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Do School Lunches Contribute to Childhood Obesity?

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The most recent figures show that 13 percent of children aged 6-11 are overweight – almost twice the rate of overweight in the early 1980s. There are few straightforward policy tools to combat the high level of overweight. Almost three quarters of school children eat a National School Lunch Program lunch, and consume about one-third of their total calories from this meal. Previous studies have established that the school lunch program lunches often fail to meet nutrition requirements, and have an especially high fat content. In this project, I assess whether the National School Lunch Program plays a role in the incidence of childhood overweight. I then employ a panel data set to follow children over time, and find that children who consume school lunches are about 2 percentile points more likely to be obese than those who brown bag their lunches. But since both groups of children enter kindergarten with the same obesity rates, the panel data suggests that the difference in obesity rates is not merely a function of fixed differences between children who select into the school lunch program. To assess the plausibility of this finding, I investigate the additional calories consumed by those in the school lunch program. Using NHANES food diary data, I find that children who eat school lunch consume 40-120 more calories at lunch than those who brown bag, but that both groups of children consume the same amount of calories the rest of the day (not including lunch). I estimate that for children an extra 40-120 calories per day would increase the incidence of overweight by 2 to 4 percentile points – the same as the observed increase in overweight. I estimate that if school lunches were made healthier and consistently met the nutrition requirements set for them, the childhood obesity rate would decline.

I. Introduction

Obesity is a pressing national health problem. Recent statistics indicate that 30 percent of adults are obese, and another 30 percent are overweight. Thirteen percent of 6-11 year olds are overweight – up from 4 percent in the mid-1970s.¹ A recent 450-page report by the National Research Council even reported that one-quarter of all American cats and dogs are obese. The causes of the recent surge in obesity are not well understood, and there are few policy interventions that have been able to reduce obesity.

The National School Lunch Program serves lunch to almost 30 million students – 60 percent of the total student population. Although a large fraction of school lunch participants get their lunch free (48 percent) or at a reduced price (9 percent), a substantial number (43 percent) are from non-poor families and pay full price. As a result, if school lunches are contributing to childhood overweight, making lunches healthier could potentially impact a large number of children across socio-economic status, race, and geography boundaries.

The government plays a large role in the school lunch program, providing \$6.1 billion in total cash payments to local schools.² In addition, the government provides another 15.5 cents per lunch served in surplus food commodities. Although the government's bankrolling of the program might suggest that they are able to influence what is served as part of school lunches, they seem to not leverage that influence

¹ Overweight in children is not typically referred to as “obesity,” though I will use the terms interchangeably in this paper. Overweight is defined as a body mass index (BMI, the ratio of weight in kg to height in meters squared) that surpasses the 95th percentile of a fixed distribution for a child's age and gender. For elementary school students, the cutoff is around a BMI of 20.

² For comparison, Title I provided \$9.8 billion in 2002. The government reimburses schools \$2.14 for every free lunch served, \$1.74 for each reduced price lunch, and \$0.20 for each full price lunch.

effectively to date. For example, in 1995 new guidelines were instituted for healthier school lunches, but even today few schools actually meet those goals.

In this paper, I show that school lunch eaters consume more calories at lunch – but not at other times of the day – than brown baggers. These additional calories could lead to a 2-4 percentage point higher obesity rate among school lunch eaters. Furthermore my results show that, holding all else constant, there was no difference between school lunch eaters and brown baggers when they entered kindergarten, before they were exposed to school lunches. After they have been in school for a couple of years, though, school lunch eaters do experience higher obesity rates than brown baggers. If school lunches were made healthier, a significant decline in childhood obesity would likely occur.

II. Previous Research and Policy Context

Economists have relatively recently come to be interested in the study of obesity and overweight. In a recent paper, Cutler, Glaeser and Shapiro (2003) study the doubling of obesity rates among adults over the past 20 years. They estimate that the increase in obesity can be accounted for by a calorie imbalance of 100 to 150 calories per day, and find that the recent increase is likely due to eating more calories (opposed to burning fewer calories through activity).³ Comparing recent food diaries to those collected in the early 1980s, they find that the increase in calorie intake appears to come from the consumption of more meals and snacks per day, and not from “super-sizing” – that is, eating a larger number of calories per meal.

³ Lakdawalla and Philipson, 2002, find that much of the increase in body weight over the past century is due to decreased physical activity – largely from workers moving away from physically demanding jobs and toward sedentary ones.

Even less work has been done by economists to examine overweight among children. Anderson, Butcher and Levine (2003) use the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to follow children over time, and measure the effects of increased maternal employment rates over the past 30 years – including all the attendant changes in children’s lives that come when mothers become employed, such as eating more pre-prepared meals and potentially playing outside less. Altogether, increased maternal employment can only explain less than one percentage point of the 9 percentage point increase in overweight.⁴

The role of schools in addressing children’s overweight has gotten increased policy attention. In 1995, after research showed that many school lunches failed to meet nutrition requirements, Congress passed the “School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children.” The new policy required food served to meet one-third of the child recommended daily allowance (RDA) of calories, protein, calcium, iron, and vitamins A and C, and for no more than 30 percent of calories to come from fat.⁵ In addition, schools were to restrict foods of “minimal nutritional value” such as soda. In a subsequent survey, two-thirds of cafeteria planners reported that the new guidelines had at least somewhat changed their school menus.⁶

School districts around the country have also responded to the obesity epidemic. New York City received considerable press attention when they announced they were mounting an “aggressive” campaign to make school lunches healthier, developing

⁴ Anderson and Butcher are currently investigating the impact of vending machines, which are much more prevalent in high schools. Over 60 percent of high schools have vending machines, while only 11 percent of elementary schools do.

⁵ Saturated fat was to account for fewer than 12 percent of calories.

⁶ By my calculations of the SNDA-2, fewer than 4 percent of schools meet all of the guidelines outlined in the Healthy Children Initiative.

healthier recipes for some favorite foods, banning beef ravioli and potato salad altogether, and removing soda and candy from vending machines. In essence, their “aggressive” campaign will serve to meet the 1995 lunch standards by 2008. Oakland, California was the first major school district to ban junk food in vending machines in January, 2002, which cost them an estimated \$650,000 in lost revenues annually. Many other school districts have jumped on the bandwagon; on June 23, 2004, Chicago Public Schools banned vending machines in elementary and middle schools, and imposed a requirement that snacks sold in vending machines in high schools meet reasonably stringent nutritional standards. Focusing on calories burned instead of calories eaten, Texas recently toughened their gym requirement. In 1995, in an effort to strengthen academic achievement, students were no longer required to take gym class daily, but the state school board reversed itself in 2001, requiring at least 135 minutes of gym per week in order to “combat childhood obesity, heart disease and diabetes.”

III. Measuring the Impact of School Lunches

Students who eat school lunches are more likely to be overweight than their classmates who brown bag their lunch. But, as mentioned above, this correlation could reflect other characteristics that influence both the probability of being obese and the probability of eating school lunch, since of course children are not randomly assigned into school lunch and brown bag treatments. There are all sorts of observable and unobservable factors that predict the likelihood that a child will eat a school lunch – for example, low-income, African American and Hispanic children are more likely to eat school lunch. Unfortunately, many of these same observable and unobservable factors

are also associated with being overweight, so a naïve regression of school lunch on overweight may overstate the causal impact of lunch if not all other related factors are perfectly controlled. As described below, I take several steps to address this, including looking at changes in obesity over time, attempting a regression-discontinuity approach, and propensity-score adjusting. These approaches suggest that, all else equal, children who eat school lunches are about 2 percentage points more likely to be overweight than brown baggers. I then show food diary data that indicates that children who eat school lunches consume an extra 60 or so calories per day, and that a calorie increase of this magnitude is large enough to cause the observed obesity increase.

Changes over time

One way to isolate the effect of school lunches is to follow a cohort of children over time starting at school entry. If children who eat different types of lunches enter school with similar levels of obesity, but after a few years end up with different obesity rates by school lunch type, this may indicate that school lunches contribute directly to obesity. Fortunately, there is a dataset available that allows such a comparison to be made. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K) is a panel data following children from kindergarten through first grade, collected by the US Department of Education.⁷ The dataset covers approximately 15,000 students in 1000 different schools and collected a wide range of information on children, their families and their schools. In addition, children’s heights and weights were directly measured by the survey collectors at the beginning and end of kindergarten, and at the end of first grade.⁸

⁷ The latest panel – following the same children through 3rd grade – should be available this summer.

⁸ Data were collected on a subset of the respondents at the beginning of 1st grade as well.

I limit the analysis in this section to only white students who are ineligible for free or reduced-price lunch (who attend schools that participate in the school lunch program). As a result, as shown in Table 1, students who brown bag their lunches look quite similar along many dimensions compared to those who eat school lunches. Tables 1 and 2 compare students by lunch type conditional on school fixed effects interacted with mother's labor force status (that is, whether she is in the labor force – including employed, unemployed and working part time – or not). As a result, the differences are measured between school lunch eaters and brown baggers in the same school who have mothers in the same employment category. As shown in Table 1, brown baggers and school lunch eaters have parents with similar education levels, have similar test scores, and had similar weights both at birth and at kindergarten entry. There are some differences, though: brown baggers come from slightly larger families and have slightly larger numbers of children's books in their homes, while school lunch eaters were more likely to have been in day care before kindergarten (even conditional on mothers' employment status). While I control directly for all of these characteristics in the results that follow, if there are also unobservable differences between the groups that impact the trajectory of obesity, then the effect of school lunches will be biased.⁹

Table 2 shows regression-adjusted results. When children enter kindergarten, the type of school lunch they will go on to eat in kindergarten and first grade is not associated with any differences in obesity rates, whether or not covariates are controlled. By the end of first grade, however, school lunch eaters are 2.4 percentage points more likely to be overweight, controlling for observable characteristics and school-by-

⁹ Since the children have similar levels of overweight at kindergarten entry, the unobservable characteristics would have to impact the change in overweight and not the level.

mother's-employment fixed effects. When baseline obesity is included as an explanatory variable, the difference in obesity rates edges down to about 2 percentage points.¹⁰ In either case, after two years of exposure to school lunches children are 2 percentage points (on a base of 9 percent) more likely to be overweight than their classmates who brown bag their lunch.

Specification checks

One cause of concern in interpreting these results might be that even though brown baggers and lunch eaters come into school with the same rates of overweight, there might be other changes in the child's family that would contribute to overweight and be correlated with lunch status. For example, since Anderson et al. (2003) find that maternal employment predicts childhood overweight, if a mother returns to work when her child enters kindergarten and no longer has time to prepare healthy meals (including a brown bagged lunch), that may contribute to a child becoming overweight in kindergarten and first grade. Other, harder to measure differences may creep in around the same time and be correlated with lunch status. For example, parents who care more about health may be more likely to enroll their children in after-school sports and brown bag their lunches, but since after-school and club sports usually begin in kindergarten or first grade, the impact they have on reducing overweight may not kick in until after kindergarten enrollment.

¹⁰ As a check on these results, I have limited the sample to only those who change obesity status between kindergarten and first grade. School lunch eaters are much more likely to move from normal weight to overweight. In addition, half-day kindergartners (who do not eat lunch at school) do not show a difference in obesity rate by first-grade lunch status during kindergarten. In first grade, though, the obesity gap opens among these children between brown baggers and lunch buyers.

In order to test the robustness of the findings, in Table 3 I run several alternate specifications. In about 10 percent of the sample, mothers enter employment after their children enter kindergarten. When I limit the sample to children whose mothers did not change employment status between their child's entry into kindergarten and the end of first grade, the impact of school lunch on overweight remains about the same. Similarly, when I limit to children who already had school age siblings, or those who still have younger pre-school age siblings – on the basis that the impact of lunch on overweight might differ by family structure – there is no change in the magnitude of school lunch. The effect is also robust to limiting the sample only to obesity “movers” – that is, only including those who move from overweight in kindergarten to non-overweight by the end of first grade, and vice versa. School lunch eaters are much more likely to move into overweight.¹¹

I employed several other tests to see whether there was an unobserved shift in the propensity toward overweight starting in kindergarten that may have impacted children likely to eat school lunches differently. The results are also robust to redefining the outcome of interest from “overweight” to “at risk of overweight,” which is defined as the 85th percentile of a fixed distribution of body mass index conditional on age, and to using body mass index itself instead of a binary indicator for overweight.¹² I also separately examined children in half-day kindergarten who were not given the opportunity to eat lunch at school. Their later school lunch status does not impact overweight by the

¹¹ I also tested to make sure that there was no difference, on average, in the height or age of children by school lunch status.

¹² A promising approach that has not panned out was to leverage the sharp discontinuity in eligibility for free- and reduced-price lunches. While those with incomes just below the reduced-price lunch cutoff of 185 percent were more likely to eat school lunch and be overweight at the end of first grade than their peers above the income cutoff, they also entered kindergarten with higher rates of overweight. It is possible that other programs with similar income cutoffs – such as Head Start or Medicaid – may impact overweight before school starts, which would be interesting to test in the ECLS-Birth Cohort.

beginning of kindergarten or first grade, but does impact overweight by the end of first grade after they have been exposed to school lunch. (Add Table 4).

A random subset of students was surveyed at the beginning of first grade, giving me the opportunity to investigate whether school lunch status has an impact on weight gain (or loss) over the summer. I find that – conditional on obesity at the end of kindergarten – school lunch status does not predict change in weight over the summer.

Up to this point, we have concentrated on the impact of additional calories consumed on obesity. But a person's weight is a function of calorie intake and calorie outflow, and it may be the case that children who brown bag their lunches are for some reason more active and that is the cause of the weight disparity. Since all results have been estimated conditional on school fixed effects, we would not expect differences in school-time physical activity to be driving the results – for example, all students are subject to the same physical education requirements, regardless of school lunch status. But there may be important differences in non-school activity levels that are correlated with lunch status. The ECLS data collected limited information about after-school activities such as participation in sports and dance, and also parental assessment of a child's activity level and amount of weekly aerobic activity. While measures of activity are directly related to overweight (for example, children who are “less active than other children” are 13 points more likely to be overweight), these activity measures are not related to a child's school lunch status.¹³ One drawback of these measures is that they are measured at the end of kindergarten and not at baseline.

IV. Is the Impact Plausible?

¹³ Other measures of parental inputs – such as trips to the museum – do not differ by lunch status, either.

I find that children who eat a National School Lunch Program lunch for two school years are 2 percentage points more likely to be overweight. In this section, I provide evidence that this is a plausible magnitude. On average, students eating a school lunch consume an extra 40 calories per day – all at lunch – and holding all else constant, that increase could account for the observed weight gain.

Measuring Calories in School Lunches

In order to measure the difference in average calories consumed by brown baggers and school lunch eaters, I employ two food diary datasets. Using such data is often problematic because food consumption is notoriously underreported.¹⁴ Furthermore, the very act of recording it is known to alter one's food intake. These problems may be attenuated in this case because I am measuring the difference in calories. If calories are underreported by the same amount by both groups of children, for example, the difference in calories would still be accurate.¹⁵

The datasets I use are the NHANES III, a nationally representative dataset collected by the Centers for Disease Control in 1988-94, and the Continuing Survey of Food Intake by Individuals (CSFII), also nationally representative but collected by the USDA. The datasets took different approaches to measuring children's food intake. In the NHANES, children under age 12 were interviewed in the presence of a parent so that the parent could assist the child's recall. The CSFII, on the other hand, was particularly geared toward estimating the amount of plate waste; as a result, children were

¹⁴ For example, Cutler et al. (2003) simulate that if American men were really consuming the number of calories reported in NHANES food diaries, they would have an average weight of a mere 108 pounds.

¹⁵ It is possible that school lunches are more accurately reported if, for example, the family has a school lunch menu that they use as an aid when reporting the child's intake. On the other hand, if a parent packed the child's brown bag lunch then they may have a similarly good recollection of the child's intake.

interviewed without their parents so they would be more likely to be honest about which foods they actually ate and which ones they traded or discarded.¹⁶

Table 6 presents regression results where the first dependent variable is the number of calories consumed at lunch, and the second is all non-lunch calories consumed. The sample is limited to weekdays not during the summer.¹⁷ Students report – and I use as the school lunch variable – whether they eat school lunch “every day” or “most days;” there is no direct information about whether they ate the school lunch on the particular days that the food diary was collected. In addition, defining what is “lunch” is non-trivial, so I take several approaches. The food diaries collect information on what is eaten, when, where, and how the eater would categorize it (e.g. breakfast, snack, etc.). One measure of “lunch,” of course, is everything eaten that the respondent categorizes as “lunch.” One problem arises with this definition because there are multiple words in Spanish for lunch – some children report the noontime meal as “almuerzo” while others report it as “comida.” Unfortunately, “comida” can also be used to describe other meals, so a definition that incorporates these three categories (lunch, almuerzo and comida) as “lunch” will also contain an evening meal in many cases. To address this problem, one can instead define “lunch” as anything eaten around noontime, regardless of the name of the meal. It turns out that because of tight school and cafeteria schedules, some students eat lunch as early as 10 AM.¹⁸ As a result, defining “lunch” as anything eaten between 10 AM (after breakfast, but early enough to catch early lunch times) and 1:30 PM (before

¹⁶ In the next version of this paper (!!!), I will include a table of summary statistics from both datasets so among other things we can compare the average number of calories reported in each.

¹⁷ There is no direct measure of whether the diary day is a “school day,” though the location of the consumption (e.g. “at school”) is reported.

¹⁸ Many of the students who eat lunch early in the day (reasonably!) report the meal as a “snack” and report eating “lunch” either after school is over or not at all, so the category-based definition of lunch would have excluded these students’ participation in the school lunch program.

after-school snacks, but late enough for late lunch shifts) appears to be a reasonable definition, and is my preferred method.¹⁹

As shown in Table 6, students in the NHANES who eat a school lunch daily appear to consume 46 more calories at lunch than those who regularly brown bag their lunch, but consume the same number of calories at other times of the day. That is, controlling for observable characteristics such as age, race, gender, parents' BMI and family size, school lunch eaters consume about 40 extra calories per day, but this additional consumption comes entirely at lunch. The next version of the paper will have comparable results from the CSFII. In the meantime, results from that dataset come from a Mathematica Policy Research report, which finds that school lunch participants consume an extra 120 calories per day – again, all at lunch. Although they make different choices about how to define lunch and which variables to control that will tend to maximize the difference between school lunch and brown bag lunch, their results are reasonable. It appears that school lunch participants consume between 40 and 120 extra calories per day compared to brown baggers, and all of the difference comes from eating a larger lunch.²⁰

Measuring the Potential Effect of Additional Calories

Are as few as 40 extra calories per day enough to cause a measurable difference in obesity rates in children? Following the approach in Shofield (1985), I simulate the

¹⁹ Another method that seems reasonable at first glance is to separate all food consumed at “school” and at “non-school”, but this inadvertently includes school breakfasts and any after-school snacks eaten at school during after-school programs or sports events.

²⁰ It is worth noting that this does not imply that brown baggers themselves eat a “healthy” lunch. The number of calories consumed does not indicate whether the food packed is largely prepackaged – such as “Lunchables,” potato chips, or yogurt in frightening and unnatural colors – or is a homemade sandwich and fruit. In future work, I hope to investigate how the composition of brown bag lunches has changed over time and whether that can account for any of the large increase in children’s overweight.

potential impacts of additional calories for first graders, based on the following equation²¹:

$$K = a + (B + E)*W + 0.1K$$

where K is caloric intake in kilocalories, and W is weight in kilograms. The constants a and B represent the Basal Metabolic Rate for females and males ages 3-10, and vary only by gender in the current simulation. E is the energy expenditure constant, which represents the amount of physical activity the children engage in; calories burned through physical activity depend both on E and on the child's weight.²² The final term in the equation represents the thermic effect of food – that is, the calories burned from eating and digesting food.

Results from the simulation are presented in Table 7. If first graders consume just an additional 40 calories, then the rate of overweight increases by 1.7 percentage points. As a result, we could expect to observe school lunch eaters' obesity rates to be about 2 percentage points higher than brown baggers' rates, all else equal. If the number of additional calories in a school lunch is closer to 120 as the Mathematica Policy Research report suggests, the difference in obesity rates could be as high as 7 percentage points. In either case, the seemingly small difference in calories – if consumed every day – could lead to a measurable increase in overweight.²³

V. Potential Impacts on Hunger

²¹ This is similar to the simulations in Cutler, Glaeser and Shapiro (2003.)

²² In the simulation, I hold constant the amount of physical activity when more calories and weight are added. In reality, children may be less active if they weigh more, and this method would therefore understate the increase in obesity from extra calories.

²³ To put the calorie increase in context, a can of cola has about 145 calories and a “fun size” Snickers candy bar has about 70 calories.

It appears that school lunches increase the probability that a child is overweight by about 2 percentage points, and this suggests the relatively straightforward policy intervention of making school lunches healthier. But since the school lunch program is primarily intended to combat hunger, it is important to also consider the potential impact of any policy changes on the underfed. For example, reducing calories served by 40 across the board increases the simulated rate of underweight by 0.5 percentage points – from 1.4 to 1.9.

One potential method to address underweight is through the school breakfast program. Fifteen percent of children who are underweight and from low-income families attend schools that do not offer the school breakfast program, even though they participate in the school lunch program. In addition, underweight students who do attend schools with a breakfast program are less likely to participate in the program than their classmates who are not underweight. Encouraging eligible students to enroll in the school breakfast program could offset any increase in underweight associated with reducing calories in school lunches.

It also appears to be the case that – as shown in Table 8 – schools with a higher fraction of low-income students already serve healthier lunches.²⁴ On average, schools with the lowest percent of low-income students serve lunches with about 80 more calories than schools with the highest percent of low-income students. Other nutrition measures – such as meeting the standards for iron, calcium and vitamins, or keeping the percentage of calories from fat below 30 percent – are either flat or improve as the fraction of low-income students increases. This implies that an intervention in favor of

²⁴ The underlying data in this table come from the SNDA-II, a survey of school and district food services with a sample size of about 1700. Note that even though low-income students are more likely to be obese, this does not appear to be caused by school lunches.

healthier lunches should likely be targeted at higher-income schools, which are less likely to have students suffering hunger.

VI. Conclusions

When compared to their classmates who brown bag their lunches, school lunch participants are 2 percentage points more likely to be overweight – all else equal.

Analysis of food diary data suggests that school lunch eaters consume between 40 and 120 calories more at lunch than brown baggers, but both groups consume the same number of calories the rest of the day. A simulation of the relationship between weight and caloric intake among children indicates that as few as 40 additional calories per day could lead to a 2 percentage point difference in obesity rates. Although this explains a relatively small part of the overall obesity rate, and is not a strong candidate for describing the cause of the large and rapid increase in the rate, it suggests a relatively straightforward policy intervention and – since the Federal government spends over \$6 billion per year on the program – one in which the government wields considerable leverage.

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