has indeed arrived at the best answer we can have at this juncture to the question of whether public assistance leads to obesity among poor Americans.

Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide, by **Cass R. Sunstein**. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 199pp. \$21.95 cloth. ISBN: 9780195378016

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Cass Sunstein surveys what we know about the effects of conversational discourse in small face-to-face groups on questions of public policy. In the end, he is especially interested in a “crippled epistemology” (a marvelous phrase). The “extremes” of the title are especially bad if they are stupid, ill informed, and injurious. The cap of crippling epistemology is a group systematically building barriers to learning that they are wrong, by excluding people and evidence *because* they disagree.

He starts with innocuous effects of “polarization” in heterogeneous small groups discussing in unstructured (i.e., probably university) settings. People slightly liberal (e.g., Democrats) become more liberal; slightly conservative more conservative. So to speak, each side fills in blanks in a socially polarized worldview. Such drifts appear especially in the experiments with one-dimensional, socially-named divisions, about which people do not have deep feelings (e.g., in the United States, not abortion or capital punishment). Such divides have socially established zeros, where people satisfy the comment about Bertrand Russell, “such an open mind the wind blows through.” The one-dimensional character of experimental causes and outcomes means that the results cannot be generalized to multiparty systems: for example, voters for extreme Nazism in the last open Weimar election were strongly Protestant rather than Catholic, and strongly