



Q&A with Caitlin Caspi

What is the basic premise of your research?

My work builds on decades of research identifying persistent disparities in health outcomes. In the U.S., our policies and environments have contributed to the disparities we see in nutrition and obesity-related outcomes. What I hope to do in my work is move beyond documenting disparities towards identifying interventions and policies that reduce these disparities and improve overall population health. One of the things I like about this work is that many upstream policies and interventions that could be effective in improving nutrition and obesity might also have other positive effects on health and well-being. For instance, I am leading an ongoing study evaluating the effects of an increase in the minimum wage on obesity-related outcomes. But if there are benefits to raising the minimum wage, they are probably not limited to obesity.

How did your interest in your current research area develop?

My dissertation examined the social determinants of cancer risk among low-income housing residents in greater-Boston. Challenges with food access became a salient theme, including food insecurity. Around the time I moved to the University of Minnesota in 2012, there was a growing conversation around addressing food insecurity. The hunger relief system (including food pantries, food banks, other anti-hunger organizations) was mobilizing and trying out some innovative initiatives that addressed client's needs, including their health and nutrition. I built some terrific partnerships, which after several years led to the first NIH-funded study address the nutrition in the hunger relief system. Also when I moved to the University of Minnesota, I began working with Dr. Melissa Laska on a natural experiment evaluating the effect of the Minneapolis Staple Foods Ordinance on diet-related outcomes. I have continued to be very interested in conducting these kinds of natural experiments evaluating policy health effects, such as the ongoing minimum wage policy evaluation study.

You've been at a few different academic institutions throughout your career. What drew you to the Rudd Center and the University of Connecticut as a whole?

I am beyond thrilled to be joining the Rudd Center, as I have been following their work for well over a decade. They have been frontrunners in tackling the "big questions" around food policy and obesity; the work that the Rudd Center has done on school and community food environments and on government food assistance programs has particularly shaped my work. What I have always been impressed with is the Rudd Center's commitment to sharing tools and communicating research findings, not just to researchers, but also to policymakers and the general public. I am also excited to be joining UConn's Department of Allied Health Sciences where I will have more opportunities to work with students than I did where I came from in a medical school. But I have really enjoyed working at a land-grant university at the University of Minnesota, where public engagement and outreach are part of the mission. I am glad to continue that at UConn, as I find that the structure aligns really well with my research focus on the social determinants of health and nutrition.

What do you wish more people knew about when it comes to food insecurity and social determinants of health?

Obesity has been the more visible problem in the U.S. in recent years and has featured more prominently into the public discourse. But I think there is a growing recognition of the problem of food insecurity. The problems of obesity and food insecurity in the U.S. are interrelated, preventable and borne of many of the same policies and food environments. It can be shocking for people to learn that, in the U.S. in 2018, 1 in 7 households with children were food insecure. That was in 2018. Now, in the COVID-19 era, we are seeing signs of an enormous increase in food insecurity. We haven't quite measured the magnitude of it yet, but the problem has gained tremendous visibility in just a few weeks. I expect that this pandemic will speed up awareness of the problem, and maybe even advance the conversation about innovative solutions.

Where are you from?

I grew up in New Haven, CT. I've lived in Minneapolis, MN for the last 8 years, which has overall been a great experience. You even get used to the cold. But there is definitely a certain joy in coming home after all these years.

What is your favorite food?

I lived in Italy for a time in college and still dream about the fresh simplicity of Italian food. Closer to home, there is nothing like New Haven pizza. I enjoy telling people who are not from the area about the history of pizza in the town. Growing up, we were a Modern Apizza family, if you must know. I still have their number programmed into my phone!