



Postcodes with paunches

Researchers have found that poor neighbourhoods are bad for your health. **Geoff Maslen** reports.

THE number of takeaway food outlets in Melbourne suburbs is a powerful indicator of how well-off or disadvantaged they are: the more fast-food shops, the more impoverished the area.

That is one of the findings of a three-year study into how neighbourhoods affect the type of food people buy, their physical activity and whether they are overweight.

A second finding was that those living in poor neighbourhoods are three kilograms heavier on average than their counterparts in better-off suburbs. Poorer areas also have more than double the number of takeaway shops.

One of the largest studies of its kind undertaken in Australia, the research has highlighted the importance of the local area in affecting a person's body weight. It seems the quality of residents' local environment strongly influences opportunities for physical activity, as well as their attitudes and access to healthy food.

"Previous research has shown that people with lower incomes and lower education levels are more likely to be overweight or obese," said Associate Professor Anne Kavanagh. "But this study demonstrates that living in poorer areas is a more important factor than a person's socio-economic characteristics."

Professor Kavanagh heads a team of University of Melbourne researchers who surveyed nearly 5000 men and women in 20 municipalities across the city's high, medium and low-income areas. The suburbs extended from Fawkner in the north, Deer Park in the west, Croydon in the east and Dandenong in the south-east.

One adult was chosen at random from each household, and people from different age groups were selected in each of the areas. They were asked about the food they bought, their physical activity and how much alcohol they consumed.

Detailed information was also collected on the "walkability" of each district, the presence of recreational facilities, the number of food shops, the price and availability of healthy and less healthy food, and which common alcoholic drinks were available.

Researchers probed the extent to which a neighbourhood influences the health behaviour of residents; whether

people in low socio-economic areas have the same access to recreational facilities and healthy food as those living in more prosperous areas; and how the built environment — including streets, pedestrian crossings and lighting — affects physical activity.

One key finding of the Victorian Neighbourhood Lifestyle Environment Study, or VicLANES, was the marked variation between the different

areas in the body weights of adults of similar size and age. On average, men and women in one of the most disadvantaged areas would be three kilograms heavier than if they were in one of the least disadvantaged suburbs.

"We know that people in poorer areas are likely to be less physically active and less healthy," Professor Kavanagh said. "But we didn't know if

that was something about them particularly or the place where they lived."

The results, however, were startlingly clear: "Our findings show that where you live is an incredibly important predictor of physical activity, your food-purchasing behaviour — whether you're more likely to buy fruit and vegetables and have a low-fat, high-fibre diet — and whether you are overweight or obese."

Professor Kavanagh said the study is unique because of the amount of data collected on the different districts and on each of the individuals who participated. She said most researchers focus either on a particular locality or on the individuals in that area, whereas the



Melbourne team compiled information on both.

“That’s a big step forward, and methodologically, a much more challenging study to do,” she said. “What we found was that it doesn’t matter if you’re rich or poor, living in a poor area is bad for you — not that many rich people do, of course.”

The researchers are now working with two of the local councils and with the municipal councils’ association so they can make use of the findings. Professor Kavanagh says she

expects the councils will speak to their engineers and urban planners to improve the quality of their suburbs.

“This is an example of extremely applied research, not an ivory-tower study,” she said.

Densely settled suburbs with heavy traffic may not be able to create expansive parklands or walking paths through the bush.

But Professor Kavanagh says the councils can improve broken footpaths and ensure that streets can be crossed safely

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Dr Rob Moodie, chief executive of the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation, which supported the research, agreed that an individual’s behaviour is influenced by environmental and other factors.

“Turning off the TV is a good start, but if you don’t have a park or a playground within walking distance, or a footpath to get you there, you are less likely to get off the couch,” he said.

Link: www.kcwhfs.unimelb.edu.au/viclanes

Living in poorer areas is a more important factor than a person’s socio-economic characteristics.

ANNE KAVANAGH



Associate Professor Anne Kavanagh headed a study that shows poor neighbourhoods beget poor health.