

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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Office Hours: TBD/by appointment

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 21<sup>st</sup>

Overview: Obesity Policy Research and the Course

- a. “Does X Really Cause Y”? [http://www.ernestoamaral.com/docs/dcp854b-132/dowd\\_town\(2002\).pdf](http://www.ernestoamaral.com/docs/dcp854b-132/dowd_town(2002).pdf)
- b. Skim this: <https://www.nap.edu/read/13275/chapter/1>

### March 28<sup>th</sup>

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

- a. Cummins, S., Flint, E., & Matthews, S. A. (2014). New neighborhood grocery store increased awareness of food access but did not alter dietary habits or obesity. *Health Affairs*, 33(2), 283–291.
- b. Currie, J., DellaVigna, S., Moretti, E., & Pathania, V. (2010). The effect of fast food restaurants on obesity and weight gain. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 2(3), 32–63.
- c. Jerrett M, Almanza E, et al. (2013). Smart Growth Community Design and Physical Activity in Children. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, Oct; 45(4): 386-9

### April 4<sup>th</sup>

School-Based Policies: USDA School Standards, School Food Policies

- a. Turner, L., & Chaloupka, F.J. (2014). Perceived reactions of elementary school students to changes in school lunches after implementation of the United States Department of Agriculture’s new meals standards: Minimal backlash, but rural and socioeconomic disparities exist. *Childhood Obesity*, 10(4), 349–356.

- b. Cohen, J.F., Richardson, S., Parker, E., Catalano, P.J. & Rimm, E.B. (2014). Impact of the new U.S. Department of Agriculture school meal standards on food selection, consumption, and waste. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 46(4), 388–394.
- c. Taber, D.R., Chriqui, J.F., Powell, L., & Chaloupka, F.J. (2013). Association between state laws governing school meal nutrition content and student weight status: Implications for new USDA school meal standards. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 167(6), 513–519.

#### **April 11<sup>th</sup> – Guest Lecture, Andrew Breck, NYU Wagner**

Benefit Design: Food stamps and WIC limitations, restrictions, subsidies

- a. Hoynes, H.W., Schanzenbach, D.W., & Almond, D. (2012). *Long run impacts of childhood access to the safety net*. National Bureau on Economic Research. Retrieved from <http://www.nber.org/papers/w18535>.
- b. Kong, A., Odoms-Young, A.M., Schiffer, L.A., Kim, Y., Berbaum, M.L., Porter, S.J., Blumstein, L.B., Bess, S.L. & Fitzgibbon, M.L. (2014). The 18-month impact of special supplemental nutrition program for women, infants, and children food package revisions on diets of recipient families. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 46(6), 543–551.
- c. Chiasson, M.A., Findley, S.E., Sekhobo, J.P., Scheinmann, R., Edmunds, L.S., Faly, A.S., & McLeod, N.J. (2013). Changing WIC changes what children eat. *Obesity*, 21(7), 1423–1429.

#### **April 18<sup>th</sup>**

Pricing: Taxes for unhealthy foods and subsidies for health food

- a. Hanks, A., Wansink, B., Just, D., Smith, L., Cawley, J., Kaiser, H., Sobal, J., Wethington, E., & Schulze, W. (2013). From Coke to Coors: A field study of a fat tax and its unintended consequences. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 45(4), 40.
- b. Falbe et al. (2016). Impact of the Berkeley Excise Tax on Sugar-Sweetened Beverage Consumption. *American Journal of Public Health*, Oct; 106(10).
- c. Epstein, L.H., Dearing, K.K., Roba, L.G., & Finkelstein, E. (2010). The influence of taxes and subsidies on energy purchased in an experimental purchasing study. *Psychological Science*, 21(3), 406–14.

#### **April 25<sup>th</sup>**

Information: Calorie Labeling, Front-of-Package labeling

- a. Bollinger, B., Leslie, P., & Sorensen, A. (2011). Calorie posting in chain restaurants. *American Economic Journal: Economic Policy*, 3(1), 91–128.
- b. Elbel, B., Mijanovich, T., Dixon, L.B., Abrams, C., Weitzman, B., Kersh, R., Auchincloss, A.H., & Ogedegbe, G. (2013). Calorie labeling, fast food purchasing and restaurant visits. *Obesity*, 21(11), 2172–2179.
- c. Roberto, C.A., Bragg, M.A., Schwartz, M.B., Seamans, M.J., Musicus, A., Novak, N., & Brownell, K.D. (2012). Facts up front versus traffic light food labels: A randomized controlled trial. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 43(2), 134–141.

#### **May 2<sup>nd</sup>**

Marketing: Marketing to Children, Television, Internet

- a. Halford, J.C., Boyland, E.J., Hughes, G.M., Stacey, L., McKean, S., & Dovey, T.M. (2008). Beyond-brand effect of television food advertisements on food choice in children: the effects of weight status. *Public Health Nutrition*, *11*(9), 897–904.
- c. Roberto, C.A., Baik, J., Harris, J.L., & Brownell, K. D. (2010). Influence of licensed characters on children’s taste and snack preferences. *Pediatrics*, *126*(1), 88–93.
- d. Robinson, T.N., Borzekowski, D.L.G., Matheson, D.M., & Kraemer, H.C. (2007). Effects of fast food branding on young children’s taste preferences. *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, *161*(8), 792–797.