Growth Trajectories of Refugee and Nonrefugee Children in the United States

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BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES: Limited data examine longitudinal nutrition outcomes of refugee children after United States resettlement. Among refugee children, our aims were to (1) assess the changes in weight-based nutritional status between baseline (0–3 months) and 10-24 months after arrival and (2) compare the BMI (BMIz) or weight-for-length z score (WFLz) trajectories to nonrefugee children for up to 36 months after arrival.

METHODS: We conducted a retrospective study of refugees aged 0-16 years from Washington and Pennsylvania and compared them with an age and sex-matched nonrefugee low-income sample from Washington. Data included anthropometric measurements from the initial screening medical visit and subsequent primary care visits. Multilevel linear mixed-effects regression models evaluated the change in BMIz or WFLz trajectory.

RESULTS: The study included 512 refugee and 1175 nonrefugee children. The unadjusted prevalence of overweight/obesity increased from 8.9% to 20% ($P < .001$) for 2- to 16-year-old refugees from baseline to 10-24 months. Refugees (2–16 years old) had a steeper increase in their BMIz per 12 months compared with nonrefugees (coefficient 0.18 vs 0.03; $P < .001$). Refugees <2 years old had a less steep increase in their WFLz per 12 months compared with nonrefugees (coefficient 0.12 vs 0.36, $P = .002$).

CONCLUSIONS: Older refugee children exhibited a higher risk of obesity than nonrefugees, whereas refugees <2 years old exhibited a slower increase in their risk of obesity than nonrefugee children. All age groups experienced increasing obesity prevalence. Targeted and culturally tailored obesity prevention interventions may mitigate health and nutrition inequities among refugee children.

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