

**Exploring Pathways to Immigrant Obesity:  
A Review for Research, Practice and Policy Recommendations**

Prepared by the Immigration and Obesity Research Team  
Immigration and Health Initiative (IAHI)

Ming-Chin Yeh, PhD  
E-mail: [myeh@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:myeh@hunter.cuny.edu)

Anahí Viladrich, PhD  
E-mail: [aviladri@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:aviladri@hunter.cuny.edu)

Nancy Bruning  
Email: [nbruning1@yahoo.com](mailto:nbruning1@yahoo.com)

Much current research attention is being directed to the increasing problem of obesity and its health sequelae among immigrants in the US. Recent studies show that the more Americanized immigrants are, the more like Americans their BMIs (Body Mass Index) appear to become. Nevertheless, findings are incomplete and inconclusive, and there is no overall conceptual framework to direct it and to integrate research findings.

Upon arrival in the US, immigrants are generally leaner and healthier than their American counterparts. Many eventually gain weight and even become obese after immigration; however, many also do not. Research on the causes is incomplete, but adoptions of American-style eating and activity habits appear to be the pathway to the increase in weight. However, some research shows that adoption of some aspects of an American lifestyle can be healthy—if a person becomes “selectively acculturated”, which implies adopting some American habits and retaining some of the habits of their culture of origin. This could represent a major and innovative means of preventing obesity in first and second-generation immigrants.

A comprehensive review of literature is currently being conducted with the purpose of better compile what is known in terms of sociocultural and individual factors contributing to immigrant obesity. We are currently engaged in an in-depth analysis of the impact of acculturation on immigrants’ dietary. We are particularly interested in the eating and exercise patterns of Latino/Hispanic immigrant women because this group, belonging to the largest ethnic minority group in the US, has been the subject of most existing literature on immigration and dietary patterns as they are particularly at high risk for obesity.

Our research principles rely on the conviction that if coordinated efforts can be directed towards healthier habits, and away from less healthy ones, the legacy of an increasingly unhealthy BMI being passed from one generation to the next will be averted. Future research on this important topic is warranted.