New York University
Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service

Public Policy and Obesity Research (UPADM-GP 237)

Prof: Brian Elbel, PhD, MPH

Instructor Information:
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Course:
Tuesday, 3:30 – 6 pm
Location WAVE 566A (24 Waverly Pl).

For Administrative Matters:
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Objectives:
Obesity is a large, pressing public health problem in the United States and, increasingly, across the globe. In contrast to some other public health problems, we have yet to truly establish population-level solutions. Increasing attention in the policymaking and research world is being given to policy and environmental approaches to combat obesity, and as such obesity policy is the topic of a growing amount of research. This is a very new field, and much of the research is contradictory, not well interpreted by the media or policy makers, and is generally sparse, relative to some other fields (like smoking policy). In this half semester course, seek to meet the following objectives:

- Understand the larger set of issues involved when performing or critically appraising obesity policy research.
- For a number of key obesity policies, understand the current state of knowledge with respect to effectiveness or potential for effectiveness.
- For these same policies, understand the key research tensions or difficulties.
- Be able to both express the above in verbal and written formats.

Prerequisites:

Format:
The first class will be an overview to the course and to obesity policy research. For each subsequent class, I will give an overview lecture on the specific topic—to set the stage and frame the larger discussion. Then, the class will be run in a “seminar style”. Working in groups, students will:
a) give a brief overview of the “state of the literature”, b) go into greater depth on the 2-3 papers assigned each day (further info below), and c) propose additional next research steps, including how one might do these next stage studies, and d) state what conclusions you believe should be drawn from a policy perspective. We will then engage in a hopefully vibrant and engaging class discussion on these points, in a way that challenges assumptions, probes for further evidence and draws out key points.

Course Requirements:

Readings:
Given that this is a seminar, it is extremely important that you fully read/absorb the assigned reading before each course. In such a small, discussion oriented class it will be (very, painfully) obvious if you have not done this work. I really look forward to vibrant discussion.

Presentations:
In groups, everyone will give at least one presentation over 6 weeks in the class. These presentations can include PowerPoint or not, your choice; however, they should probably show data/results from the papers in some capacity. They will follow my overview lecture, which will include the following: a) an overview of the policy/policies under discussion for the day (what is it, how is it structured, key points, etc.), b) the historical context, c) current state of the debate about the policy. That means you don’t need to include this information. Your presentation should focus on the assigned articles. More specifically:

I. What is the goal(s) of the assigned articles?
II. How does that relate back to the policy(ies) under discussion?
III. What was the research design for the study?
IV. What data were used and/or collected?
V. What statistical analysis was used? (basic sense is fine)
VI. What were the results of the study?
VII. Do the results imply correlation or causation?
VIII. What do you think of the results? What conclusions should be drawn from the studies? Do the results within or across papers agree or disagree?
IX. What are the obvious next steps from a research perspective?

This is not a presentation where you will move on from beginning to end without discussion; expect to be interrupted by your classmates and me often with observations, questions, discussion. You are keying up the discussion and issues, and are responsible for leading it, but everyone is expected to contribute.

Please note: Some of these articles are difficult, either from a statistical and/or design perspective. They will be a challenge, but you will be much better off if you persevere and get as much out of them as you can. You will be expected to understand the statistical nuance or detailed intricacies of the study design. I, and/or your classmates, can help fill in the holes.
Grading:

20%: Choose a paper (with approval from instructor) not assigned in the class and write a 2-3 page critique. Due during class IV.

40%: Design a study that would advance one of the topics examined in the course. Describe the policy approach examined, study design, data collection, strengths, limitations, next steps. Due at the end of the course. Probably about 3-5 pages needed.

20%: The quality of your group presentation, where all students in the group will receive the same grade.

20%: Participation: You will be directly graded on the quality of your participation in the larger discussion in the seminar. Note that this is not quantity, but quality—do your comments advance the discussion in meaningful ways?

Course Outline and Readings:

The following represents the 7 weeks of the course, with readings potentially subject to change.

March 21st
Overview: Obesity Policy Research and the Course


b. Skim this: [https://www.nap.edu/read/13275/chapter/1]

March 28th
Access to Health/Unhealthy Food/Build Environment: New supermarkets, farmers markets, zoning changes, walkability


April 4th
School-Based Policies: USDA School Standards, School Food Policies


April 11th – Guest Lecture, Andrew Breck, NYU Wagner
Benefit Design: Food stamps and WIC limitations, restrictions, subsidies


April 18th
Pricing: Taxes for unhealthy foods and subsidies for health food


April 25th
Information: Calorie Labeling, Front-of-Package labeling


May 2nd
Marketing: Marketing to Children, Television, Internet
