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Charles Courtemanche  
Georgia State University and NBER

Josh Pinkston  
University of Louisville

Christopher Ruhm  
University of Virginia, NBER, and IZA

George Wehby  
University of Iowa and NBER

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# Can Changing Economic Factors Explain the Rise in Obesity?

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Charles Courtemanche\*

Assistant Professor of Economics, Georgia State University  
Faculty Research Fellow, National Bureau of Economic Research  
[ccourtemanche@gsu.edu](mailto:ccourtemanche@gsu.edu)

Josh Pinkston

Assistant Professor of Economics, University of Louisville  
[josh.pinkston@louisville.edu](mailto:josh.pinkston@louisville.edu)

Christopher Ruhm

Professor of Public Policy and Economics, University of Virginia  
Research Associate, National Bureau of Economic Research  
Research Fellow, IZA  
[cjr6e@eservices.virginia.edu](mailto:cjr6e@eservices.virginia.edu)

George Wehby

Associate Professor of Health Management and Policy and Economics, University of Iowa  
Research Associate, National Bureau of Economic Research  
[george-wehby@uiowa.edu](mailto:george-wehby@uiowa.edu)

## Abstract

A growing literature examines the effects of economic variables on obesity, typically focusing on only one or a few factors at a time. We build a more comprehensive economic model of body weight, combining the 1990-2010 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System with 27 state-level variables related to general economic conditions, labor supply, and the monetary or time costs of calorie intake, physical activity, and cigarette smoking. Controlling for demographic characteristics and state and year fixed effects, changes in these economic variables collectively explain 37% of the rise in BMI, 43% of the rise in obesity, and 59% of the rise in class II/III obesity. Quantile regressions also point to large effects among the heaviest individuals, with half the rise in the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile of BMI explained by economic factors. Variables related to calorie intake – particularly restaurant and supercenter/warehouse club densities – are the primary drivers of the results.

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Keywords: BMI, obesity, restaurant, supercenter, food price, economic factors

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## **I. Introduction**

Obesity, defined as a body mass index (BMI) of at least 30, leads to adverse health conditions such as heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, and stroke (Strum, 2002).<sup>1</sup> The adult obesity rate in the United States skyrocketed from 13% in 1960 to 35% in 2011-2012, with most of this increase occurring since 1980 (Flegal et al., 1998; Ogden, et al. 2014). Obesity has become a major public health and public finance concern. Estimates of its annual costs include 112,000 lives and \$190 billion, with about half of the medical expenses borne by Medicare and Medicaid (Flegal et al., 2005; Cawley and Meyerhoefer, 2012; Finkelstein et al., 2003).

This trend has prompted economists to ask whether obesity is an economic phenomenon involving individuals' responses to incentives. Technological progress has resulted in an environment in which food is cheaper and more readily available, while physical activity is increasingly easy to avoid. Philipson and Posner (1999) formalize this notion by modeling weight as the result of eating and exercise decisions made through a utility-maximization process.<sup>2</sup> Individuals trade-off the disutility from excess weight with the enjoyment of eating and having a sedentary lifestyle, subject to a budget constraint. The model predicts that lower food prices and reduced on-the-job physical activity increase weight, while the effect of additional income on weight varies across the income distribution. Cutler et al. (2003) point out that time costs of eating should matter in addition to monetary costs, and discuss how innovations such as vacuum packing, improved preservatives, and microwaves have reduced the time cost of food preparation. Later theoretical models (e.g. Komlos, 2004; Ruhm, 2012; Courtemanche et al., 2012) add an intertemporal dimension, noting that the enjoyment from eating and sedentary activities occurs in the present but the health costs occur in the future. The prediction that the

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<sup>1</sup> BMI=weight in kilograms divided by height in squared meters.

<sup>2</sup> The paper was later published as Philipson and Posner (2003), but we focus on the working paper version as it contains a more detailed model.

weights of at least some individuals respond to economic incentives persists in these models, regardless of whether or not preferences are time consistent.

Motivated by these theoretical considerations, a large number of empirical studies investigate links between various economic factors and obesity.<sup>3</sup> Lakdawalla and Philipson (2002) document an inverted U-shaped association between income and BMI in individual fixed effects models. Lindahl (2005) and Cawley et al. (2010) find no evidence that income affects weight using lottery prizes and variations in Social Security payments as natural experiments, while Schmeiser (2009) finds that Earned Income Tax Credit benefits increase weight.

Several papers document a connection between the costs of eating and BMI. Lakdawalla and Philipson (2002), Chou et al. (2004), Lakdawalla et al. (2005), Goldman et al. (2011), and Courtemanche et al. (2012) find an inverse association between food prices and obesity, while the results from Baum and Chou (2011) and Finkelstein et al. (2012) are less clear. Evidence on the role of restaurants is mixed. Chou et al. (2004), Rashad et al. (2006), Dunn (2008), and Currie et al. (2010) find a positive relationship between restaurant prevalence and BMI; but Anderson and Matsa (2011), Baum and Chou (2011), and Finkelstein et al. (2012) find no evidence of a connection. Cutler et al. (2003) argues that lower time costs of food preparation are partly responsible for trends in weight. Additionally, several studies investigate whether food stamps lead to obesity, with mixed results.<sup>4</sup>

A variety of other economic factors have been linked to BMI. Chou et al. (2004), Baum (2008) and Rashad et al. (2006) estimate that higher cigarette prices increase obesity; however, Gruber and Frakes (2006) and Nonnemaker et al. (2008) find that this result disappears using

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<sup>3</sup> A separate but related literature studies how economic factors affect childhood obesity. Since our study focuses on adult obesity, we do not discuss this literature. See Anderson and Butcher (2006) for a survey of this literature, and Cawley and Ruhm (2011) for a detailed discussion of research on both adult and childhood obesity.

<sup>4</sup> See Baum (2011), Baum and Chou (2011), Beydoun et al. (2008), Chen et al. (2005), Fan (2010), Gibson (2003 and 2006); Meyerhoefer and Pylypchuck (2008), Kaushal (2007), and Ver Ploeg et al. (2007).

different methodologies, and Courtemanche (2009b) and Wehby and Courtemanche (2011) suggest the long-run relationship might even be negative. The effect of urban sprawl on obesity is also the subject of debate, with Ewing et al. (2003), Frank et al. (2004), and Zhou and Kaestner (2010) obtaining a positive relationship with obesity but Plantinga and Bernell (2007) and Eid et al. (2008) arguing otherwise. Other factors that have been linked to adult obesity include on-the-job physical activity (Lakdawalla and Philipson, 2002; Lakdawalla et al., 2005; Baum and Chou, 2011), state unemployment rates (Ruhm, 2000 and 2005), work hours (Courtemanche, 2009a), gasoline prices (Courtemanche, 2011), and the proliferation of Walmart Supercenters (Courtemanche and Carden, 2011).

Most of the aforementioned papers examine only one or a few factors, and it is difficult to use their results to answer the big-picture question of how well “the economic explanation” of people responding to changing incentives can explain the rise in obesity. Simply adding the percentage of the trend explained by separate studies of each potential contributor does not produce a reliable answer. Many of the economic variables discussed above are highly correlated with each other, so including only a small subset of them might lead to omitted variable bias. Summing the effects of those variables would then lead to double counting some of their contributions to the rise in obesity. For example, the number of stores selling food likely affects food prices; so if one study estimates the impact of grocery stores while another estimates the effect of food prices, the portion of food stores’ impact that occurs via prices will be double counted. Other examples include the influences of restaurant density on restaurant prices, gas prices on urban sprawl, and income on various aspects of the built environment. To underscore our point, Table 1 shows that adding estimates from the literature suggests that economists have already explained 177% of the rise in average BMI.

Chou et al. (2004) provide the first attempt at a comprehensive economic model of obesity that includes several economic factors. They use the 1984-1999 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) combined with state-level prices of grocery food, restaurant meals, cigarettes, and alcohol as well as restaurant density and clean indoor air laws. In models that control for individual demographic characteristics and state fixed effects, these state-level economic factors explain essentially all of the growth in BMI and obesity during the period. However, Chou et al. (2004) do not control for time in any way, which – as noted by Gruber and Frakes (2006) and Nonnemaker et al. (2009) – likely introduces bias due to the strong upward trend in weight. In the original working paper version of their work, Chou et al. (2002) show that including a quadratic time trend leads to smaller coefficient estimates than those from models without controls for time. When we estimate their model with our data (through 1999, the last year of their sample), adding year fixed effects substantially attenuates the estimates. Appendix Table 1 reports these results.

Recognizing this issue, two recent papers aim to develop comprehensive economic models of obesity while controlling for time. Finkelstein et al. (2012) forecast obesity through 2030 based on a model that includes individual demographic characteristics as well as state-level unemployment rate, alcohol price, gasoline price, fast food and grocery food prices, the relative price of healthy to unhealthy foods, restaurant density, and internet access. They find scant evidence that these state-level economic factors influence obesity. Baum and Chou (2011) perform a Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition using data from the 1979 and 1997 cohorts of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth in an effort to explain the differences in BMI between the two cohorts. They include economic factors related to employment, on-the-job physical activity, smoking, food stamp receipt, urban sprawl, food prices, cigarette prices, and restaurant

prevalence, but find that these variables explain very little of the rise in obesity, at least among their sample of young adults.

We contribute to this literature by providing an analysis of body weight trends that is, to our knowledge, the most comprehensive in terms of the number of economic factors included, the length of the sample period, and the range of BMI-related outcomes considered. We combine individual-level survey data from the 1990-2010 waves of the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System with 27 state-level variables reflecting general economic conditions; labor supply; and the monetary or time costs of eating, physical activity, and smoking. Factors related to general economic conditions include the unemployment rate, median income, and measures of income inequality. Our labor supply variables are female and male labor force participation rates, average work hours, and proportions of physically active and blue collar jobs. Factors influencing the monetary or time costs of caloric intake include restaurant, grocery food, and alcohol prices; the relative price of fruits and vegetables to other foods; restaurant, supercenter/warehouse club, supermarket, convenience store, and general merchandiser densities; and per-capita food stamp spending. Variables influencing the relative costs of physical activity are gasoline prices, fitness center density, and a proxy for urban sprawl. Cigarette prices and smoking bans capture variation in the costs of smoking.

We estimate how these economic factors are associated with BMI, obesity, and class II/III obesity ( $BMI \geq 35$ , also known as severe obesity), as well as various percentiles of the BMI distribution. Our models control for demographic characteristics as well as state and year fixed effects. Changes in the economic factors collectively explain 37% of the rise in average BMI and 43%, 59% and 51% of the increases in obesity, class II/III (severe) obesity, and the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile of the BMI distribution. The high explanatory power for the trends in severe obesity

and the 90<sup>th</sup> BMI percentile is particularly important, as this is where the strong deleterious mortality and morbidity consequences of excessive weight occur (Flegal et al., 2013). Supercenter/warehouse club expansion and increasing numbers of restaurants are the leading drivers of the results. The decline in blue collar employment and rise in food stamp spending also explain meaningful portions of the trend in class II/III obesity, with other factors adding small contributions for particular outcomes.

Robustness checks show that our conclusions remain similar if we drop insignificant factors, use a quadratic trend instead of year fixed effects, allow for gradual effects, aggregate the data, or use instrumental variables for the leading contributors to the trend. We conduct falsification tests that suggest little connection between the key economic factors and other health behaviors, consistent with a causal interpretation of our main results. We also find that supercenter and warehouse club density is associated with a higher probability of weight loss attempts. Since weight loss attempts can be considered an admission of past deviations from utility-maximizing levels of weight (Ruhm, 2012), this suggests the effect of supercenters/warehouse clubs on weight may be partly attributable to time inconsistency.

## **II. Analytical Framework and Econometric Model**

We model weight ( $W$ ) as a function of caloric intake ( $I$ ), energy expenditure ( $E$ ), and metabolism ( $M$ ):

$$W = w(I, E, M). \quad (1)$$

Greater caloric intake increases weight, while greater energy expenditure and a faster metabolism reduce weight. Smoking's ( $S$ ) effects are multifaceted: nicotine stimulates the metabolism and has appetite-suppressing properties that may reduce caloric intake, but smoking diminishes lung capacity which may reduce physical activity (Courtemanche, 2009b). Caloric

intake, exercise, and smoking are in turn influenced by variables related to their monetary and time costs ( $C_I$ ,  $C_E$ , and  $C_S$ ) as well as general economic ( $G$ ) and labor market ( $L$ ) characteristics.

Therefore,

$$I = i(C_I, G, L, S) \quad (2)$$

$$E = e(C_E, G, L, S) \quad (3)$$

$$M = m(S) \quad (4)$$

$$S = s(C_S, G, L) . \quad (5)$$

Substituting equations (2) through (5) into (1) yields

$$W = w(i(C_I, G, L, s(C_S, G, L)), e(C_E, G, L, s(C_S, G, L)), m(s(C_S, G, L))). \quad (6)$$

which simplifies to the reduced-form equation

$$W = w(G, L, C_I, C_E, C_S). \quad (7)$$

Estimating the full structural model in (6) with a large number of aggregate-level economic factors is not practical with available data. Datasets that contain sufficient sample sizes to simultaneously analyze the effects of many state-level economic variables (like the BRFSS) lack adequate information on the mechanisms (eating, exercise, and/or smoking) through which these variables influence weight, while sources that contain sufficient information on the mechanisms (e.g. the National Health and Nutrition Examination Surveys) are too small. Our empirical analysis therefore focuses on the estimation of the reduced-form model given by (7).

Assuming a linear functional form for (7) yields the estimating equation

$$W_{ijt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 G_{jt} + \beta_2 L_{jt} + \beta_3 C_{Ijt} + \beta_4 C_{Ejt} + \beta_5 C_{Sjt} + \beta_6 X_{ijt} + \alpha_j + \tau_t \quad (8)$$

where  $i, j$ , and  $t$  index individuals, states, and years.  $W$ =BMI, a dummy for obesity ( $BMI \geq 30$ ), a dummy for class II/III ( $BMI \geq 35$ ), or various percentiles of the BMI distribution.<sup>5</sup>  $X$  is a set of controls that includes individual age and age squared; dummies for gender, race/ethnicity (black, white, Hispanic, or other), marital status (single, married, divorced, or widowed), and education (less than high school degree, high school degree, some college, or college degree); as well as state population.<sup>6</sup>  $\alpha_j$  and  $\tau_t$  are state and year fixed effects.

$G$  consists of four variables reflective of general state economic characteristics: unemployment rate, median income, and the ratios of the 90<sup>th</sup> to the 50<sup>th</sup> and the 50<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> percentiles of the earnings distribution.<sup>7</sup> Theoretically, income could influence weight in either direction. Expanding the budget set could raise food consumption and higher weight, or it could reduce weight by causing substitution from cheap, energy-dense foods to more expensive, healthy foods. Additional income could also reduce weight by increasing demand for health, as higher wages increase the value of healthy time (Grossman, 1972). Lakdawalla and Philipson (2002) documented an inverted U-shaped relationship between income and BMI, with additional income increasing BMI at the low end of the distribution but decreasing it at the high end. The non-linearity of this relationship suggests that central tendency might not be the only feature of the income distribution that influences the weights of a state's residents; variance (i.e. income inequality) might also matter. We also include unemployment rates because higher state

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<sup>5</sup> We have verified that our conclusions are similar if we use logits or probits for the binary dependent variables rather than linear probability models. We present linear probability model results as they are easier to interpret.

<sup>6</sup> We control for population because some of our economic incentive variables are per capita, and we want to ensure that any estimated effects of these variables can be attributed to the numerator rather than the denominator.

<sup>7</sup> The BRFSS does contain a variable for respondents' household income, but it only gives broad categories and is top-coded at \$75,000. Because of the top-coding, inflation-adjusting this variable suggests that average real income dropped by over 20% during our sample period, which is inconsistent with other data sources and might therefore misleadingly suggest that changes in real income have substantially contributed to the obesity trend. We therefore control for income at the state level rather than the individual level. It is unlikely that this would bias our coefficient estimates for the regressors of interest since they are also state level. Indeed, these estimates are very similar if we use the BRFSS individual income measure rather than median state income.

unemployment has been linked to lower BMI, with the association *not* being explained by income (Ruhm, 2005).

$L$  consists of five state-level variables related to labor supply: female and male labor force participation rates, average work hours among employees, proportion with a job that requires at least moderate physical activity (defined as a metabolic equivalent (MET) score of 3 or higher), and proportion of the workforce in blue collar occupations (construction, manufacturing, or extraction). The first three of these reflect the impact of market work on time constraints, perhaps leading to less exercise or substitution from home-cooked meals to less healthy prepared foods. This theory is particularly salient in light of the rise in female labor force participation during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that was only partially offset by a decline in male labor force participation (Anderson et al., 2003; Ruhm, 2008; Courtemanche, 2009a). The latter two variables relate to the notion that the shift from a manufacturing-based economy to more sedentary jobs may have reduced overall levels of physical activity, as one must now exercise during leisure time (Philipson and Posner, 2003; Lakdawalla and Philipson, 2005). Proportion in active jobs captures this hypothesis more directly, while the share in blue collar occupations may also capture other aspects of such jobs – e.g., their relatively rigid structure may inhibit on-the-job snacking or going out for lunch.

$C_I$  includes several variables related to the monetary or time costs of calories. These variables test a leading theory for the rise in obesity: that food has become cheaper and more readily available, increasing caloric intake and therefore weight. The first three variables in this category are restaurant, grocery food/non-alcoholic drink, and alcohol prices. At first glance, lower prices for foods or drinks should increase weight via the law of demand; however, substitution between types of food and drink needs to also be considered. For example, if the

price of grocery food falls while the price of restaurant meals stays the same, individuals might substitute away from restaurant meals toward home-cooked meals, which are presumably less caloric. Similar logic applies if the prices of certain types of grocery foods fall further than others. To that end, our fourth variable in this category is the relative price of fruits and vegetables to other grocery foods. Fifth, we include per capita food stamp spending, which effectively lowers the price of food for recipients out to a certain threshold.

Our variables related to the time cost of obtaining food are per capita numbers of restaurants, supercenters/warehouse clubs, supermarkets, convenience stores, and general merchandisers. Greater availability of these stores reduces travel time to obtain food, presumably increasing weight; however, substitutability matters here as well. For example, the food sold in conventional supermarkets may be on average less energy-dense than food sold at the other places. A rise in supermarket density could, therefore, reduce weight by lowering the time costs of buying healthy foods. Food store availability could also influence monetary prices, either through competitive effects or, in the case of supercenters and warehouse clubs, by selling food at discounted prices (Courtemanche and Carden, 2011).

$C_E$  includes three state-level variables: gasoline price, fitness centers per capita, and share of residents living in the central cities of MSAs. Higher gasoline prices increase the cost of driving relative to walking, bicycling, or taking public transportation, effectively reducing the opportunity cost of physical activity (Courtemanche, 2011).<sup>8</sup> An increase in fitness center density lowers the time cost of exercising. Share of residents living in central cities proxies for urban sprawl.<sup>9</sup> More sprawl (fewer residents in central cities) typically reduces the amenities accessible

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<sup>8</sup> Courtemanche (2011) notes that higher gasoline prices could also reduce eating at restaurants.

<sup>9</sup> We considered other proxies for urban sprawl, such as population-weighted population density, and share of the population living in counties with various density cutoffs. The conclusions were similar.

through walking or mass transit, increasing the opportunity cost of caloric expenditure (Zhou and Kaestner, 2010).

Finally,  $C_S$  includes state-level cigarette price and dummies for smoking bans in private workplaces, government workplaces, restaurants, and other locations. Cigarette prices capture the monetary cost of smoking, while smoking bans affect the time cost since smokers have to go outside to smoke more often (Chou et al., 2004).

### **III. Data**

Our source of individual-level data is the BRFSS, a telephone survey of the health conditions and risky behaviors of randomly-selected individuals conducted by state health departments and the Centers for Disease Control. The BRFSS began in 1984, but did not include all states until the 1990s. We use the years 1990-2010 to match the years in which all of our state-level economic factors are available. As already discussed, the sharp rise in obesity began around 1980, so our sample includes two-thirds of the period during which weights rapidly increased. Following Gruber and Frakes (2006), we exclude individuals older than 64 out of concerns that the true model of weight for the elderly is likely different than that for working-age adults, and that mortality is more likely endogenous to weight for seniors, which has implications for the composition of the sample.

The BRFSS includes self-reported height and weight. We apply the percentile-based correction of Courtemanche et al. (2014) to adjust for systematic reporting error, and use the “corrected” heights and weight to compute BMI and indicators for obesity and severe obesity. Like the more familiar approach discussed by Cawley (2004), this method uses external validation samples drawn from the NHANES to predict measured weight and height; however, percentile ranks of the self-reported variables, instead of the self-reports themselves, are used to

predict the actual measures. The resulting predictions are robust to differences in misreporting between surveys.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, the BRFSS contains the individual-level demographic variables discussed above, as well as questions on health behaviors that provide dependent variables for our falsification tests. These include seatbelt use and utilization of three types of preventive medical care: flu vaccinations (shot or spray), mammograms, and prostate screenings.

Our price data come from the Council for Community and Economic Research's (C2ER) Cost of Living Index (formerly known as the ACCRA Cost of Living Index). The C2ER Cost of Living Index computes prices for a wide range of grocery, energy, transportation, housing, health care, and other items in approximately 300 local markets per quarter throughout the US. Most of these local markets are single cities, but some are combinations of cities or entire counties. Following Chou et al. (2004), we average over the prices of each item in the given category (e.g. grocery foods) for each market, weighting by the C2ER shares of each item's importance in the basket of goods. We then define state prices as the population-weighted average of the prices in the state's C2ER markets. Finally, we convert prices to 2010 dollars using the Consumer Price Index for all urban consumers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

We use data from the Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (QCEW) for the numbers of restaurants, supermarkets, convenience stores, and general merchandisers in each state. The data are collected by the BLS with the cooperation of the state agencies that manage the Unemployment Insurance system. In our industries, the QCEW captures the universe of establishments. The only missing values are due to BLS disclosure rules that protect

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<sup>10</sup> Courtemanche et al. (2014) find that misreporting is more severe in the BRFSS than the NHANES, as one would expect given the differences in interview context. For example, NHANES respondents are interviewed in person, but BRFSS respondents are interviewed by phone. We also allow for the possibility that misreporting varies over time by matching samples from each year of the BRFSS to samples from the closest years of the NHANES.

confidentiality in small cells. The number of restaurants includes both fast food and full service. When we model these two categories separately, we cannot reject the hypothesis that the effects of both types are the same.<sup>11</sup>

The QCEW information on supercenters and warehouse clubs is missing for many observations, so we construct this variable by updating the primary data collected by Courtemanche and Carden (2011). The key limitation is that this variable only captures Walmart Supercenters, Sam's Clubs, Costcos, and BJ's Wholesale Clubs. It does not, for instance, include K-Mart or Target Supercenters. However, Walmart is by far the dominant supercenter chain, while Sam's Club, Costco, and BJ's Wholesale Club are the only three major warehouse chains operating in the U.S. We considered modeling Walmart Supercenters and warehouse clubs separately but were unable to reject the hypothesis that their effects are the same.

The other state-level variables come from various sources. Median income, unemployment rate, female and male labor force participation, proportion of the workforce in a physically active and blue collar job, average work hours, and 90/50 and 50/10 ratios come from the Current Population Study (CPS), which is conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The United States Department of Agriculture provides information on Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (food stamp) benefits. Population and share of the population living in MSA central cities are taken from the U.S. Census Bureau. Cigarette prices, inclusive of state and federal excise taxes, come from *The Tax Burden on Tobacco* (Orzechowski and Walker, 2010).<sup>12</sup> Finally, we construct dummy variables reflecting the extent of state clean indoor air laws using data from Impacteen and the classification scheme of the 1989 Surgeon General's Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1989).

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<sup>11</sup> Chou et al. (2004) combined fast-food and full-service restaurants for the same reason.

<sup>12</sup> *The Tax Burden on Tobacco* reports prices both including and excluding generic brands. Following Chou et al. (2004), we use the series excluding generics to allow for greater comparability across the sample period.

We measure economic factors at the state rather than county level because the state is the narrowest geographic level for which all determinants are available. The CPS variables are available at the county level but can be unreliable because the samples are frequently quite small. The C2ER price data have virtually no coverage of rural counties and only contain a subset of urban counties. We are not aware of any county-level source of cigarette prices that is available through our entire sample period, and the smoking ban variables reflect state laws. QCEW establishment counts are often suppressed in small counties due to confidentiality concerns.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, the BRFSS is only designed to be representative at the state level, and county identifiers are not even available for all counties until the 1998 wave of the public-use data (or 1994 wave of the restricted data).

Combining all of these sources yields a final sample of 2,922,071 person-year observations. Appendix Table A2 describes the variables further, presents summary statistics, and reports means in the first and last years of the sample. From 1990 to 2010, average BMI rose from 26 to 28.5, the obesity rate rose from 18% to 34%, and severe obesity from 7% to 14%. Figures 1-10 show trends over the same period in the economic factors. The only factors steadily trending in directions that are consistent with meaningful contributions to the rise in obesity are restaurant density, supercenter/warehouse club density, proportion of the workforce in a blue collar job, cigarette price, and smoking bans.<sup>14</sup> The proportion in a central city, proportion in active jobs, female labor force participation, restaurant price, and food stamp spending exhibit trends that on net work in the direction of the trend in obesity, but are uneven throughout the

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<sup>13</sup> Some of the QCEW variables (restaurants, supermarkets, and convenience stores) only have a small number of missing county-year cells. Our Supercenter/warehouse club and central city share variables are available for every county and year. However, we do not want to use narrower geographic levels for some economic factors than others because this would amount to giving some variables a “head start in the horse race.”

<sup>14</sup> We also decomposed the proportion of the workforce in a blue collar job variable into separate variables for manufacturing, construction, and extraction; finding that the entire decline is driven by manufacturing. All three components appear to have similar effects on weight, however, so we elect to combine them.

sample period. Gasoline price and fitness center density exhibit trends that should theoretically work against the trend in weight.<sup>15</sup> We observe trends in income inequality during the sample period – namely, the middle of the income distribution losing ground against both the bottom and the top – that could have either increased or reduced obesity.

The remaining variables do not exhibit trends that seem consistent with a meaningful impact on the weight distribution in either direction. Of particular interest is the lack of a downward trend in grocery prices, which are widely believed to have helped cause the obesity epidemic. Ruhm (2011) observes the same phenomenon with BLS food price data; however, the C2ER and BLS both exclude or drastically undersample supercenters and warehouse clubs, which sell food at deep discounts.<sup>16</sup> Since the prevalence of supercenters/warehouse clubs has rapidly increased, as shown in Figure 8, it is possible that our supercenter/warehouse club variable better captures changes in food-at-home prices than our grocery price variable.

#### **IV. Baseline Results**

Estimating the impacts of such a large number of state-level covariates involves an inherent trade-off between reducing omitted variable bias and minimizing multicollinearity. Presumably including all the economic factors together would minimize the extent of omitted variable bias (though this need not occur if some variables are endogenous and bias spills over to the other coefficients). On the other hand, given the correlations among the economic factors, including them all in the same regression along with year and state effects could lead to such

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<sup>15</sup> Courtemanche (2011) notes that real gasoline prices fell during the 1980s and 1990s, in contrast to the pattern we observe post-2000. Changes in gasoline prices might therefore have contributed to the increase in obesity during the earlier stages of the rise, but worked against the trend in the later stages. This would imply, however, that other factors dwarf the influence of gasoline price.

<sup>16</sup> Specifically, the BLS excludes all supercenters and warehouse clubs, while the C2ER's sampling strategy excludes all warehouse clubs and aims to include only the supercenters at which upper income consumers regularly shop. See Hausman and Leibtag (2004) for further discussion of the BLS' exclusions and Basker and Noel (2009) and Courtemanche and Carden (2014) for further discussion of the C2ER's exclusions.

severe multicollinearity that the resulting coefficient estimates are too imprecise to be useful.<sup>17</sup> We therefore estimate the models two ways: first for each economic factor separately (i.e. 27 separate regressions) and then including all economic factors together in the same regression. Comparing results from the two approaches helps to shed light on the relative importance of omitted variable bias and multicollinearity. We standardize all the economic factors to have a mean of zero and standard deviation of one. Therefore, the coefficient estimates can be interpreted as effects of one standard deviation increases, enabling the comparison of magnitudes.

Table 2 reports the results for BMI. Running separate regressions for each economic factor suggests that a number of the economic factors are associated with BMI, sometimes in surprising ways. Income inequality, food prices, supermarket density, gasoline price, fitness centers, cigarette prices, and restaurant smoking bans are all statistically significant and negatively associated with BMI. Greater supercenter/warehouse club and general merchandiser densities and miscellaneous smoking bans all predict statistically significant weight gains. Coefficients on the other 16 economic factors are not statistically significant. However, one of these insignificant results – the negative estimated effect of proportion central city – is noteworthy because its magnitude is among the largest of any economic factor.

Including all economic factors in the same regression changes the results dramatically, eliminating some effects, attenuating others, and causing a couple new patterns to emerge. The coefficients on income inequality, grocery prices, general merchandiser density, cigarette prices, smoking bans in restaurants, and miscellaneous smoking bans all decrease in magnitude enough to become statistically insignificant, despite smaller standard errors. The magnitude of the coefficient for proportion in a central city also decreases dramatically. The magnitudes of the

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<sup>17</sup> Chou et al. (2004) use this rationale to justify excluding time trends from their model.

parameters on supercenters/warehouse clubs, supermarkets, and fitness centers all shrink but remain statistically significant. New statistically significant results include positive effects of median income, alcohol price, and restaurant density on BMI; and a negative effect of proportion blue collar. Overall, these results suggest that the coefficient estimates in the single-economic-factor regressions are plagued by omitted variable bias.

Concerns about multicollinearity from including a large number of economic factors together are not supported by the results in Table 2. The standard errors for 25 of the 27 coefficients shrink with the inclusion of all economic factors together. In the other two cases, supercenters/warehouse clubs and smoking bans in private workplaces, the increase in standard errors is inconsequential to the results. For this reason, we consider the regression with all economic factors together to be the preferred specification.

Table 3 displays the results for obesity. As with BMI, a number of significant associations observed when running separate regressions for each economic factor disappear when the variables are included together. In the latter specification, only six economic factors are statistically significant. 50<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> percentile earnings ratio and supermarket density are negatively associated with the probability of being obese, while restaurant, supercenter/warehouse club, general merchandiser densities, and miscellaneous smoking bans are positively associated with obesity.

Table 4 presents the results for class II/III Obesity. Eight economic factors are significant in the regression that includes all factors: proportion in blue collar jobs, supermarket and fitness center densities, and restaurant smoking bans reduce the probability of severe obesity; restaurant, supercenter/warehouse club, and general merchandiser densities and food stamp benefits increase it.

Table 5 uses results from the preferred regressions to compute the percentage of the increases in average BMI, obesity, and class II/III obesity during our sample period that can be explained by changes in the economic factors. For each factor, we multiply its coefficient estimate by the change in its (standardized) sample mean from 1990 to 2010, divide by the change in the dependent variable, and then multiply by 100%. We also compute subtotals for each category and a grand total for all factors. The last row of Table 5 shows the percentages explained collectively by changes in individual demographic and state population controls.<sup>18</sup> (Details are available in Appendix Table A3.)

The first column shows that changing economic factors explain 37.2% of the rise in BMI, with changes in factors related to costs of calories accounting for almost the entire amount: 36.5%. Changes in general economic indicators, labor supply variables, and smoking-related factors combined explain less than 7.5% of the trend, while changes related to costs of physical activity actually offset 6.7% of the trend.

Turning to specific economic factors, the proliferation of supercenters/warehouse clubs alone explains 17.2% of the increase in BMI, and restaurant expansion another 12.2% of it. The next largest contributors are the rise in cigarette prices (3.9%), the declining proportion of blue collar workers (3.3%), higher food stamp benefits (2.7%), and the drop in fast food restaurant price (2.3%). Higher gasoline prices and fitness center expansion are the strongest forces working against the secular rise in BMI (-3.3% and -4.1% respectively).

The second column shows that changing economic factors explain 42.8% of the rise in obesity. As with BMI, this is almost entirely driven by changes in the variables related to the costs of calories, which combine to account for 39.1%. General economic indicators, labor

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<sup>18</sup> Age and education are the most important demographic factors. The increasing age of the population explains over 18% of the increase in average BMI, while increased education worked against the trend in BMI.

supply, and smoking variables each contribute slightly to the trend, while variables related to physical activity work marginally against it. Supercenters/warehouse clubs and restaurants are the single largest contributors to the rise in obesity at 16.3% and 13.8%, respectively. Other economic factors explaining at least 2% of the trend are higher cigarette prices (4.4%), the rise in food stamp benefits (3.9%), cheaper fast food (3.4%), and the declining earnings of the middle class relative to the poorest (2.1%). Fitness center expansion is the only factor meaningfully working against the trend (-2.7%).

The third column reports that changing economic factors explain 59.3% of the increase in class II/III obesity – a much greater portion of the trend than for BMI and overall obesity. This is an important result since excess weight does not begin to substantially increase mortality until the class II obesity threshold (Flegal et al., 2013). On the other hand, increases in BMI could actually reflect an *improvement* in health among previously underweight individuals. Therefore, the class II/III obesity is most relevant from a public health standpoint.

Changes in factors related to the costs of calories explain 59.6% of the rise in class II/III obesity, while the labor supply variables contribute another 7.8%. General economic indicators, physical-activity-related variables, and smoking-related factors each work slightly against the trend. Among the variables related to the costs of calories, supercenters/warehouse clubs and restaurants are again the most important, explaining 24.1% and 22.9% of the rise in severe obesity, respectively. Other factors contributing meaningfully are the rise in food stamp benefits (8.3%) and the decline in blue collar jobs (6.2%).<sup>19</sup> Fitness center expansion offsets 3.6% and higher gasoline prices 2.8% of the trend.

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<sup>19</sup> It is interesting that proportion of blue collar workers influences severe obesity (and to a lesser extent average BMI) while proportion in a physically active job does not. This suggests the effect of blue collar employment is due to some other aspect of these jobs besides their presumably higher levels of activity. One possibility is that they tend to have more rigidly structured work days than white collar or service jobs, with fewer opportunities for on-the-job

## V. Quantile Regressions

Our finding that changing economic factors explain a greater portion of the rise in class II/III obesity than BMI or obesity suggests that economic variables affect BMI most strongly at the right extreme of the distribution. This is important for two reasons. First, as mentioned, weight gain appears to only have strong negative consequences for those who are severely obese (Flegal et al., 2013). Stronger effects of economic factors at higher BMI levels imply that the health consequences of changing economic factors are more harmful than suggested by mean BMI regressions. Second, the BMI distribution did not symmetrically shift to the right over the past two decades, but instead became more right-skewed. The 10th percentile increased by about 1 BMI point (~5%) between 1990 and 2010, whereas the 90th percentile rose by over 4 points (~13%).<sup>20</sup> If economic factors have the strongest effects on those who already have high BMIs, they could help to explain the right-skewed growth in the BMI distribution. We use quantile regression to investigate this possibility more formally.

We estimate determinants of BMI at the 0.1, 0.25, 0.5, 0.75, and 0.9 quantiles using unconditional quantile regressions (UQR), which were developed by Firpo et al, (2009). UQR allow us to estimate the marginal effects of right-hand-side variables on the quantiles of the unconditional distribution of BMI,  $F(BMI)$ . In contrast, standard conditional quantile regressions (CQR, Koenker and Basett, 1978) would estimate effects on the quantiles of the BMI distribution conditional on the right-hand-side variables,  $F(BMI|X, \mathbf{G}, \mathbf{L}, \mathbf{C}_I, \mathbf{C}_E, \mathbf{C}_S)$ . This conditional distribution and its quantiles change as the right-hand-side variables change, and

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snacking or going out to lunch. In unreported regressions (available upon request), we found some preliminary support for these hypotheses. Using data from the American Time Use Survey, we find a negative association between having a blue collar job and time spent in secondary eating. Using data from the DDB Needham Life Style Surveys, we estimate a negative association between blue collar employment and frequency of eating lunch at restaurants, but no effect on frequency of eating out for other meals. These patterns deserve further research.

<sup>20</sup> For comparison, the 25th, 50th, and 75th BMI percentiles rose by 1.6, 2.4, and 3.4 points, respectively.

marginal effects on quantiles of the conditional distribution are not generally the same as marginal effects of quantiles of the unconditional distribution.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, UQR provides estimates that are more consistent with our goal of evaluating changes in the BMI distribution over time.<sup>22</sup>

Table 6 reports the estimated marginal effects of the economic factors on each of the five BMI quantiles. The effects of the key variables related to costs of caloric intake vary across quantiles and are usually larger at higher quantiles. This is most apparent for supercenters/warehouse clubs and restaurants, which have effects that are roughly ten times larger at the 0.9 quantile than at the 0.1 quantile. This result is consistent with the prominent effects of these two variables on class II/III obesity. Additionally, general merchandisers have sizeable positive effects at the 0.75 and 0.9 quantiles but negative (and significant) coefficients at the 0.1 and 0.25 quantiles, while the food stamp coefficient is largest at the 0.9 quantile and small and insignificant at lower quantiles. The density of supermarkets appears to lower BMI, but only at the 0.75 and 0.9 quantiles. Some variables in other categories – such as female labor participation and fitness centers – exhibit some heterogeneity in effects across quantiles but without clear patterns. Collectively, these results indicate that the main economic factors associated with BMI are most relevant for weight changes at the right tail of the distribution.

Table 7 shows the percentage changes in the five BMI quantiles accounted for by changes in the economic factors, computed in a similar way to those reported in Table 5. The results are consistent with the differences in effects across quantiles discussed above. The

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<sup>21</sup> In OLS, the marginal effects on the mean of the outcome conditional on the right-hand-side variables are the same as the effects on the unconditional mean. See detailed discussion in Firpo et al, (2009).

<sup>22</sup> Another practical reason for avoiding CQR in this work is that estimating the variance-covariance matrix for that model using bootstrap is extremely time-consuming given the large dataset we employ. Following Firpo et al. (2009), the UQR is estimated using an OLS regression of the re-centered influence function of the unconditional BMI quantiles on all of the explanatory and control variables described above, including state and year fixed effects. The regressions are weighted using BRFSS weights and standard errors are obtained using 500 bootstrap replications.

economic factors collectively explain 51% of the 4-point rise in BMI at the 0.9 quantile between 1990 and 2010, but explain less than 15% of the ~ 1 point rises in the 0.1 and 0.25 BMI quantiles. This pattern is again most pronounced for supercenters/warehouse clubs and restaurants, which together explain about 45% in the rise of the 0.9 quantile. In contrast, supercenters/warehouse clubs explain around 13% of the 0.1 quantile change, and restaurants have no statistically significant effect. Other changes that contribute to the rise in the 0.9 quantile are the drop in blue collar jobs (~5.3% explained) and increase in food stamp benefits (6.3%).

Interestingly, changes in the control variables explain a larger portion of the trend at lower quantiles than higher quantiles. Changes in control variables actually have greater explanatory power than changes in economic factors at the 0.1 and 0.25 quantiles. As in the case of mean regressions, age accounts for most of the effect of the control variables.

Overall, the results from quantile regressions are consistent with those for class II/III obesity, indicating that costs of caloric intake are important contributors to the clinically-relevant portion of the rise in BMI and the shift in the BMI distribution to the right. Costs of caloric intake – and economic factors in general – explain much less of the changes in the “non-obese” weight range. These findings imply important heterogeneity in the effects across the BMI distribution.

## **VI. Additional Robustness Checks**

We estimated a number of additional models to evaluate the sensitivity of the results from our preferred specification. Our first two robustness checks further evaluate the role of multicollinearity in influencing our results. First, we drop any economic factors that were not statistically significant in either the regressions for each factor separately or for all of them together. The goal is to develop a model that strikes a balance between the two extremes by

including some, but not all, of the economic factors. Dropping irrelevant variables may help reduce the standard errors for the remaining coefficients. This approach leaves 15 of the 27 economic factors in the BMI regression, 14 in the obesity regression, and 15 in the class II/III obesity regression. Our second robustness check returns to including all 27 economic factors but replaces the year fixed effects with a quadratic time trend, thereby allowing some time-series variation to help with identifying so many separate effects at once.

Next, we aggregate all variables to the state level, using the BRFSS sampling weights and weighting the states by population in the regressions. Since all independent variables of interest are state-level, it is useful to check whether we reach the same conclusions regardless of whether or not we leave the dependent and control variables at the individual level.

Our fourth robustness check returns to individual-level data and addresses the possibility that, since weight is a capital stock accumulated over time, the short- and long-run effects of changing economic incentives could differ. It is not clear which of these our fixed effects estimates with contemporaneous economic factors more closely reflect. One approach to modeling dynamics would be to include lags of the economic factors. However, the strong correlations between contemporaneous and lagged values of the economic factors creates an additional multicollinearity concern. Instead, we adopt an approach previously used in the obesity literature (Anderson et al., 2003; Courtemanche, 2009a; Wehby and Courtemanche, 2012) and model the economic factors as moving averages of their values over the past several years. We reached similar conclusions using three-, five-, and seven-year averages; and present results for the seven-year averages. The regressions therefore estimate the impacts of changes in the economic factors that are sustained for seven years (i.e. long-run effects). Seven-year

averages reflect values over the current and six preceding years, so the first six years of our sample (1990-1995) are dropped.<sup>23</sup>

Our fifth robustness check addresses the issue of whether our results can be interpreted as causal effects as opposed to merely associations. Controlling for state and year fixed effects, individual demographic characteristics, and a wide range of state-level economic factors goes quite far toward accounting for unobservable confounders; however, potential concerns still remain. For instance, if a state becomes more health-conscious over time relative to other states, this may affect some economic factors (e.g. types of foods stores) as well as obesity, leading to omitted variable bias. Additionally, reverse causality would be an issue if, for example, a state's average BMI affects food prices or food retailer entry decisions. We aim to at least partially address these concerns with an instrumental variables approach. While it is impractical to simultaneously instrument for 27 different endogenous variables, it is feasible to instrument for the two economic factors that emerged as the leading drivers of our baseline results: supercenters/warehouse clubs and restaurants.

Prior research provides guidance on how to do this. Courtemanche and Carden (2011) estimate the impact of Walmart Supercenters on BMI by exploiting plausibly exogenous variation from Walmart's strategy of expanding in concentric circles outwards from its headquarters in Bentonville, AR. Dunn (2010) and Anderson and Matsa (2011) identified the effects of restaurants on BMI by utilizing the tendency for restaurants to locate near major highway exits.

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<sup>23</sup> As another approach to modeling dynamics, we aggregated the data to the state level and estimated dynamic panel models that included the lag of the dependent variable as a regressor. When we implement Arrelano-Bond estimation methods, the coefficient on the lagged dependent variable is imprecisely estimated, making the results uninformative.

Motivated by these approaches, we instrument for supercenter/warehouse club density and restaurant density using: 1) interactions of the natural log of distance from Bentonville (measured from the centroid of each state) with each year fixed effect, and 2) the number of interstate exits per 10,000 residents in the state interacted with year fixed-effects. Interstate exit information as of May 2014 comes from <http://m.roadnow.com/> and we treat exits as being fixed over time, which is likely almost the case since the original interstate highway plan was completed by 1992.<sup>24</sup> Interactions with year fixed effects prevent these time-invariant variables from being dropped by the inclusion of state fixed effects. Identification comes from *changes over time* in the relationships between these variables and the endogenous regressors. We recognize that the validity of the exclusion restrictions could be questioned on various grounds and, for this reason, we include the IV estimates only as a robustness check.

Table 8 reports the results for the robustness checks for BMI. To save space, we present only the percentage of the rise in BMI explained for each economic factor, along with indicators of statistical significance. Coefficient estimates and standard errors are available upon request. The overall percentage of the rise in BMI explained by the economic factors ranges from 27.7% to 44.5%. Recall that the baseline estimate from Table 5 was 37.2% with a standard error of 10.6%. The estimates from the robustness checks are therefore all within a standard error of the baseline estimate.

Turning to the subtotals from each category of economic factors, the percentages are very similar across specifications for the labor supply variables and variables related to calorie intake. The subtotals for variables related to general economic indicators, physical activity, and smoking

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<sup>24</sup> Roadnow.com only has data on major interstates, so we are unable to include miles and exits from auxiliary routes, e.g. the bypass around a city. In some sense this may be preferable, as auxiliary routes are more likely to have been built or expanded during our sample period, which would be problematic for our assumption that miles and exits are fixed over time. The date of completion of the interstate highway system (aside from a few parts that remain unfinished) is from <http://logistics.about.com/od/legalandgovernment/a/Interstate-Highway-System.htm>.

are also generally similar across specifications, with the exception of the model with 7-year averages. In this regression, the general economic indicators and smoking categories contribute more to the trend than in the baseline model, while the physical activity category works against the trend more strongly. However, the caloric intake category remains by far the most substantial contributor to the rise in BMI. Regarding the individual economic factors, the key result is that supercenters/warehouse clubs and restaurants remain the two leading contributors to the trend in all specifications. Interestingly, however, rising cigarette prices explain virtually the same amount of the rise in BMI as increased restaurant density in the 7-year averages specification. Also noteworthy is that the IV estimates for restaurants and supercenters/warehouse clubs are both well within the confidence intervals from the baseline model, with the supercenters/warehouse clubs estimate being slightly larger in the IV model and the restaurants estimate being slightly smaller. Supercenters/warehouse clubs remain highly statistically significant despite the inherent inefficiency of IV estimation, whereas the estimate for restaurant density becomes insignificant due to the almost 3-fold increase in the standard error. The first stage F statistics are 34.58 for supercenters/warehouse clubs and 12.41 for restaurants, indicating that our instruments are sufficiently strong to rule out the possibility that the IV and OLS estimates are only similar because of weak instrument bias.

Tables 9 and 10 present the results from the robustness checks for obesity and class II/III obesity. Since the conclusions about robustness are similar to those for BMI, we provide only a brief discussion. The overall percentage of the rise in obesity explained by all the economic factors together ranges from 35.5% to 49.4%, in the vicinity of the baseline estimate of 42.8%. The overall percentage of the increase in class II/III obesity ranges from 50.7% to 67.0%, again similar to the baseline estimate of 59.3%. Variables related to the costs of calorie intake –

particularly restaurants and supercenters/warehouse clubs – remain the most important in all models. Interestingly, the rise in cigarette prices explains a sizeable 21.4% of the rise in obesity in the 7-year averages model, but has virtually no effect on class II/III obesity using the same specification.

## **VII. Falsification Tests**

An important question is the extent to which the previously estimated effects of the economic factors on BMI, obesity, and class II/III obesity can be considered causal. At issue is whether movements over time in unobservable state-level characteristics are correlated with changes over time in the state-level economic variables. We believe that including more economic factors reduces this possibility, at least relative to the less comprehensive approaches typically used in the literature. The robustness of our most striking results – those for restaurants and supercenters/warehouse clubs – to the use of 2SLS is also reassuring. This section attempts to further mitigate concerns about potential omitted variables bias through a series of falsification tests.

Ideal dependent variables for falsification tests, in our context, satisfy two criteria: 1) there should not be any reason for them to be causally affected by the economic factors, and 2) they should be influenced by the same unobservable characteristics as body weight. Natural candidates to satisfy the second condition are other health behaviors, as presumably they are also affected by potentially unobserved confounders such as state residents' demand for health, health knowledge, and individual time and risk preferences. However, other health behaviors might not perfectly satisfy the first condition, especially given the wide scope of the economic factors included in our analysis. The best candidates in the BRFSS are dummies for whether the respondent always uses a seatbelt, had a flu vaccine in the past year, and had a mammogram (for

women) or digital rectal prostate exam (for men 40 and older) in the past two years.<sup>25</sup> However, it remains possible that these outcomes are affected by some of our economic factors, which could result in our falsification tests indicating endogeneity when none exists.

Table 11 reports the results from linear probability models regressing each of these four falsification test outcomes on the economic factors, as well as demographic controls and state and year fixed effects. The table presents a total of 108 coefficient estimates, so we expect some statistically significant “effects” even for well-specified models. We obtain slightly more falsification test failures than expected: 15 (13.9%) coefficients are significant at the 10% level, and 10 (9.3%) at the 5% level. However, we see no relationship between the coefficients that are statistically significant in these falsification tests and those that are significant in our main results. Specifically, none of the estimates for supercenters/warehouse clubs are significant, while the only significant result for restaurants is an association with *higher* levels of prostate screening. This suggests that, if anything, restaurants enter areas with *improving* health behaviors. In sum, we view the results from Table 11 as generally supportive of a causal interpretation of our earlier estimated effects on weight – particularly for the economic factors that emerged as the most important contributors to the trend.

### **VIII. Weight Loss Attempts**

A lingering question with the results presented thus far is whether or not individual responses to economic factors are rational. In the standard neoclassical model, with rational consumers, the utility lost from the additional weight is less than the utility gained from, for instance, greater enjoyment of tasty foods. Conversely, if preferences are time-inconsistent or

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<sup>25</sup> The BRFSS specifically imposed the age restriction for men’s prostate exams, but not for women’s mammogram’s, so we follow their lead and include women of all ages. The results are similar if we impose various age cutoffs for women.

individuals are otherwise irrational, the effects of changing economic incentives may be exacerbated and increases in weight may be inefficient, even in absence of externalities. Ruhm (2012) documents the prevalence of weight loss attempts and characterizes these as an admission of past deviations from one's lifetime utility maximizing plans, suggesting "internalities" due to time inconsistency or other sources of not fully rational decision-making. Building on this idea, we evaluate whether the economic factors identified as major contributors to the rise in BMI, obesity, or severe obesity are associated with the probability of reporting current weight loss attempts. Significant effects would be consistent with at least some of the weight gained from changes in these factors being welfare-decreasing.

Table 12 reports the results. The weight loss attempt variable is only available in 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2003, so our sample size is smaller than for the main regressions. The first column includes all 27 economic factors in the same regression. We observe only two significant effects, both at the 10% level: a higher proportion of the workforce in an active job is associated with fewer weight loss attempts, while greater supercenter/warehouse club density is associated with more weight loss attempts.

Since our sample only contains five years (compared to 21 for the main regressions), multicollinearity among the economic factors might help explain the lack of significant results. We therefore estimate two additional models. The first includes only the "important" economic factors, which we define as explaining more than 5% of the rise in BMI, obesity, or class II/III obesity in the baseline regressions (or working against the trend by the same amount). Variables meeting this criterion are proportion blue collar, restaurants, supercenters/warehouse clubs, food stamp benefits, gas prices, and fitness centers. Next, we include only restaurants and supercenters/warehouse clubs, which repeatedly emerged as the two most important factors.

These additional specifications do not cause any new results to emerge. Supercenter/warehouse club density is the only significant economic factor, and its level of significance rises as the number of other included economic factors shrinks. Discount big box grocers may trigger impulses that lead to “mistakes,” i.e. deviations from long-run utility maximization. This result is consistent with Courtemanche et al.’s (2014) finding that present-biased individuals are the most responsive to falling food prices. It is interesting, however, that we do not observe a similar effect for restaurants.

## **IX. Discussion**

This paper aims to answer to the big-picture question of how well “the economic explanation” of individuals responding to changing incentives can explain the rise in obesity. We develop a model of weight that includes numerous economic factors reflecting the economic incentives alleged to have contributed to the upward trend in weight in the U.S. These factors relate to general economic conditions, labor supply, and the monetary or time costs of eating, physical activity, and smoking. Changes in these economic factors collectively explain 37% of the rise in body mass index, 43% of the increase in obesity, and 59% of the growth in class II/III obesity – the category in which the strong mortality consequences of excess weight emerge. Quantile regressions confirm that the economic factors are most relevant for explaining the rise in “obese weight” ranges and the greater shifts of the upper BMI percentiles, accounting for 51% of the change at the 90<sup>th</sup> BMI percentile. Variables related to the costs of eating – particularly supercenter/warehouse club expansion and increasing numbers of restaurants – are the leading drivers of the results.

Our main conclusions are robust to the exclusion of insignificant economic factors, the use of a quadratic trend instead of year fixed effects, accounting for the gradual nature of weight

accumulation, aggregating the data, and using instruments for the leading contributors to the trend. Falsification tests show little connection between the aforementioned key economic factors and other health behaviors, consistent with a causal interpretation of the effects on weight. Finally we show that supercenter/warehouse club density increases the probability of weight loss attempts, raising the possibility that cheap food from these retailers triggers self-control problems.

Several limitations of our study provide opportunities for future research. Most obviously, while we identify the factors associated with a meaningful portion of the trend in weight, much of the trend remains unexplained. Measurement error in some economic variables could lead us to underestimate their contributions. Perhaps most importantly, the C2ER state-level food and alcohol price data are based on a limited number of products and urban markets, almost certainly resulting in some measurement error. Additionally, we are not able to evaluate some potentially important changes in incentives due to technological innovations for which it is difficult to measure cross-state over-time variation. For instance, Cutler et al. (2003) argue that the rise in obesity is the result of technological progress in food preparation and preservation that reduces the time cost of consuming snack foods. However, the specific innovations mentioned (e.g. microwaving and vacuum packing) occurred well before 1990, so they are not likely to explain the rise in obesity during our sample period. Another possible explanation is that electronic innovations – video games, computers, more television channels, cell phones, etc. – have improved sedentary leisure time options, increasing the opportunity cost of physical activity. We are skeptical, though, that this explains a large portion of the trend because Cutler et al. (2003) documented that the rise in obesity is driven by additional caloric intake rather than reduced energy expenditure.

Future research should push further to establish causality. While the inclusion of state and year fixed effects, robustness of the results for the two leading factors to an instrumental variable specification, and favorable falsification test results give us confidence that our estimates have a causal interpretation, it is obviously impossible to make strong claims in the absence of randomization or quasi-randomization. Further analyses, both using the “one factor at a time” approach common in the literature and comprehensive models such as the one considered here, are necessary before a consensus can emerge about the causal effects of the various economic factors.

Finally, future research should continue to evaluate the appropriate role of policy in light of an economic explanation for the rise in obesity. We briefly consider one possible justification for intervention: time-inconsistent preferences. Others include negative externalities from pooled health care costs and imperfect information about the caloric content of different foods. More work is needed on the benefits, costs, and welfare effects of various policy options.

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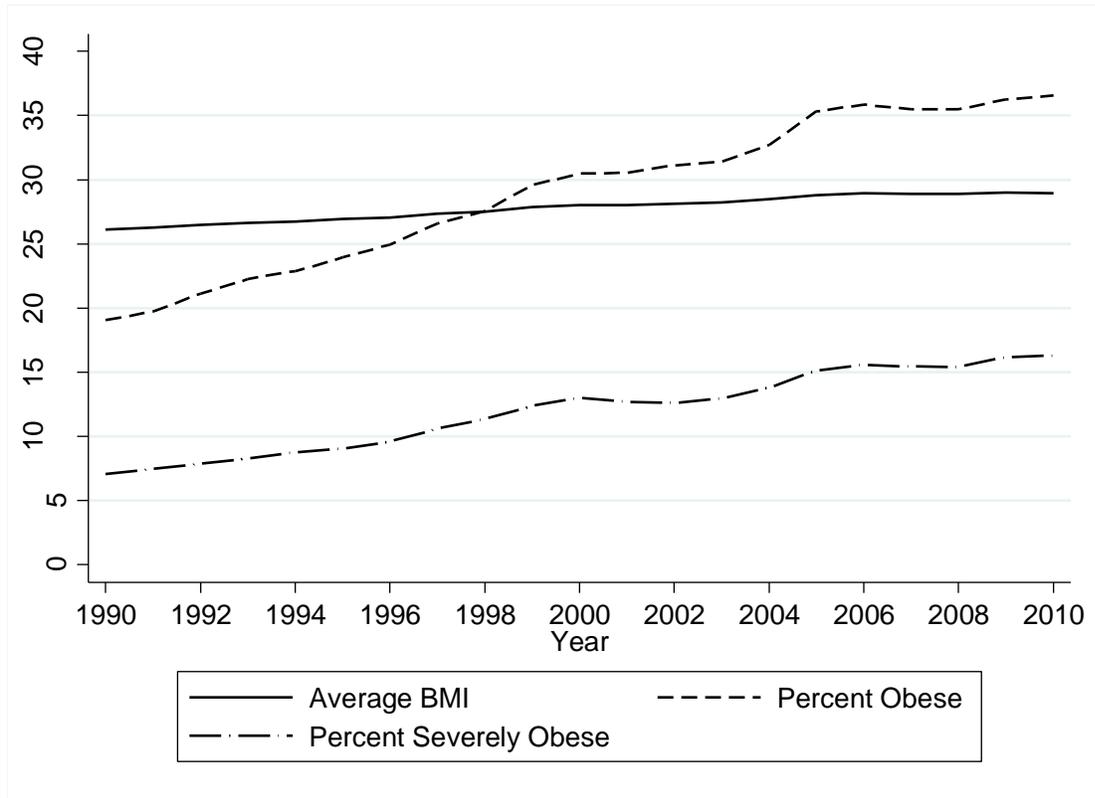
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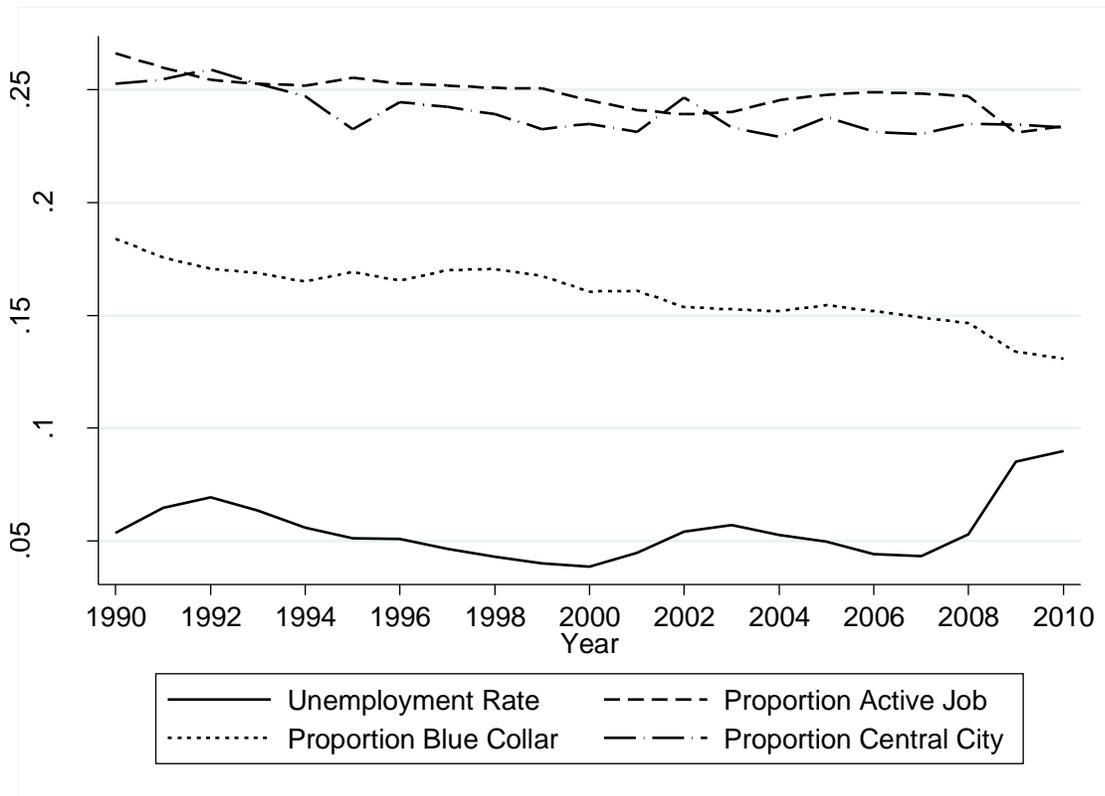
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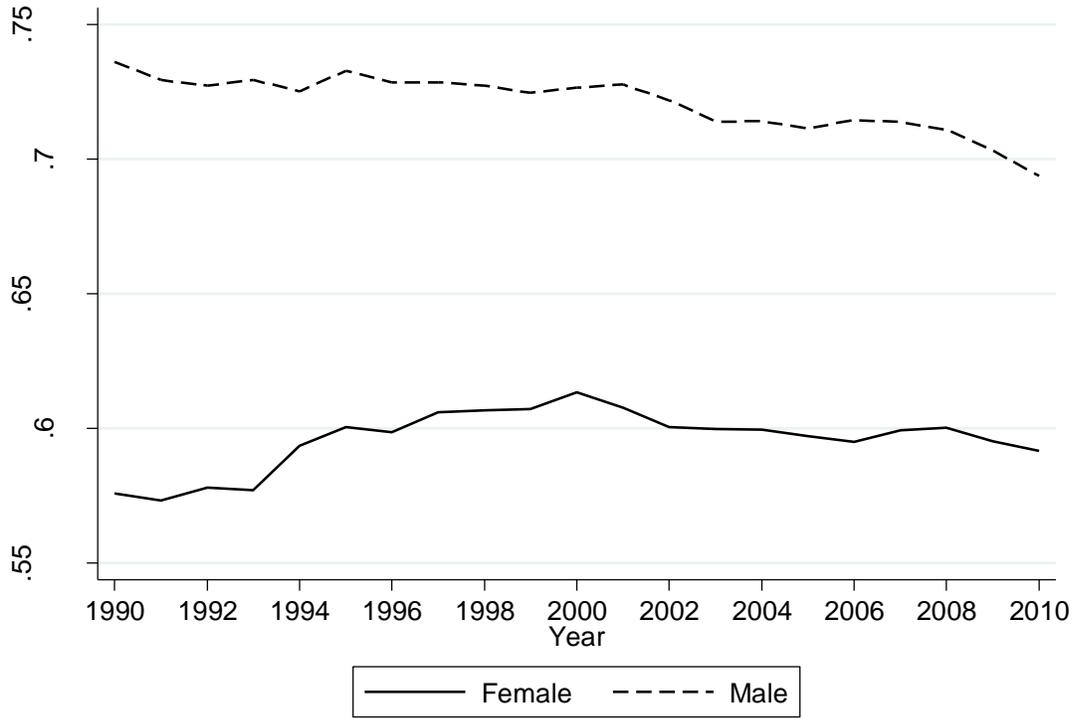
**Figure 1 – Trends in BMI, Obesity, and Severe Obesity**



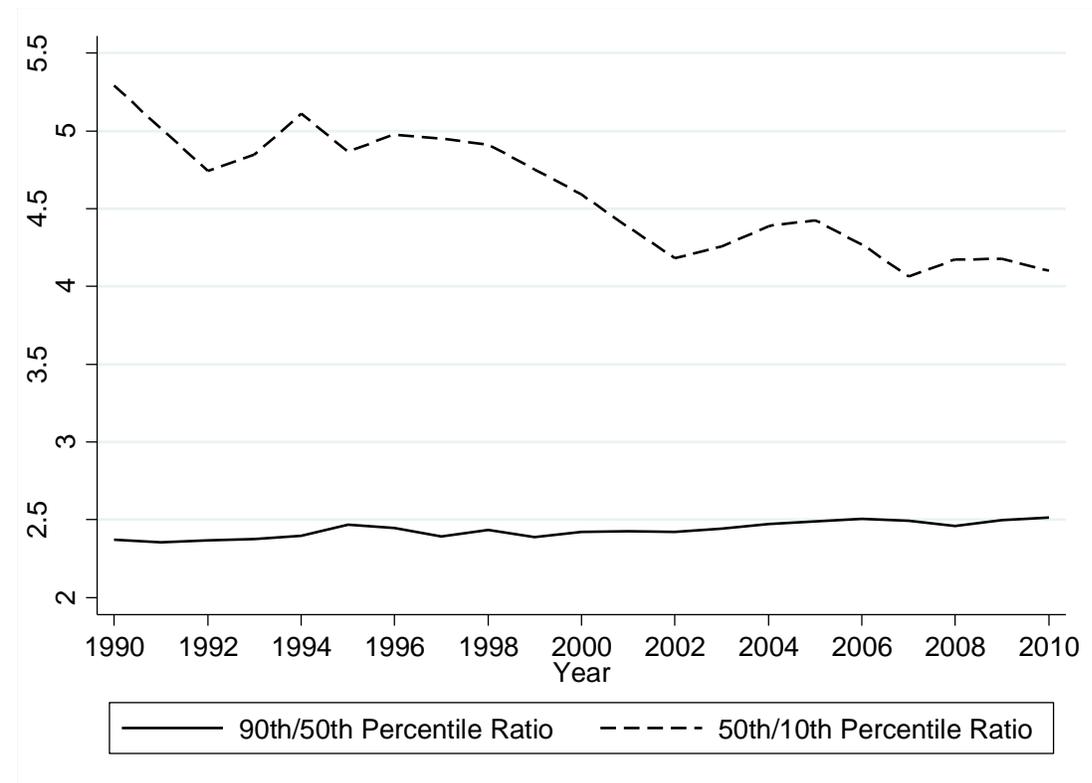
**Figure 2 – Trends in Economic Factors Measured as Proportions**



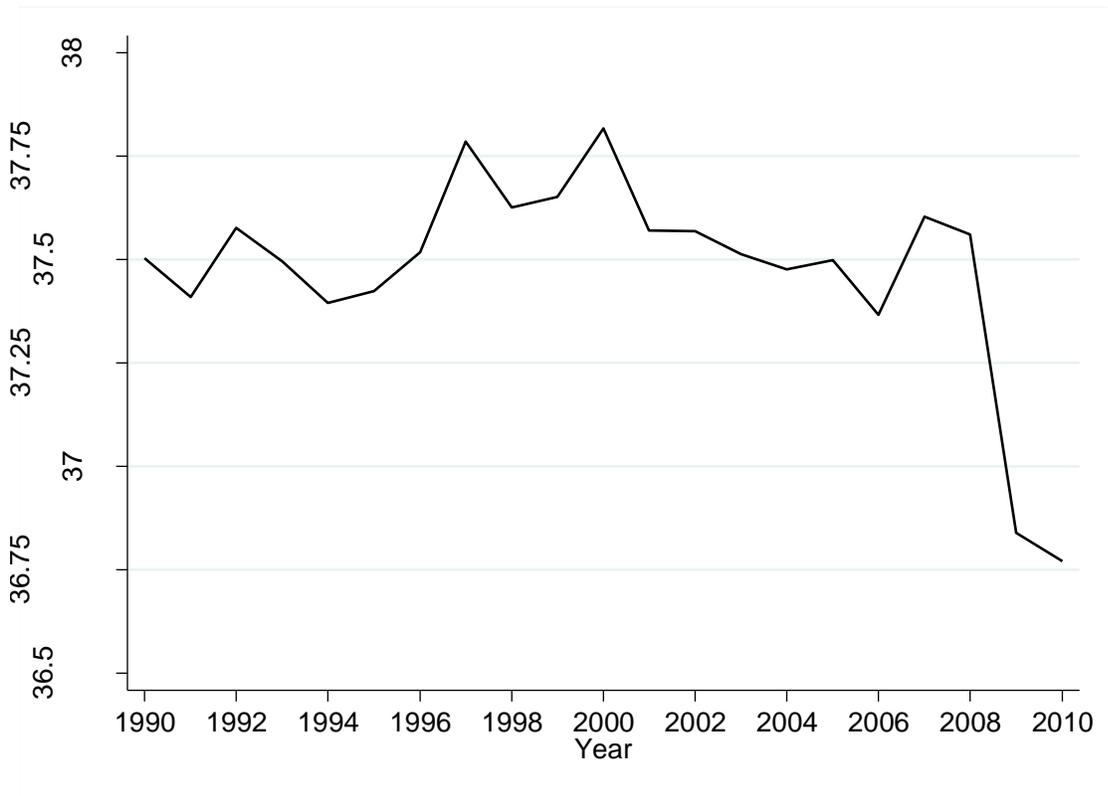
**Figure 3 – Trends in Labor Force Participation Rates**



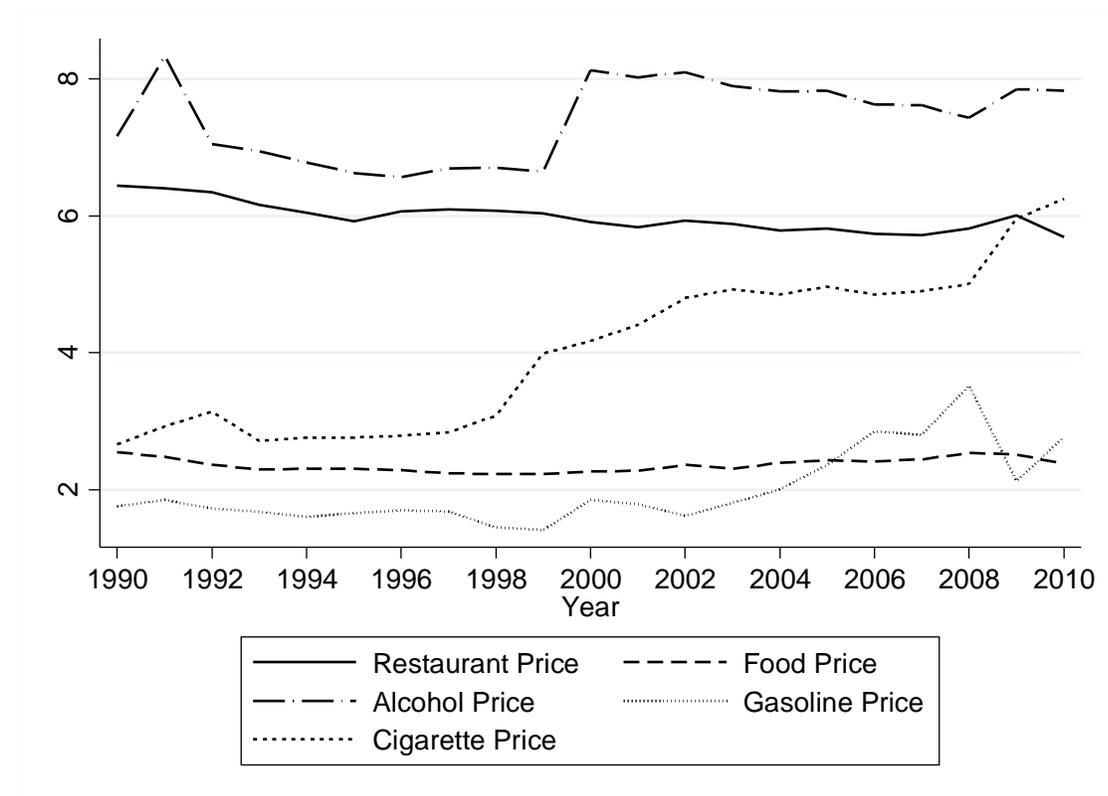
**Figure 4 – Trends in Income Inequality Ratios**



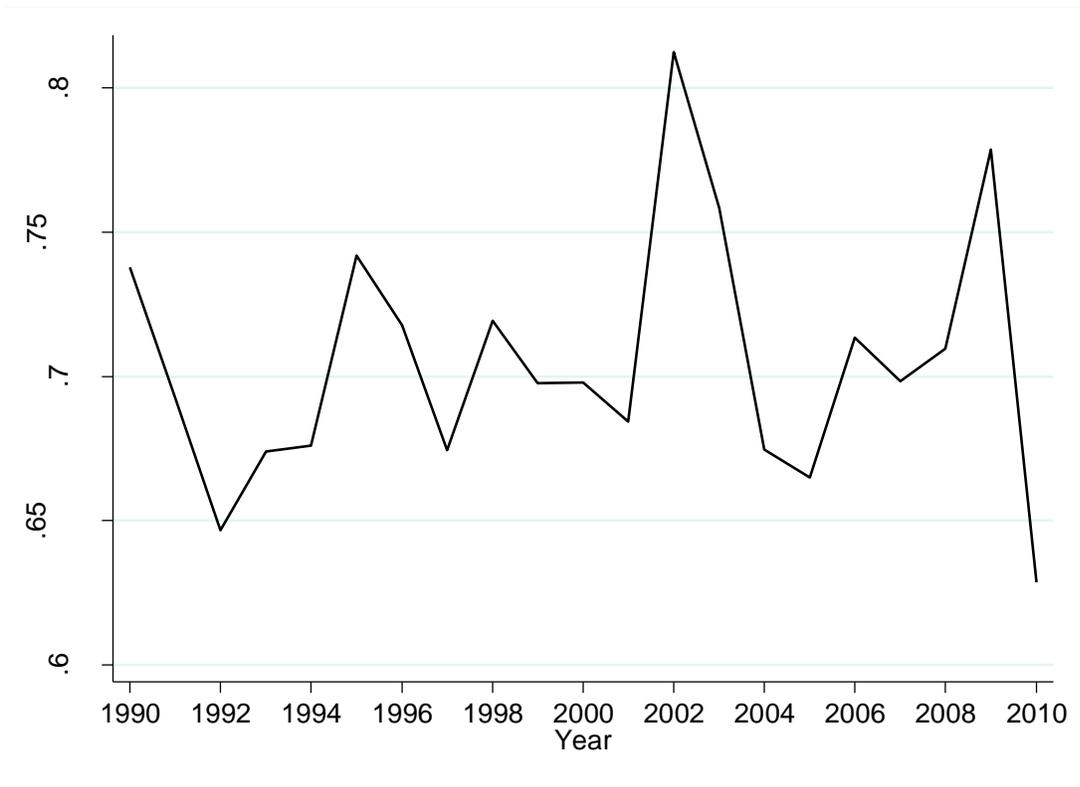
**Figure 5 – Trend in Work Hours**



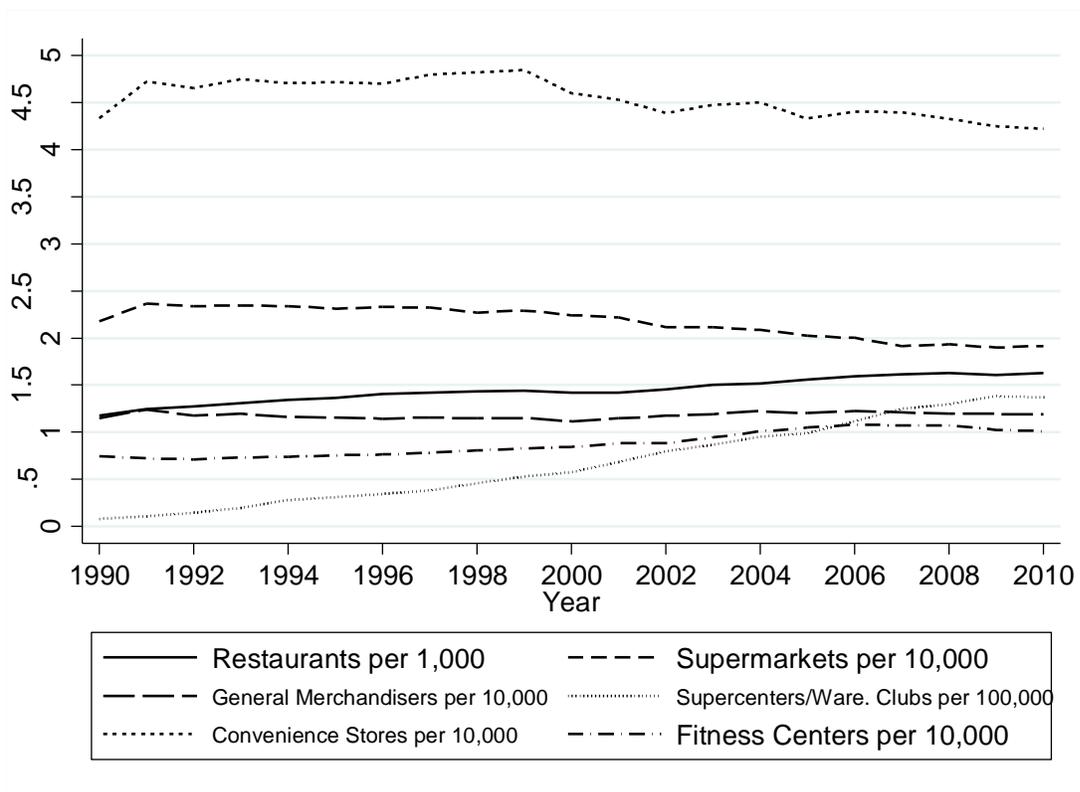
**Figure 6 – Trends in Price Variables**



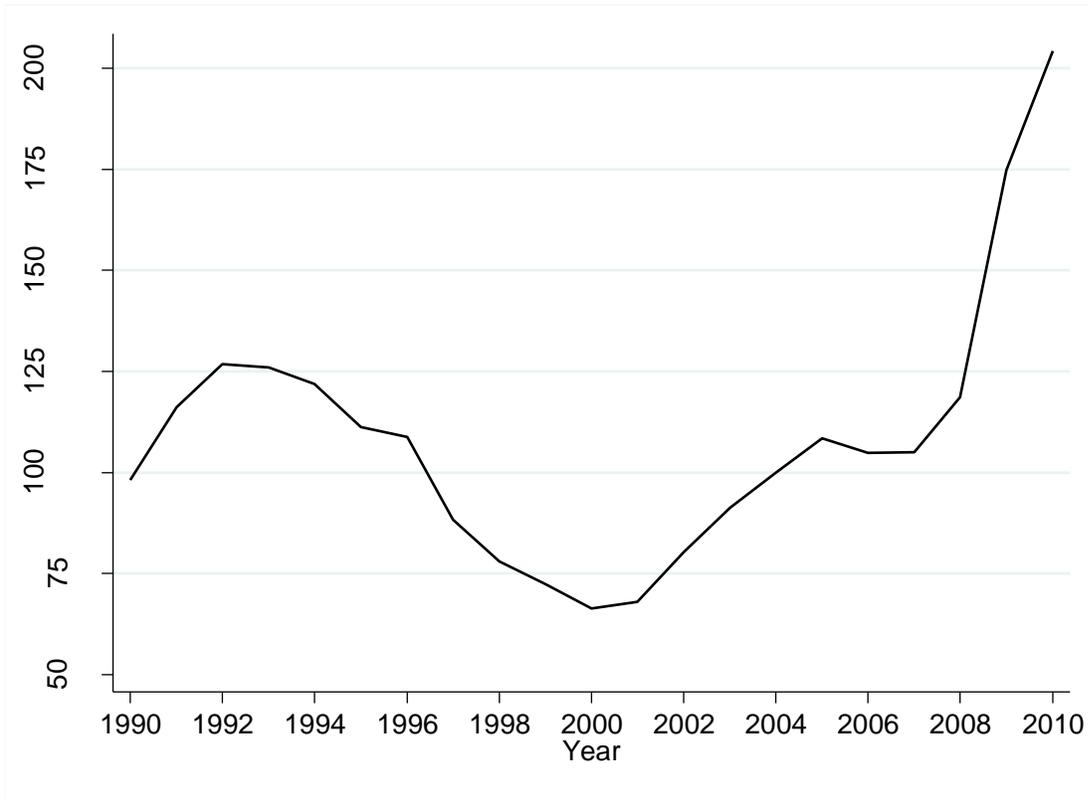
**Figure 7 – Trend in Relative Price of Fruits and Vegetables**



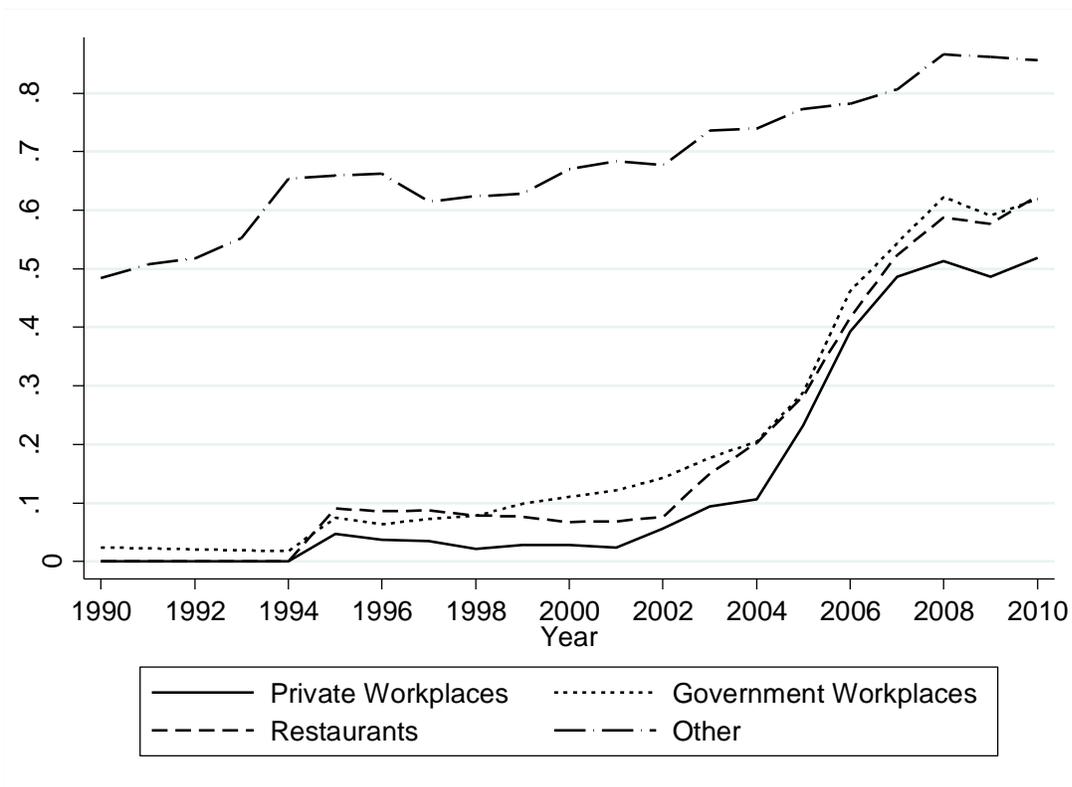
**Figure 8 – Trends in Store Variables**



**Figure 9 – Trend in Food Stamp Spending**



**Figure 10 – Trends in Smoking Ban Variables**



**Table 1 – Percentage of Rise in BMI Explained by Prior Studies**

Variable	Study	Data	Years	Percentage of Rise in BMI Explained
Fast-food price	Chou et al. (2004)	BRFSS	1984-1999	3.6% <sup>+</sup>
Grocery food price	Lakdawalla and Philipson (2002)	NHIS	1976-1994	40.0%
Alcohol price	Chou et al. (2004)	BRFSS	1984-1999	0.7% <sup>+</sup>
Restaurants	Chou et al. (2004)	BRFSS	1984-1999	64.4% <sup>+</sup>
Walmart Supercenters	Courtemanche and Carden (2011)	BRFSS	1994-2005	10.5%
Food stamps	Baum (2011)	NLSY	1985-2000	0.6% <sup>+</sup>
Work hours	Courtemanche (2009b)	NLSY	1985-2004	1.4%
Urban sprawl	Zhou and Kaestner (2010)	NHIS	1976-2001	8.6% <sup>+</sup>
On-the-job exercise	Lakdawalla and Philipson (2002)	NHIS	1976-1994	9.8% <sup>+</sup>
Gasoline prices	Courtemanche (2009b)	BRFSS	1984-2004	8.0%
Cigarette price	Chou et al. (2004)	BRFSS	1984-1999	24.9% <sup>+</sup>
Clean indoor air laws	Chou et al. (2004)	BRFSS	1984-1999	4.2% <sup>+</sup>
<b>Total</b>				<b>176.7%</b>

Notes: BRFSS is Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, NHIS is National Health Interview Survey, and NLSY is National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. <sup>+</sup> denotes estimate is our calculation based on summary statistics and coefficient estimates from the paper, as opposed to being directly presented by the paper's authors.

**Table 2 – Impacts of One Standard Deviation Increases in Economic Factors on BMI**

	Separate Regressions	All Factors Together
<i>General Economic Indicators</i>		
Unemployment rate	0.034 (0.033)	0.008 (0.019)
Median household income	-0.015 (0.034)	0.066 (0.027)**
90/50 ratio	-0.050 (0.013)***	-0.014 (0.009)
50/10 ratio	-0.033 (0.018)*	-0.014 (0.013)
<i>Labor Supply Variables</i>		
Female labor force participation rate	-0.040 (0.031)	-0.035 (0.022)
Male labor force participation rate	-0.024 (0.026)	-0.007 (0.021)
Average work hours	0.009 (0.017)	0.004 (0.014)
Proportion active job	-0.045 (0.030)	0.018 (0.019)
Proportion blue collar	-0.051 (0.036)	-0.048 (0.021)**
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Calorie Intake</i>		
Fast-food restaurant price	-0.013 (0.031)	-0.031 (0.026)
Grocery food price	-0.121 (0.033)***	-0.002 (0.031)
Relative price of fruits/vegetables	-0.015 (0.028)	-0.002 (0.013)
Alcohol price	0.019 (0.024)	0.028 (0.014)*
Restaurants	0.045 (0.077)	0.167 (0.047)***
Supercenters/warehouse clubs	0.280 (0.032)***	0.218 (0.039)***
Supermarkets	-0.156 (0.051)***	-0.087 (0.031)***
Convenience stores	-0.066 (0.081)	-0.064 (0.052)
General merchandisers	0.206 (0.055)***	0.058 (0.045)
Food stamp benefits	0.071 (0.044)	0.033 (0.025)
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Physical Activity</i>		
Gasoline price	-0.245 (0.107)**	-0.047 (0.065)
Fitness centers	-0.237 (0.044)***	-0.113 (0.035)***
Proportion central city	-0.266 (0.197)	-0.087 (0.099)
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Smoking</i>		
Cigarette price	-0.108 (0.049)**	0.036 (0.031)
Smoking ban: private	-0.020 (0.026)	0.027 (0.027)
Smoking ban: government	-0.011 (0.028)	-0.013 (0.025)
Smoking ban: restaurant	-0.052 (0.026)*	-0.011 (0.016)
Smoking ban: other	0.057 (0.023)**	0.005 (0.014)

Notes: Standard errors, heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered by state, are in parentheses. \*\*\* statistically significant at 1% level; \*\* 5% level; \* 10% level. All regressions include the control variables and state and year fixed effects. BRFSS sampling weights are used. N=2,922,071.

**Table 3 – Impacts of One Standard Deviation Increases in Economic Factors on P(Obese)**

	Separate Regressions	All Factors Together
<i>General Economic Indicators</i>		
Unemployment rate	0.002 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.001)
Median household income	-0.001 (0.002)	0.003 (0.002)
90/50 ratio	-0.003 (0.001)***	-0.0004 (0.001)
50/10 ratio	-0.004 (0.001)***	-0.002 (0.001)**
<i>Labor Supply Variables</i>		
Female labor force participation rate	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.001)
Male labor force participation rate	-0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.002)
Average work hours	0.0004 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Proportion active job	-0.004 (0.002)*	-0.002 (0.002)
Proportion blue collar	-0.003 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.001)
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Calorie Intake</i>		
Fast-food restaurant price	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.003 (0.002)
Grocery food price	-0.006 (0.002)***	0.002 (0.002)
Relative price of fruits/vegetables	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.0001 (0.001)
Alcohol price	0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)
Restaurants	0.004 (0.005)	0.012 (0.004)***
Supercenters/warehouse clubs	0.017 (0.002)***	0.013 (0.003)***
Supermarkets	-0.008 (0.003)**	-0.005 (0.003)*
Convenience stores	-0.003 (0.005)	-0.005 (0.004)
General merchandisers	0.015 (0.004)***	0.007 (0.003)**
Food stamp benefits	0.003 (0.003)*	0.003 (0.002)
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Physical Activity</i>		
Gasoline price	-0.013 (0.006)**	-0.001 (0.005)
Fitness centers	-0.012 (0.003)***	-0.005 (0.004)
Proportion central city	-0.018 (0.011)	-0.005 (0.007)
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Smoking</i>		
Cigarette price	-0.007 (0.003)*	0.003 (0.003)
Smoking ban: private	-0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)
Smoking ban: government	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.001 (0.002)
Smoking ban: restaurant	-0.003 (0.002)**	-0.001 (0.001)
Smoking ban: other	0.005 (0.002)**	0.002 (0.001)*

See notes for Table 2.

**Table 4 – Impacts of One Std. Dev. Increases in Economic Factors on P(Class II/III Obese)**

	Separate Regressions	Surviving Factors Only
<i>General Economic Indicators</i>		
Unemployment rate	0.002 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Median household income	-0.003 (0.002)	0.001 (0.001)
90/50 ratio	-0.002 (0.001)***	-0.0002 (0.001)
50/10 ratio	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.0004 (0.001)
<i>Labor Supply Variables</i>		
Female labor force participation rate	-0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Male labor force participation rate	-0.003 (0.001)*	-0.002 (0.001)
Average work hours	0.0004 (0.0008)	-0.0002 (0.001)
Proportion active job	-0.002 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Proportion blue collar	-0.003 (0.002)**	-0.003 (0.001)***
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Calorie Intake</i>		
Fast-food restaurant price	-0.0005 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Grocery food price	-0.006 (0.001)***	-0.0004 (0.001)
Relative price of fruits/vegetables	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.0004 (0.001)
Alcohol price	-0.0001 (0.001)	0.0002 (0.001)
Restaurants	0.004 (0.003)	0.009 (0.003)***
Supercenters/warehouse clubs	0.013 (0.002)***	0.009 (0.002)***
Supermarkets	-0.007 (0.002)***	-0.004 (0.001)***
Convenience stores	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.003 (0.003)
General merchandisers	0.011 (0.002)***	0.003 (0.002)*
Food stamp benefits	0.005 (0.002)**	0.003 (0.001)**
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Physical Activity</i>		
Gasoline price	-0.010 (0.005)**	-0.001 (0.003)
Fitness centers	-0.010 (0.002)***	-0.003 (0.002)*
Proportion central city	-0.013 (0.008)*	-0.005 (0.003)
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Smoking</i>		
Cigarette price	-0.006 (0.002)***	0.0002 (0.001)
Smoking ban: private	-0.002 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)
Smoking ban: government	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)
Smoking ban: restaurant	-0.003 (0.001)**	-0.001 (0.001)**
Smoking ban: other	0.003 (0.001)**	0.001 (0.001)

See notes for Table 2.

**Table 5 – Percentage of Rises in BMI, Obesity, and Severe Obesity Explained by Changes in Economic Factors**

	BMI	Obesity	Class II/III Obesity
<i>General Economic Indicators</i>			
Unemployment rate	0.7% (1.5%)	-1.1% (1.9%)	-2.6% (2.7%)
Median household income	0.5% (0.2%)**	0.4% (0.3%)	0.3% (0.4%)
90/50 ratio	-0.7% (0.5%)	-0.3% (0.6%)	-0.4% (0.8%)
50/10 ratio	0.8% (0.7%)	2.1%** (0.9%)**	0.8% (1.1%)
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>1.3% (1.7%)</b>	<b>1.1% (2.1%)</b>	<b>-1.9% (2.8%)</b>
<i>Labor Supply Variables</i>			
Female labor force participation rate	-0.5% (0.3%)*	-0.4% (0.3%)	0.3% (0.4%)
Male labor force participation rate	-0.3% (0.3%)	-1.0% (1.2%)	2.1% (1.5%)
Average work hours	0.2% (0.5%)	0.5% (0.7%)	0.2% (0.8%)
Proportion active job	-0.5% (0.6%)	0.8% (0.7%)	-1.1% (0.9%)
Proportion blue collar	3.3% (1.4%)**	1.0% (1.6%)	6.2% (2.2%)**
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>2.1% (1.8%)</b>	<b>0.9% (2.0%)</b>	<b>7.8% (2.1%)**</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Calorie Intake</i>			
Fast-food restaurant price	2.3% (2.0%)	3.4% (2.1%)	1.6% (2.2%)
Grocery food price	0.06% (0.8%)	-0.6% (0.9%)	0.3% (1.1%)
Relative price of fruits/vegetables	0.1% (0.6%)	0.04% (0.8%)	0.6% (1.0%)
Alcohol price	1.1% (0.6%)*	0.8% (0.8%)	0.3% (0.9%)
Restaurants	12.2% (3.4%)**	13.8% (4.5%)**	22.9% (6.2%)**
Supercenters/warehouse clubs	17.2% (3.1%)**	16.3% (3.4%)**	24.1% (4.7%)**
Supermarkets	-0.1% (0.03%)**	-0.08% (0.04%)*	-0.1% (0.04%)**
Convenience stores	-0.1% (0.1%)	-0.2 (0.1%)	-0.2% (0.2%)
General merchandisers	0.9% (0.7%)	1.7% (0.8%)**	1.8% (0.9%)*
Food stamp benefits	2.7% (2.1%)	3.9% (2.9%)	8.3% (3.6%)**
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>36.5% (5.7%)**</b>	<b>39.1% (7.1%)**</b>	<b>59.6% (9.7%)**</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Physical Activity</i>			
Gasoline price	-3.3% (4.6%)	-0.7% (5.4%)	-2.8% (7.6%)
Fitness centers	-4.1% (1.3%)**	-2.7% (2.1%)	-3.6% (2.2%)*
Proportion central city	0.7% (0.8%)	0.7% (0.9%)	1.2% (0.9%)
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>-6.7% (4.5%)</b>	<b>-2.6% (5.9%)</b>	<b>-5.2% (7.8%)</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Smoking</i>			
Cigarette price	3.9% (3.9%)	4.4% (4.6%)	0.6% (3.8%)
Smoking ban: private	1.2% (1.2%)	0.9% (1.0%)	1.8% (1.8%)
Smoking ban: government	-0.6% (1.1%)	-0.5% (1.1%)	-1.9% (1.7%)
Smoking ban: restaurant	-0.6% (0.9%)	-1.3% (0.9%)	-2.2% (1.0%)**
Smoking ban: other	0.1% (0.4%)	0.8% (0.5%)*	0.7% (0.9%)
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>4.0% (3.4%)</b>	<b>4.3% (4.3%)</b>	<b>-1.0% (4.2%)</b>
<b>Total from Economic Factors</b>	<b>37.2% (10.6%)**</b>	<b>42.8% (12.9%)**</b>	<b>59.3% (16.9%)**</b>
<b>Total from Controls</b>	<b>10.4% (1.1%)**</b>	<b>6.1% (1.3%)**</b>	<b>2.7% (1.8%)</b>

Notes: Standard errors, heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered by state, are in parentheses. \*\*\* indicates statistically significant at the 1% level; \*\* 5% level; \* 10% level. BRFSS sampling weights are used.

**Table 6 – Impacts of One Standard Dev. Increases in Economic Factors on BMI Quantiles**

	0.1	0.25	0.5	0.75	0.9
<i>General Economic Indicators</i>					
Unemployment rate	0.022 (0.021)	0.042 (0.019)**	0.016 (0.022)	0.004 (0.032)	-0.038 (0.053)
Median household income	0.030 (0.024)	0.034 (0.023)	0.082 (0.025)***	0.058 (0.036)	0.061 (0.063)
90/50 ratio	-0.007 (0.010)	-0.011 (0.008)	-0.001 (0.009)	-0.012 (0.014)	-0.030 (0.026)
50/10 ratio	-0.018 (0.013)	-0.000 (0.011)	-0.024 (0.013)*	-0.039 (0.018)**	-0.011 (0.031)
<i>Labor Supply Variables</i>					
Female labor force participation rate	-0.054 (0.019)***	-0.051 (0.018)***	-0.079 (0.020)***	-0.024 (0.026)	0.049 (0.046)
Male labor force participation rate	0.024 (0.016)	0.017 (0.016)	0.040 (0.017)**	0.018 (0.023)	-0.02 (0.041)**
Average work hours	0.005 (0.012)	0.024 (0.011)**	0.012 (0.012)	-0.022 (0.018)	0.003 (0.032)
Proportion active job	0.020 (0.016)	0.025 (0.016)	-0.007 (0.017)	-0.029 (0.025)	0.067 (0.044)
Proportion blue collar	-0.028 (0.018)	-0.019 (0.018)	-0.053 (0.019)***	-0.020 (0.025)	-0.014 (0.049)***
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Calorie Intake</i>					
Fast-food rest. price	-0.020 (0.019)	-0.017 (0.018)	-0.035 (0.019)*	-0.046 (0.028)	-0.031 (0.048)
Grocery food price	0.016 (0.021)	0.019 (0.019)	-0.016 (0.020)	0.003 (0.030)	-0.022 (0.055)
Relative price of fruits/vegetables	0.012 (0.014)	0.007 (0.013)	0.001 (0.014)	-0.004 (0.022)	-0.019 (0.037)
Alcohol price	0.040 (0.015)***	0.035 (0.016)**	0.032 (0.017)**	0.026 (0.023)	0.001 (0.043)
Restaurants	0.046 (0.039)	0.016 (0.035)	0.062 (0.038)	0.274 (0.055)***	0.526 (0.097)***
Supercenters/warehouse clubs	0.068 (0.025)***	0.100 (0.024)***	0.186 (0.027)***	0.283 (0.039)***	0.492 (0.067)***
Supermarkets	0.023 (0.030)	-0.007 (0.029)	-0.034 (0.031)	-0.126 (0.046)***	-0.251 (0.073)***
Convenience stores	0.007 (0.041)	-0.050 (0.038)	-0.031 (0.043)	-0.131 (0.059)**	-0.143 (0.096)
General merchandisers	-0.066 (0.029)**	-0.056 (0.028)**	-0.014 (0.031)	0.164 (0.043)***	0.159 (0.076)**
Food stamp benefits	0.010 (0.026)	0.025 (0.025)	-0.015 (0.028)	0.043 (0.038)	0.134 (0.069)*

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**Table 6 – Impacts of One Standard Dev. Increases in Economic Factors on BMI Quantiles (continued)**

	0.1	0.25	0.5	0.75	0.9
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Physical Activity</i>					
Gasoline price	-0.095 (0.074)	-0.103 (0.062)*	-0.064 (0.069)	-0.019 (0.097)	-0.056 (0.165)
Fitness centers	-0.100 (0.028)***	-0.095 (0.028)***	-0.060 (0.031)*	-0.110 (0.043)**	-0.162 (0.078)**
Proportion central city	-0.051 (0.047)	-0.041 (0.045)	-0.060 (0.046)	-0.142 (0.064)**	-0.181 (0.118)
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Smoking</i>					
Cigarette price	0.017 (0.025)	0.033 (0.023)	0.064 (0.028)**	0.047 (0.040)	-0.034 (0.069)
Smoking ban: private	-0.019 (0.019)	0.016 (0.017)	0.013 (0.019)	0.050 (0.028)*	0.068 (0.052)
Smoking ban: government	0.025 (0.017)	0.011 (0.016)	0.013 (0.017)	-0.037 (0.026)	-0.070 (0.045)
Smoking ban: rest.	0.026 (0.019)	0.008 (0.018)	-0.005 (0.019)	-0.025 (0.028)	-0.047 (0.053)
Smoking ban: other	-0.025 (0.013)*	-0.021 (0.013)*	0.002 (0.014)	0.028 (0.021)	0.027 (0.037)

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses; the variance-covariance matrix of the unconditional quantile regression model is estimated using 500 bootstrap replications. \*\*\* indicates statistically significant at the 1% level; \*\* 5% level; \* 10% level. All regressions include the control variables and state and year fixed effects. BRFSS sampling weights are used. N=2,922,071.

**Table 7 – Percentage of Rise in BMI Quantiles Explained**

	0.1	0.25	0.5	0.75	0.9
<i>General Economic Indicators</i>					
Unemployment rate	4.3%	5.4%**	1.4%	0.2%	-1.8%
Median household income	0.4%	0.4%	0.7%***	0.3%	0.3%
90/50 ratio	-0.9%	-0.9%	-0.1%	-0.5%	-0.9%
50/10 ratio	2.4%	0.03%	1.4%*	1.6%**	0.4%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>6.4%</b>	<b>5.0%*</b>	<b>3.4%</b>	<b>1.8%</b>	<b>-2.1%</b>
<i>Labor Supply Variables</i>					
Female labor force participation rate	-1.7%***	-1.1%***	-1.1%***	-0.2%	0.4%
Male labor force participation rate	-2.4%	-1.1%	-1.8%**	-0.6%	2.3%**
Average work hours	0.5%	-1.4%**	-0.4%	0.6%	-0.1%
Proportion active job	-1.4%	-1.1%	0.2%	0.6%	-1.1%
Proportion blue collar	4.6%	2.1%	3.8%***	1.0%	5.3%***
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>-1.3%</b>	<b>-2.7%</b>	<b>0.7%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>6.8%***</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Calorie Intake</i>					
Fast-food restaurant price	3.6%	2.0%	2.7%*	2.5%	1.3%
Grocery food price	-1.0%	-0.8%	0.4%	-0.1%	0.3%
Relative price of fruits/vegetables	-1.4%	-0.5%	-0.03%	0.1%	0.5%
Alcohol price	3.8%***	2.2%**	1.8%**	0.8%	0.03%
Restaurants	8.1%	1.9%	4.8%	14.8%***	22.4%***
Supercenters/warehouse clubs	12.9%***	12.4%***	15.3%***	16.4%***	22.6%***
Supermarkets	0.05%	-0.01%	-0.03%	-0.1%***	-0.1%***
Convenience stores	0.03%	-0.2%	-0.1%	-0.2%**	-0.2%
General merchandisers	-2.5%**	-1.4%**	-0.2%	1.9%***	1.5%**
Food stamp benefits	1.9%	3.2%	-1.2%	2.6%	6.3%*
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>25.6%**</b>	<b>18.8%***</b>	<b>23.4%***</b>	<b>38.7%***</b>	<b>54.7%***</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Physical Activity</i>					
Gasoline price	-15.8	-11.3%*	-4.6%	-1.0%	-2.3%
Fitness centers	-8.8%***	-5.5%***	-2.3%*	-3.0%**	-3.5%**
Proportion central city	1.0%	0.5%	0.5%	0.8%**	0.8%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>-23.6%*</b>	<b>-16.3%**</b>	<b>-6.4%</b>	<b>-3.1%</b>	<b>-4.9%</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Smoking</i>					
Cigarette price	4.3	5.6%	7.1%**	3.7%	-2.1%
Smoking ban: private	-2.1	1.1%	0.6%	1.6%*	1.8%
Smoking ban: government	2.7	0.8%	0.6%	-1.2%	-1.8%
Smoking ban: restaurant	3.4	0.7%	-0.3%	-1.0%	-1.5%
Smoking ban: other	-1.7%*	-0.9%*	0.1%	0.6%	0.4%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>6.7%</b>	<b>7.3%</b>	<b>8.1%**</b>	<b>3.7%</b>	<b>-3.2%</b>
<b>Total from Econ. Factors</b>	<b>13.8%</b>	<b>12.1%</b>	<b>29.1%***</b>	<b>42.5%***</b>	<b>51.3%***</b>
<b>Total from Controls</b>	<b>32.4%***</b>	<b>23.9%***</b>	<b>13.8%***</b>	<b>5.3%***</b>	<b>1.7%</b>

Notes: \*\*\* indicates statistically significant at the 1% level; \*\* 5% level; \* 10% level, based on variance-covariance matrix of the unconditional quantile regression model estimated using 500 bootstrap replications. BRFSS sampling weights are used.

**Table 8 – Robustness Checks: Percentage of Rise in BMI Explained**

	Surviving Factors	Quadratic Trend	Aggregate Data	7-Year Averages	Instrumental Variables
<i>General Economic Indicators</i>					
Unemployment rate	--	-2.0%	0.9%	0.05%	1.3%
Median house. income	0.3%	0.6%	0.4%	5.0% *	0.6%
90/50 ratio	-0.4%	-0.8%	-0.6%	-0.3%	-0.6%
50/10 ratio	0.9%	0.3%	0.5%	5.5%	0.8%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>0.8%</b>	<b>-1.9%</b>	<b>1.3%</b>	<b>10.3%</b>	<b>2.1%</b>
<i>Labor Supply Variables</i>					
Female labor force participation rate	--	-0.7%	-0.4%	-1.0%	-0.3%
Male labor force participation rate	--	-0.3%	-0.03%	-2.7%	-0.2%
Average work hours	--	0.3%	0.1%	1.0%	0.1%
Proportion active job	--	-0.6%	-0.5%	-1.0%	-0.5%
Proportion blue collar	2.9%**	3.8%**	3.1%**	-0.1%	3.5%**
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>2.9%**</b>	<b>2.4%</b>	<b>2.3%</b>	<b>-3.8%</b>	<b>2.4%</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Calorie Intake</i>					
Fast-food restaurant price	--	1.6%	2.8%	0.7%	2.2%
Grocery food price	0.2%	0.1%	0.1%	-1.6%	-0.1%
Relative price of fruits/vegetables	--	1.3%**	0.02%	0.4%	-0.7%
Alcohol price	1.0%	1.7%***	0.9%	-0.5%	0.9%
Restaurants	10.2%***	10.8%***	9.7%***	13.2%**	8.2%
Supercenters/warehouse clubs	18.3%***	18.9%***	15.3%***	18.6%***	20.9%***
Supermarkets	-0.1%***	-0.1%***	-0.1%	-0.2%	-0.1%**
Convenience stores	--	-0.2%*	-0.1%	1.1%	-0.04%
General merchandisers	1.0%	1.5%**	1.7%***	-0.5%	0.9%
Food stamp benefits	--	-1.1%	0.1%	3.3%***	2.5%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>30.5%***</b>	<b>34.5%***</b>	<b>30.4%***</b>	<b>34.4%***</b>	<b>35.4%***</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Physical Activity</i>					
Gasoline price	-3.5%	1.3%	0.4%	-14.3%	-2.2%
Fitness centers	-4.0%***	-1.3%	-3.0%**	-13.2%***	-3.4%**
Proportion central city	--	0.7%	0.6%	1.7%	0.5%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>-7.5%</b>	<b>0.7%</b>	<b>-2.0%</b>	<b>-25.8%</b>	<b>-5.1%</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Smoking</i>					
Cigarette price	4.3%	8.3%**	3.0%	13.1%*	6.0%
Smoking ban: private	--	1.4%	0.7%	-1.1%	1.1%
Smoking ban: government	--	-0.7%	-0.03%	-2.2%	-0.6%
Smoking ban: restaurant	0.1%	-1.5%*	-1.0%	2.4%	-0.3%
Smoking ban: other	-0.01%	0.3%	0.3%	-0.7%	0.03%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>4.3%</b>	<b>7.8%**</b>	<b>3.1%</b>	<b>11.5%*</b>	<b>6.3%*</b>
<b>Total from Econ. Factors</b>	<b>31.0%***</b>	<b>44.5%***</b>	<b>35.1%***</b>	<b>27.7%</b>	<b>41.0%***</b>
Sample Size	2,922,071	2,922,071	1,013	2,430,831	2,857,581

Notes: \*\*\* statistically significant at 1% level; \*\* 5% level; \* 10% level, based on heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors that are clustered by state. All regressions include the control variables and state fixed effects; all except the “quadratic trend” regression also include year fixed effects.

**Table 9 – Robustness Checks: Percentage of Rise in Obesity Explained**

	Surviving Factors	Quadratic Trend	Aggregate Data	7-Year Averages	Instrumental Variables
<i>General Economic Indicators</i>					
Unemployment rate	--	-4.6% **	-0.9%	0.2%	-0.8%
Median house. income	--	0.7% **	0.3%	9.8% **	0.5%
90/50 ratio	0.03%	-0.3%	-0.2%	-1.7%	-0.1%
50/10 ratio	2.2% **	1.2%	1.8%	8.6% *	2.1% **
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>2.3% **</b>	<b>-3.0%</b>	<b>1.0%</b>	<b>16.9% *</b>	<b>1.6%</b>
<i>Labor Supply Variables</i>					
Female labor force participation rate	--	-0.5%	-0.4%	-1.8%	-0.4%
Male labor force participation rate	--	-0.9%	-0.6%	-3.5%	-1.1%
Average work hours	--	0.7%	0.5%	1.0%	0.6%
Proportion active job	1.0%	0.8%	0.7%	-0.2%	0.9%
Proportion blue collar	--	1.3%	1.4%	-2.7%	1.0%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>1.0%</b>	<b>1.4%</b>	<b>1.6%</b>	<b>-7.2%</b>	<b>0.9%</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Calorie Intake</i>					
Fast-food restaurant price	--	2.1%	4.0% *	-0.4%	3.3%
Grocery food price	-0.6%	-0.2%	-0.5%	-0.4%	-0.8%
Relative price of fruits/vegetables	--	1.5% **	-0.1%	0.2%	-0.2%
Alcohol price	--	1.1%	0.8%	0.9%	0.5%
Restaurants	10.3% **	12.8% ***	10.6% ***	15.4% *	13.0%
Supercenters/warehouse clubs	17.3% ***	16.2% ***	13.7% ***	17.4% **	19.0% ***
Supermarkets	-0.1% **	-0.07% *	-0.1% **	-0.3%	-0.1% *
Convenience stores	--	-0.2% **	-0.2% **	2.0%	-0.1%
General merchandisers	1.6% **	1.8% **	2.7% ***	0.6%	1.8% *
Food stamp benefits	3.4%	2.8%	0.2%	3.8% ***	3.7%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>31.9% ***</b>	<b>37.7% ***</b>	<b>31.0%</b>	<b>39.3% ***</b>	<b>40.1% ***</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Physical Activity</i>					
Gasoline price	-2.1%	-1.0%	4.3%	-13.0%	0.9%
Fitness centers	-2.2%	-1.5%	-1.7%	-10.5% *	-2.1%
Proportion central city	--	0.9%	0.5%	0.9%	0.6%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>-4.3%</b>	<b>-1.6%</b>	<b>3.1%</b>	<b>-22.6%</b>	<b>-0.6%</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Smoking</i>					
Cigarette price	4.6%	5.8%	3.1%	21.4% *	5.7%
Smoking ban: private	--	0.5%	0.4%	1.7%	0.9%
Smoking ban: government	--	-0.3%	0.2%	-3.1%	-0.6%
Smoking ban: restaurant	-0.6%	-1.7% *	-1.9%	-1.1%	-1.1%
Smoking ban: other	0.7%	0.9% *	1.0% **	-0.3%	0.8%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>4.6%</b>	<b>5.1%</b>	<b>2.9%</b>	<b>19.2% *</b>	<b>5.8%</b>
<b>Total from Econ. Factors</b>	<b>35.5% ***</b>	<b>39.6% ***</b>	<b>39.6% ***</b>	<b>45.2%</b>	<b>47.8% ***</b>
Sample Size	2,922,071	2,922,071	1,013	2,430,831	2,857,581

See notes for Table 8.

**Table 10 – Robustness Checks: Percentage of Rise in Class II/III Obesity Explained**

	All Factors Together	Quadratic Trend	Aggregate Data	7-Year Averages	Instrumental Variables
<i>General Economic Indicators</i>					
Unemployment rate	--	-8.4%***	-2.4%	0.2%	-1.6%
Median house. income	--	0.8%**	0.1%	7.4%*	0.3%
90/50 ratio	-0.2%	-0.5%	-0.1%	-2.5%	-0.1%
50/10 ratio	--	-0.5%	0.7%	7.4%	0.7%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>-0.2%</b>	<b>-8.5%***</b>	<b>-1.7%</b>	<b>12.6%</b>	<b>-0.7%</b>
<i>Labor Supply Variables</i>					
Female labor force participation rate	--	0.3%	0.5%	0.5%	0.4%
Male labor force participation rate	1.5%	2.5%	2.3%	-0.5%	2.2%
Average work hours	--	0.4%	0.2%	2.5%**	0.2%
Proportion active job	--	-0.8%	-1.3%	-1.6%	-1.2%
Proportion blue collar	5.1%***	6.4%**	6.8%***	2.0%	6.6%***
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>6.5%***</b>	<b>8.7%***</b>	<b>8.5%***</b>	<b>2.9%</b>	<b>8.2%***</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Calorie Intake</i>					
Fast-food restaurant price	--	-1.2%	2.2%	2.0%	1.0%
Grocery food price	0.2%	1.0%	0.5%	-0.2%	0.3%
Relative price of fruits/vegetables	--	2.5%***	0.5%	-0.1%	0.5%
Alcohol price	--	1.7%**	0.5%	-10.2%**	0.1%
Restaurants	18.8%***	22.9%***	18.1%***	28.8%***	16.5%
Supercenters/warehouse clubs	24.7%	24.1%***	22.0%***	23.4%**	30.3%***
Supermarkets	-0.2%***	-0.1%**	-0.2%***	0.5%	-0.1%***
Convenience stores	--	-0.3%	-0.2%	2.8%	-0.1%
General merchandisers	1.6%*	1.6%*	2.5%***	-2.0%	1.7%**
Food stamp benefits	7.2%**	2.0%	6.1%*	3.0%*	7.8%**
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>52.4%***</b>	<b>54.2%***</b>	<b>52.1%***</b>	<b>48.9%***</b>	<b>58.1%***</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Physical Activity</i>					
Gasoline price	-3.3%	-3.4%**	2.1%	1.7%	2.7%
Fitness centers	-3.1%	-3.3%*	-2.9%	-22.1%***	-2.4%
Proportion central city	1.2%	1.7%*	0.9%	2.7%**	1.0%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>-5.5%</b>	<b>-4.9%</b>	<b>0.1%</b>	<b>-17.7%</b>	<b>1.2%</b>
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Smoking</i>					
Cigarette price	3.1%	4.0%	-2.1%	-0.4%	4.1%
Smoking ban: private	--	0.7%	1.5%	-2.3%	1.8%
Smoking ban: government	--	-1.4%	-1.5%	-0.1%	-1.9%
Smoking ban: restaurant	-1.7%	-2.6%**	-2.7%*	1.7%	-1.9%
Smoking ban: other	0.6%	0.6%	0.8%	-1.0%	0.6%
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>2.1%</b>	<b>1.3%</b>	<b>-4.0%</b>	<b>-2.1%</b>	<b>2.6%</b>
<b>Total from Econ. Factors</b>	<b>55.3%***</b>	<b>50.7%***</b>	<b>55.0%***</b>	<b>53.1%*</b>	<b>69.4%***</b>
Sample Size	2,922,071	2,922,071	1,013	2,430,831	2,857,581

See notes for Table 8.

**Table 11 – Falsification Tests**

	Seatbelt	Flu Vaccine	Mammogram	Prostate Exam
<i>General Economic Indicators</i>				
Unemployment rate	-0.003 (0.008)	-0.007 (0.004)*	-0.002 (0.003)	-0.006 (0.005)
Median household income	-0.007 (0.006)	-0.003 (0.003)	-0.004 (0.004)	-0.007 (0.010)
90/50 ratio	0.002 (0.003)	0.002 (0.001)*	-0.001 (0.001)	0.002 (0.002)
50/10 ratio	0.003 (0.005)	0.001 (0.002)	0.0002 (0.002)	0.006 (0.006)
<i>Labor Supply Variables</i>				
Female labor force p. rate	0.004 (0.007)	0.003 (0.002)	-0.003 (0.003)	-0.003 (0.006)
Male labor force p. rate	-0.004 (0.006)	-0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.003)	0.003 (0.005)
Average work hours	0.007 (0.004)*	-0.002 (0.001)	-0.00003 (0.001)	-0.004 (0.004)
Proportion active job	0.0001 (0.005)	-0.002 (0.002)	-0.002 (0.003)	0.00001 (0.007)
Proportion blue collar	0.002 (0.006)	0.0001 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.003)	0.003 (0.008)
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Calorie Intake</i>				
Fast-food restaurant price	-0.005 (0.006)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.004 (0.003)	0.0001 (0.005)
Grocery food price	0.004 (0.005)	-0.001 (0.006)	-0.001 (0.003)	-0.0002 (0.005)
Rel. price of fruits/vege.	-0.013 (0.006)**	-0.001 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.003)
Alcohol price	-0.016 (0.004)***	0.001 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.002)	-0.010 (0.005)**
Restaurants	0.005 (0.013)	0.013 (0.010)	-0.004 (0.005)	0.029 (0.012)**
Supercenters/ware. clubs	0.010 (0.009)	0.003 (0.005)	0.002 (0.004)	0.003 (0.008)
Supermarkets	-0.011 (0.008)	-0.007 (0.006)	0.007 (0.005)	-0.014 (0.010)
Convenience stores	-0.005 (0.012)	-0.004 (0.013)	-0.004 (0.007)	-0.024 (0.020)
General merchandisers	0.015 (0.014)	0.004 (0.007)	0.011 (0.005)**	-0.015 (0.010)
Food stamp benefits	-0.009 (0.009)	-0.001 (0.006)	-0.011 (0.005)**	-0.007 (0.008)
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Physical Activity</i>				
Gasoline price	0.028 (0.016)*	-0.003 (0.011)	0.007 (0.005)	0.018 (0.012)
Fitness centers	0.035 (0.010)***	0.004 (0.008)	0.015 (0.005)***	-0.008 (0.008)
Proportion central city	-0.039 (0.013)***	0.009 (0.012)	0.011 (0.009)	0.059 (0.044)
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Smoking</i>				
Cigarette price	0.002 (0.006)	0.005 (0.003)	0.001 (0.003)	0.008 (0.005)*
Smoking ban: private	-0.011 (0.008)	0.0003 (0.003)	0.001 (0.004)	-0.005 (0.005)
Smoking ban: government	0.008 (0.010)	-0.004 (0.004)	0.005 (0.004)	0.001 (0.006)
Smoking ban: restaurant	0.004 (0.005)	0.002 (0.002)	-0.009 (0.002)***	0.006 (0.005)
Smoking ban: other	-0.005 (0.006)	-0.004 (0.003)	-0.001 (0.002)	0.001 (0.005)
Sample Size	1,275,291	2,454,524	1,167,870	281,820

Notes: Standard errors, heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered by state, are in parentheses. \*\*\* indicates statistically significant at the 1% level; \*\* 5% level; \* 10% level. BRFSS sampling weights are used.

**Table 12 – Impacts of One Standard Deviation Increases in Economic Factors on P(Trying to Lose Weight)**

	All Factors	“Important” Factors Only	Top Two Factors Only
<i>General Economic Indicators</i>			
Unemployment rate	0.0004 (0.007)	--	--
Median household income	0.002 (0.011)	--	--
90/50 ratio	0.001 (0.003)	--	--
50/10 ratio	-0.003 (0.004)	--	--
<i>Labor Supply Variables</i>			
Female labor force participation rate	-0.004 (0.005)	--	--
Male labor force participation rate	0.006 (0.005)	--	--
Average work hours	-0.006 (0.004)	--	--
Proportion active job	-0.008 (0.005)*	-0.006 (0.005)	--
Proportion blue collar	-0.001 (0.005)	--	--
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Calorie Intake</i>			
Fast-food restaurant price	0.001 (0.006)	--	--
Grocery food price	-0.004 (0.008)	--	--
Relative price of fruits/vegetables	-0.006 (0.004)	--	--
Alcohol price	0.005 (0.008)	--	--
Restaurants	0.009 (0.017)	-0.002 (0.013)	0.0004 (0.010)
Supercenters/warehouse clubs	0.019 (0.011)*	0.020 (0.008)**	0.023 (0.007)***
Supermarkets	-0.012 (0.009)	--	--
Convenience stores	-0.017 (0.019)	--	--
General merchandisers	0.008 (0.011)	--	--
Food stamp benefits	-0.007 (0.015)	0.0003 (0.012)	--
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Physical Activity</i>			
Gasoline price	-0.014 (0.022)	-0.020 (0.023)	--
Fitness centers	0.011 (0.015)	0.004 (0.013)	--
Proportion central city	-0.005 (0.013)	--	--
<i>Variables Related to Monetary or Time Costs of Smoking</i>			
Cigarette price	0.007 (0.020)	--	--
Smoking ban: private	-0.001 (0.005)	--	--
Smoking ban: government	0.0003 (0.004)	--	--
Smoking ban: restaurant	0.001 (0.004)	--	--
Smoking ban: other	-0.006 (0.005)	--	--
Sample Size	515,116	515,116	515,116

Notes: Standard errors, heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered by state, are in parentheses. \*\*\* indicates statistically significant at the 1% level; \*\* 5% level; \* 10% level. BRFSS sampling weights are used.

**Appendix Table A1 – Replications of Chou et al.’s (2004) Model for BMI**

	Chou et al.’s results (BRFSS 1984- 1999)	Chou et al.’s model and our data (BRFSS 1990- 1999)	Add year dummies
Restaurants	0.631 (0.067)***	0.469 (0.060)***	0.122 (0.047)***
Restaurants <sup>2</sup>	-0.011 (0.002)***	-0.007 (0.002)***	-0.004 (0.001)***
Marginal effect at mean	0.339	0.291	0.002
Fast-food restaurant price	-1.216 (0.728)*	-2.854 (1.011)***	-0.928 (0.786)
Fast-food restaurant price <sup>2</sup>	0.135 (0.119)	0.434 (0.174)***	0.142 (0.131)
Marginal effect at mean	-0.432	-0.416	-0.135
Food at home price	-6.462 (1.918)***	-6.047 (2.322)***	-0.311 (1.535)
Food at home price <sup>2</sup>	2.244 (0.719)***	2.644 (1.049)***	0.172 (0.707)
Marginal effect at mean	-0.816	-0.729	0.034
Cigarette price	0.486 (0.355)	1.670 (0.367)***	0.591 (0.340)*
Cigarette price <sup>2</sup>	0.009 (0.113)	-0.293 (0.114)***	-0.194 (0.101)*
Marginal effect at mean	0.509	0.865	0.056
Alcohol price	1.140 (0.884)	-1.654 (0.457)***	-0.971 (0.340)***
Alcohol price <sup>2</sup>	-0.734 (0.380)*	0.199 (0.067)***	0.133 (0.051)***
Marginal effect at mean	-0.423	-0.401	-0.144
Smoking ban: private	0.015 (0.039)	0.124 (0.128)	0.082 (0.095)
Smoking ban: government	0.115 (0.071)	-0.099 (0.088)	-0.155 (0.055)***
Smoking ban: restaurant	-0.020 (0.056)	-0.092 (0.071)	-0.199 (0.037)***
Smoking ban: other	0.054 (0.056)	0.253 (0.060)***	0.020 (0.037)
Observations	1,111,074	912,454	912,454

Notes: Standard errors, heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered at the state\*year level, are in parentheses. \*\*\* indicates statistically significant at the 1% level; \*\* 5% level; \* 10% level. Regressions include state fixed effects and individual-level control variables for age, age squared, real income, real income squared, and dummies for male, race/ethnicity (black, white, Hispanic, or other), marital status (single, married, divorced, or widowed), and education (less than high school degree, high school degree, some college, or college degree). Chou et al. also included full-service restaurant price and its square, but the variable was only available every five years and was imputed for the other years. Perhaps for this reason, its effect was one of the weakest Chou et al. estimated. We have not been able to find an annual measure and therefore do not include full-service restaurant prices in our dataset.

**Appendix Table A2 – Variable Descriptions and Summary Statistics**

Variable	Source	Description	Mean (Standard Deviation)	1990 Mean	2010 Mean
BMI	BRFSS	Body mass index	26.618 (6.141)	26.027	28.507
Obese	BRFSS	Dummy for BMI $\geq$ 30	0.279 (0.449)	0.184	0.339
Severely obese	BRFSS	Dummy for BMI $\geq$ 35	0.111 (0.314)	0.066	0.141
Black	BRFSS	Dummy for race/ethnicity is non-Hispanic black	0.100 (0.300)	0.100	0.104
Hispanic	BRFSS	Dummy for race/ethnicity is Hispanic	0.120 (0.325)	0.083	0.142
Other	BRFSS	Dummy for race/ethnicity is not white, black, or Hispanic	0.056 (0.229)	0.030	0.076
Male	BRFSS	Dummy for sex is male	0.519 (0.500)	0.509	0.520
Some high school	BRFSS	Dummy for some high school but no degree	0.071 (0.257)	0.093	0.058
High school graduate	BRFSS	Dummy for high school degree but no college	0.301 (0.459)	0.347	0.260
Some college	BRFSS	Dummy for some college but no four-year degree	0.282 (0.450)	0.275	0.268
College graduate	BRFSS	Dummy for college graduate or further	0.315 (0.464)	0.250	0.387
Married	BRFSS	Dummy for married	0.611 (0.487)	0.618	0.639
Divorced	BRFSS	Dummy for divorced	0.122 (0.328)	0.111	0.112
Widowed	BRFSS	Dummy for widowed	0.019 (0.138)	0.022	0.017
Age	BRFSS	Age in years	39.634 (12.506)	37.623	41.983
Population	Census	State population (in 10,000s)	12.694 (10.117)	11.557	13.941
Seatbelt	BRFSS	Dummy for always wears seatbelt <sup>a</sup>	0.746 (0.435)	0.581	0.861
Checkup	BRFSS	Dummy for preventive doctor checkup in past year <sup>b</sup>	0.675 (0.469)	0.671	0.648
Flu shot	BRFSS	Dummy for got a flu shot within past year <sup>c</sup>	0.300 (0.458)	0.138	0.347
Mammogram	BRFSS	Dummy for mammogram in past two years (women only)	0.509 (0.500)	0.365	0.432
Prostate	BRFSS	Dummy for digital rectal exam in past two years (men 40+) <sup>d</sup>	0.432 (0.495)	0.469	0.376
Smoker	BRFSS	Dummy for currently smokes	0.238 (0.426)	0.260	0.194
Drinks per month	BRFSS	Number of alcoholic drinks in the past 30 days	11.747 (31.752)	11.974	14.282
Lose weight	BRFSS	Dummy for currently trying to lose weight <sup>e</sup>	0.397 (0.489)	0.379	0.419

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**Appendix Table A2 – Variable Descriptions and Summary Statistics (continued)**

Variable	Source	Description	Mean (Standard Deviation)	1990 Mean	2010 Mean
Unemployment rate	BLS	Proportion of labor force unemployed	0.059 (0.019)	0.056	0.097
Median household income	BLS	Median household income in \$10,000s (2010\$)	5.087 (0.678)	4.836	4.986
90/50 ratio	Census	Ratio of 90 <sup>th</sup> /50 <sup>th</sup> percentiles of earnings distribution	2.479 (0.166)	2.375	2.579
50/10 ratio	Census	Ratio of 50 <sup>th</sup> /10 <sup>th</sup> percentiles of earnings distribution	4.398 (0.699)	5.137	4.005
Female labor force p. rate	Census	Proportion of females 16+ in labor force	0.582 (0.038)	0.564	0.579
Male labor force p. rate	Census	Proportion of males 16+ in labor force	0.718 (0.033)	0.735	0.694
Average work hours	Census	Average work hours/week among those employed	37.564 (0.834)	37.660	36.791
Proportion active job	Census	Proportion of workforce in job with MET score $\geq 3$	0.243 (0.028)	0.256	0.233
Proportion blue collar	Census	Proportion of workforce in blue collar job	0.159 (0.032)	0.184	0.130
Fast-food restaurant price	C2ER	Weighted average price of McDonald's Quarter-Pounder with cheese, 11"-12" Pizza Hut or Pizza Inn thin crust cheese pizza, and Kentucky Fried Chicken or Church's thigh and drumstick	5.967 (0.406)	6.502	5.681
Grocery food price	C2ER	Weighted average price of white bread, Kellogg's or Post corn flakes, iceberg lettuce, bananas, potatoes, Del Monte or Green Giant canned peas, Hunts, Del Monte, or Libby's canned peaches, frozen corn, t-bone steak, ground beef, whole chicken, Jimmy Dean or Owen sausage, grade A or AA eggs, Starkist or Chicken of the Sea light tuna, Coca Cola, whole milk, cane or beat sugar, Crisco shortening, Kraft parmesan cheese, and Blue Bonnet or Parkay margarine	2.398 (0.237)	2.547	2.383
Relative price of fruits and vegetables	C2ER	Ratio of weighted average prices of the above fruit and vegetable items to the other grocery food items	0.697 (0.071)	0.727	0.632

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**Appendix Table A2 – Variable Descriptions and Summary Statistics (continued)**

Variable	Source	Description	Mean (Standard Deviation)	1990 Mean	2010 Mean
Alcohol price	C2ER	Weighted average price of Heineken 6-pack and Chablis or Chenin Blanc white	7.401 (0.825)	7.023	7.784
Restaurants	QCEW	Restaurants per 10,000 residents	13.851 (2.172)	10.813	15.551
Supercenters/ warehouse clubs	Primary	Walmart Supercenters, Sam’s Clubs, Costcos, and BJ’s Wholesale Clubs per 10,000 residents	0.065 (0.051)	0.009	0.127
Supermarkets	QCEW	Supermarkets/grocery stores per 10,000 residents	2.098 (0.656)	1.928	1.950
Convenience stores	QCEW	Convenience stores per 10,000 residents	4.029 (1.325)	3.705	3.768
General merchandisers	QCEW	General merchandise stores (minus supercenters/warehouse clubs) per 10,000 residents	1.056 (0.404)	0.946	1.135
Food stamp benefits	USDA	Per capita food stamp benefits (2010\$)	112.01 (48.751)	99.162	208.437
Gasoline price	C2ER	Price of one gallon of regular unleaded gasoline (including taxes) (2010\$)	2.056 (0.587)	1.723	2.796
Fitness centers	QCEW	Fitness centers/sports clubs per 10,000 residents	0.838 (0.215)	0.706	0.941
Proportion central city	Census	Proportion of residents in central city of an MSA	0.254 (0.106)	0.273	0.246
Cigarette price	<i>Tax Burden on Tobacco</i>	Weighted average price of pack of cigarettes (2010\$)	4.159 (1.318)	2.756	6.265
Smoking ban: private	ImpacTeen	Dummy for state law prohibiting smoking in private workplaces	0.143 (0.351)	0	0.471
Smoking ban: government	ImpacTeen	Dummy for state law prohibiting smoking in government workplaces	0.170 (0.376)	0.007	0.521
Smoking ban: restaurant	ImpacTeen	Dummy for state law prohibiting smoking in restaurants	0.243 (0.429)	0	0.621
Smoking ban: other	ImpacTeen	Dummy for other state smoking bans	0.717 (0.450)	0.547	0.851

Notes: n=2,922,071 in all years, 55,922 in 1990, and 239,215 in 2010. BRFSS sampling weights are used. <sup>a</sup> indicates variable not available in 1999-2001, 2003-2005, 2007, and 2009; <sup>b</sup> not available 2003-2004, <sup>c</sup> not available 1990-1992, <sup>d</sup> not available 1990-2000, <sup>e</sup> only available in 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2003. If variables are not available in 1990 their values in the first year they are available are reported in the “1990 mean” column.

**Appendix Table A3 – Percentage of Rises in BMI, Obesity, and Severe Obesity Explained by Changes in Controls**

	BMI	Obesity	Class II/III Obesity
Age	61.2% (1.0%) <sup>***</sup>	48.0% (1.3%) <sup>***</sup>	54.6% (1.7%) <sup>***</sup>
Age squared	-42.8% (0.9%) <sup>***</sup>	-32.1% (1.2%) <sup>***</sup>	-39.4% (1.5%) <sup>***</sup>
<i>Subtotal from Age</i>	<b>18.4% (0.3%)<sup>***</sup></b>	<b>15.9% (0.3%)<sup>***</sup></b>	<b>15.3% (0.4%)<sup>***</sup></b>
Some high school	-0.2% (0.1%)	-0.2% (0.1%) <sup>**</sup>	-0.4% (0.3%)
High school graduate	0.6% (0.3%)	0.8% (0.3%) <sup>***</sup>	1.2% (0.9%)
Some college	0.1% (0.03%)	0.1% (0.03%) <sup>***</sup>	0.2% (0.1%) <sup>**</sup>
College graduate	-8.1% (0.4%) <sup>***</sup>	-9.2% (0.4%) <sup>***</sup>	-11.0% (1.3%) <sup>***</sup>
<i>Subtotal from Education</i>	<b>-7.7% (0.2%)<sup>***</sup></b>	<b>-8.4% (0.2%)<sup>***</sup></b>	<b>-10.0% (0.2%)<sup>***</sup></b>
Black	0.3% (0.01%) <sup>***</sup>	0.3% (0.01%) <sup>***</sup>	0.4% (0.01%) <sup>***</sup>
Hispanic	1.8% (0.2%) <sup>***</sup>	1.4% (0.3%) <sup>***</sup>	0.4% (0.2%)
Other	-1.4% (0.4%) <sup>***</sup>	-1.3% (0.3%) <sup>***</sup>	-0.9% (0.4%) <sup>**</sup>
Male	0.1% (0.02%) <sup>***</sup>	-0.2% (0.02%) <sup>***</sup>	-0.7% (0.02%) <sup>***</sup>
Married	-0.04% (0.03%)	-0.03% (0.03%)	-0.6% (0.04%) <sup>***</sup>
Divorced	-0.01% (0.001%) <sup>***</sup>	-0.01% (0.001%) <sup>***</sup>	-0.02% (0.002%) <sup>***</sup>
Widowed	-0.1% (0.02%) <sup>***</sup>	-0.1% (0.02%) <sup>***</sup>	-0.1% (0.02%) <sup>***</sup>
State population	-0.9% (1.0%)	-1.3% (1.3%)	-1.0% (1.7%)
<i>Subtotal from Other Controls</i>	<b>-0.3% (1.0%)</b>	<b>-1.3% (1.3%)</b>	<b>-2.6% (1.6%)</b>
<i>Total from Controls</i>	<b>10.4% (1.1%)<sup>***</sup></b>	<b>6.1% (1.3%)<sup>***</sup></b>	<b>2.6% (1.8%)</b>

Notes: Standard errors, heteroskedasticity-robust and clustered by state, are in parentheses. \*\*\* indicates statistically significant at the 1% level; \*\* 5% level; \* 10% level. BRFSS sampling weights are used. + indicates age is modeled using a quadratic specification; the reported percentage of the trends explained is the sum of the percentages explained by changes in both age and age squared.