Short Communication

Socio-economic disparities in Australian adolescents’ eating behaviours

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Abstract

Objective: To assess the association between socio-economic position (SEP) and poor eating behaviours in a large representative sample of Australian secondary-school students.

Design: Cross-sectional survey of students’ vegetable, fruit, sugar-sweetened beverage and fast-food consumption assessed using validated instruments and collected via a web-based self-report format.

Setting: Secondary schools across all Australian states and territories.

Subjects: Secondary-school students (n 12 188; response rate: 54 %) aged 12–17 years participating in the 2009–10 National Secondary Students’ Diet and Activity (NaSSDA) survey.

Results: Overall, 25 % of students reported consuming ≤1 serving of vegetables/d and 29 % reported eating ≤1 serving of fruit/d. Fourteen per cent of students reported drinking at least 1–2 cups of sugar-sweetened beverages/d while 9 % reported eating fast food ≥3 times/week. After adjusting for other demographic factors, students of lower-SEP areas were more likely to report low intake of vegetables (F(4, 231) = 3.61, P = 0.007) and high frequency of consumption of sugar-sweetened beverages (F(4, 231) = 8.41, P < 0.001) and fast food (F(4, 231) = 4.59, P = 0.001) compared with students of high-SEP neighbourhoods. A positive SEP association was found for fruit consumption among female students only (F(4, 231) = 4.20, P = 0.003). Those from lower-SEP areas were also more likely to engage in multiple poor eating behaviours (F(4, 231) = 5.80, P < 0.001).

Conclusions: Results suggest that socio-economic disparities in Australian adolescents’ eating behaviours do exist, with students residing in lower-SEP neighbourhoods faring less well than those from high-SEP neighbourhoods. Reducing social inequalities in eating behaviours among young people should be a key consideration of future preventive strategies.

Socio-economic position (SEP) is inversely associated with obesity in adolescents and with poorer adolescent diets. International research and review articles have generally found that low SEP is associated with lower consumption of fruit and vegetables among adolescents. However, Australian data are less definitive. A national survey of 654 adolescents found a significant positive association between SEP and fruit consumption (both sexes) and vegetables (girls only), a community-based study of 2529 Victorian adolescents found a positive association between SEP and adolescent fruit consumption, while a cross-sectional survey of more than 18 000 Australian secondary students found no significant association between SEP and adolescent fruit and vegetable consumption.

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