



Kellogg Health Scholars

Connecting Academe, Community, and Policy

MEET THE KELLOGG HEALTH SCHOLARS

Emma Sanchez-Vaznaugh, Sc.D., M.P.H.

Emma Sanchez-Vaznaugh received her doctoral degree in social epidemiology from Harvard University's School of Public Health. Currently, she is a Kellogg Health Scholar at the Center on Social Disparities in Health, University of California, San Francisco (UCSF), and an Assistant Professor at San Francisco State University. Prior to joining the academic world, she worked as a teacher, interpreter, journalist, social worker and public health practitioner with immigrant children, adults and seniors in the states of Washington and California, across diverse settings from community non-profit agencies to universities and public health departments. This background provided her with extensive on-the-ground knowledge about the social and structural determinants of health and well-being. "I saw a great deal of suffering and injustice, and I developed a passion to change the life of the children and families I was working with," Sanchez-Vaznaugh says. "I decided that the best way to do that was to conduct research, generate evidence and use it to inform broader health and social policies."

Research and Results

One area of Sanchez-Vaznaugh's ongoing research measures the impact on obesity of new food and beverage policies being implemented in California. These include prohibiting the sale of soda and other sugary beverages in all California public schools, and banning the sale of junk food as well in the Los Angeles Unified School District -- the nation's second largest school district. With funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, she is comparing impacts on children in the Los Angeles district with those on children in the rest of California.

A second area of research, with colleagues from UCSF and Michigan, examines possible environmental determinants of obesity, including physical and social features of areas surrounding schools. Although school nutrition policies may be effective at curtailing children's consumption of unhealthy foods and reducing overweight prevalence, evidence suggests that efforts by schools may be

undermined by easy access to unhealthy foods in nearby neighborhoods.

While U.S. obesity research is abundant and growing, Sanchez-Vaznaugh finds that critical gaps remain. For example, obesity patterns among immigrants are poorly understood, despite the rapid growth of this population sector and the health disparities affecting it. Along with colleagues from Harvard and Michigan, she used a large sample of adults from the California Health Interview Survey to investigate whether the body mass index (BMI) varied when comparing adults of the same race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status, but different place of birth. One of the interesting findings was that regardless of social class or race/ethnicity, if adults were born in the U.S., they would have higher BMI (on average) than their counterparts born outside the US. Given other studies showing that BMI increases with length of time in the U.S., Sanchez-Vaznaugh believes that both physical and social determinants are at work.

Policy Implications

Sanchez-Vaznaugh's research is relevant not only to health care but to policies concerning school nutrition, immigration, education and the environment. "Bold action is needed to halt the epidemic of child and adult obesity and to prevent disastrous rates of childhood diabetes and shortened life expectancies," she says. "For example, results from the study of new policies in California may be used to guide Congress and the U.S. Department of Agriculture in adopting similar efforts at the national level, consistent with existing nutritional objectives.

Last year, the Los Angeles City Council approved a moratorium to stop new fast food restaurants from opening in South Los Angeles. Although the measure was controversial, the mayor eventually signed it. Sanchez-Vaznaugh's research will be critical in determining whether or not the presence of fast food outlets is linked with childhood obesity in California, and in informing new interventions to improve the accessibility and quality of food for poor and minority children.

Health insurance policies may be important as well, according to Sanchez-Vaznaugh: "If immigrants do not have access to medical care, it will be difficult to document, monitor and address their obesity-related morbidity." In the future, she looks forward to continued rigorous research and working with policy

makers willing to take a strong leadership role to improve the health of children and their parents.

To learn more about

Emma Sanchez-Vaznaugh, Sc.D., and her work, contact her at emmav@sfsu.edu and/or consult the following selected publications:

Sanchez-Vaznaugh, E., Kawachi, I., Subramanian, S.V., Sanchez, B.N., Acevedo-Garcia, D. (2009) Do socioeconomic gradients in BMI vary by race/ethnicity, gender and birthplace? *American Journal of Epidemiology*. 169 (9): 1102-12.

Sanchez-Vaznaugh, E., Kawachi, I., Subramanian, S.V., Sanchez, B.N., Acevedo-Garcia, D. (2008). Differential Effect of Birthplace and Length of Residence on BMI by Education, Gender and Race/Ethnicity. *Social Science and Medicine*, 67(18): 1300-10.

Clayson, Z., Castaneda, X., **Sanchez, E.**, Brindis, C. (2002) Unequal Power – Changing Landscapes: The Role of the Evaluator in Latino Communities. *American Journal of Evaluation*.

Austin, S., Melly, S., Sanchez, N., Patel, A., Buka, S., Gortmaker, S. (2005) Clustering of fast food restaurants around schools: a novel application of spatial statistics to the study of food environments. *American Journal of Public Health*, 95:1575-1581.

To learn more about the Kellogg Health Scholars Program, contact Barbara Krimgold of the Center for Advancing Health at bkrimgold@cfah.org or visit www.kellogghealthscholars.org.