

The “Growing” Disability Rolls: Obesity Prevalence Among Disability Applicants, 2005-2013

**Jody Schimmel Hyde, Joe Mastrianni, Jae Song (SSA), and
Yong Choi (Capital Disability Research Center)**

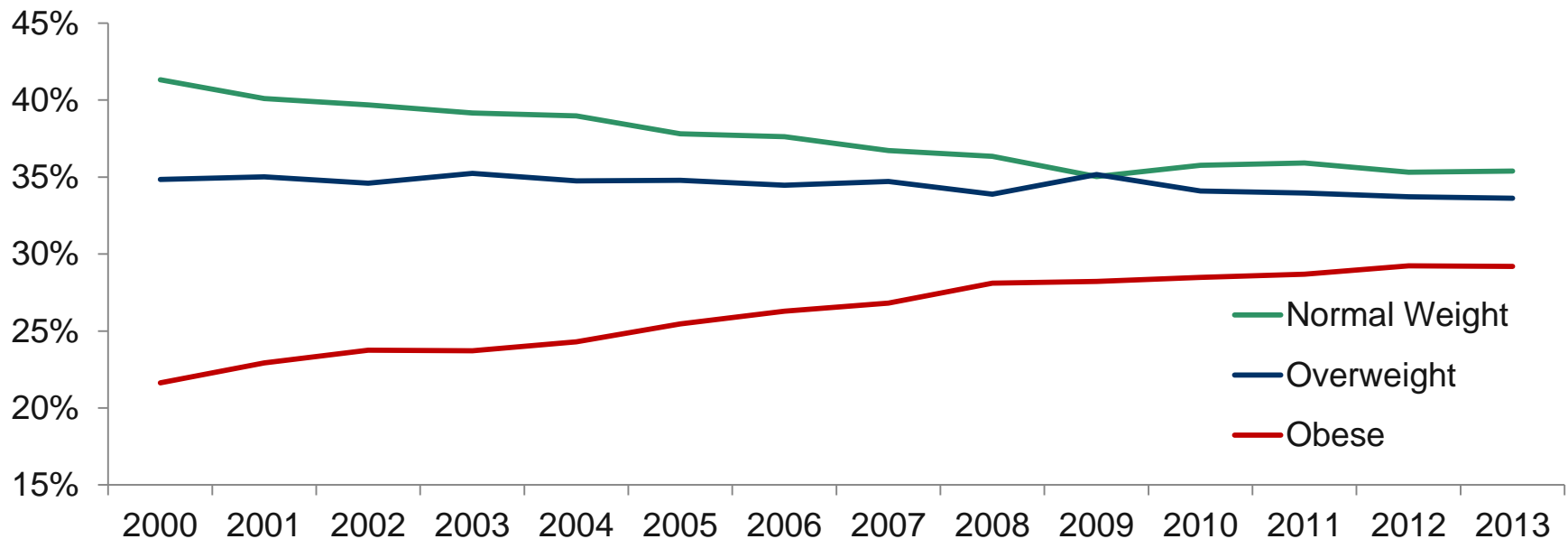
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The Obesity Epidemic in the US

- Among working-age adults, obesity rose by 33 percent from 2000 through 2013



- By 2013, 62 percent were overweight or obese

Obesity and Disability

- **Obesity:**

- Is associated with numerous chronic health conditions, including Type II diabetes, hypertension, sleep apnea, and gallbladder problems (NIH 2012, CDC 2013)
- Has been linked to disability in both younger and older populations (Sturm et al., 2004; Lakdawalla et al., 2004; Capodaglio et al., 2010)
- Has been shown to reduce the likelihood of employment (Morris, 2007; Tunceli et al., 2012)

Measuring Obesity

- **Obesity often measured using Body Mass Index (BMI)**
 - **SSA's current obesity guidelines based on BMI**
- **Generally grouped in the following way:**
 - **Underweight: BMI < 18.5**
 - **Normal weight: BMI 18.5-24.9**
 - **Overweight: BMI 25.0-29.9**
 - **Obese: BMI 30.0 or higher**

The Treatment of Obesity in Federal Disability Benefit Determinations

- **Prior to 1999, obesity was included in the listing of impairments**
 - **Body weight more than 100 pounds above ideal**
- **In October 1999, it was delisted, but today:**
 - **Reviewers can consider obesity in applicant's ability to engage in substantial gainful activity (SGA)**
 - **Can be found equivalent to a listing impairment when presented along with co-occurring conditions**
 - **No threshold for determining when obesity becomes "severe"**

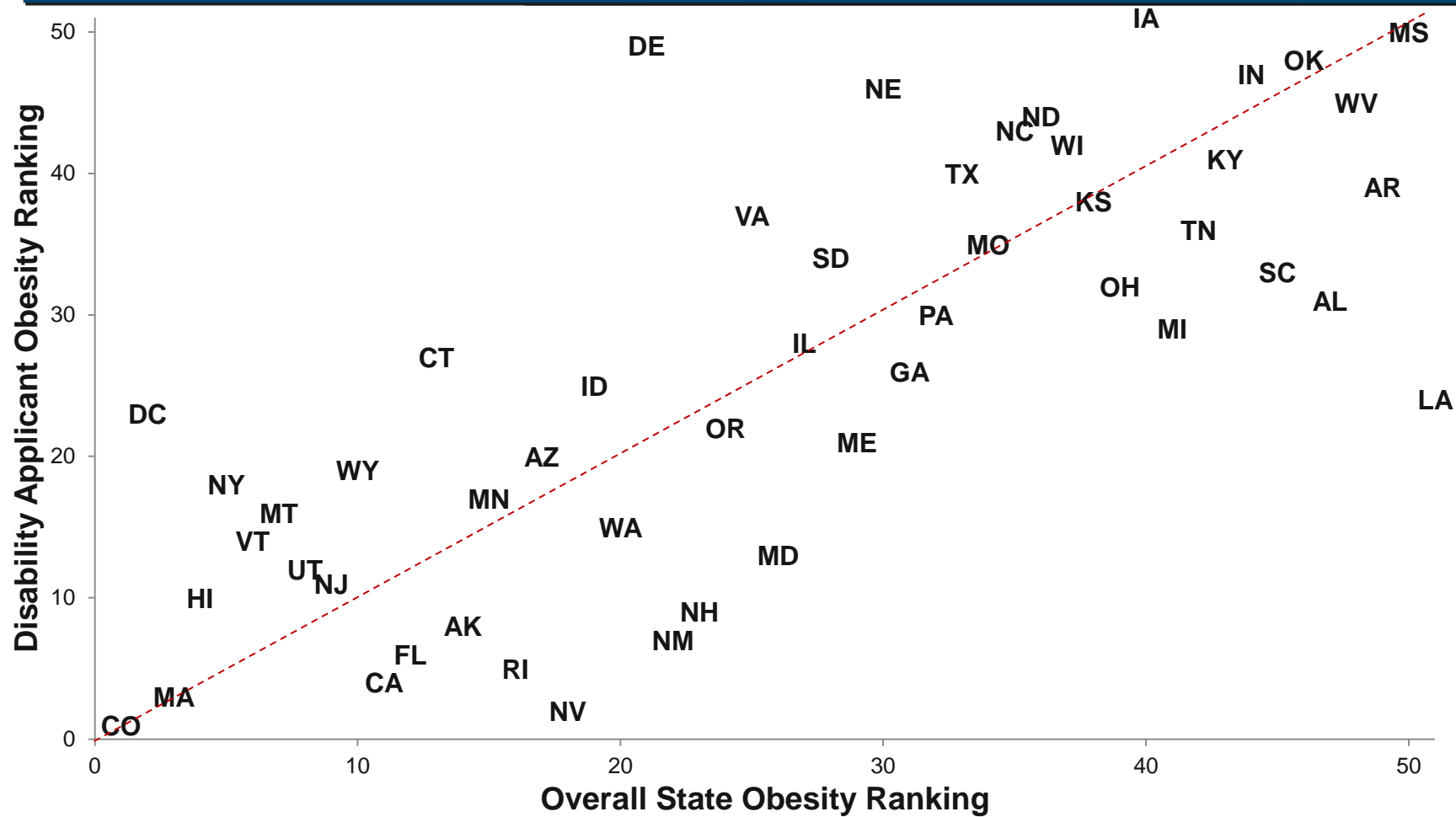
Research Questions

- **How does obesity prevalence among disability applicants compare to the working-age population?**
- **How has obesity prevalence among disability applicants changed over time?**

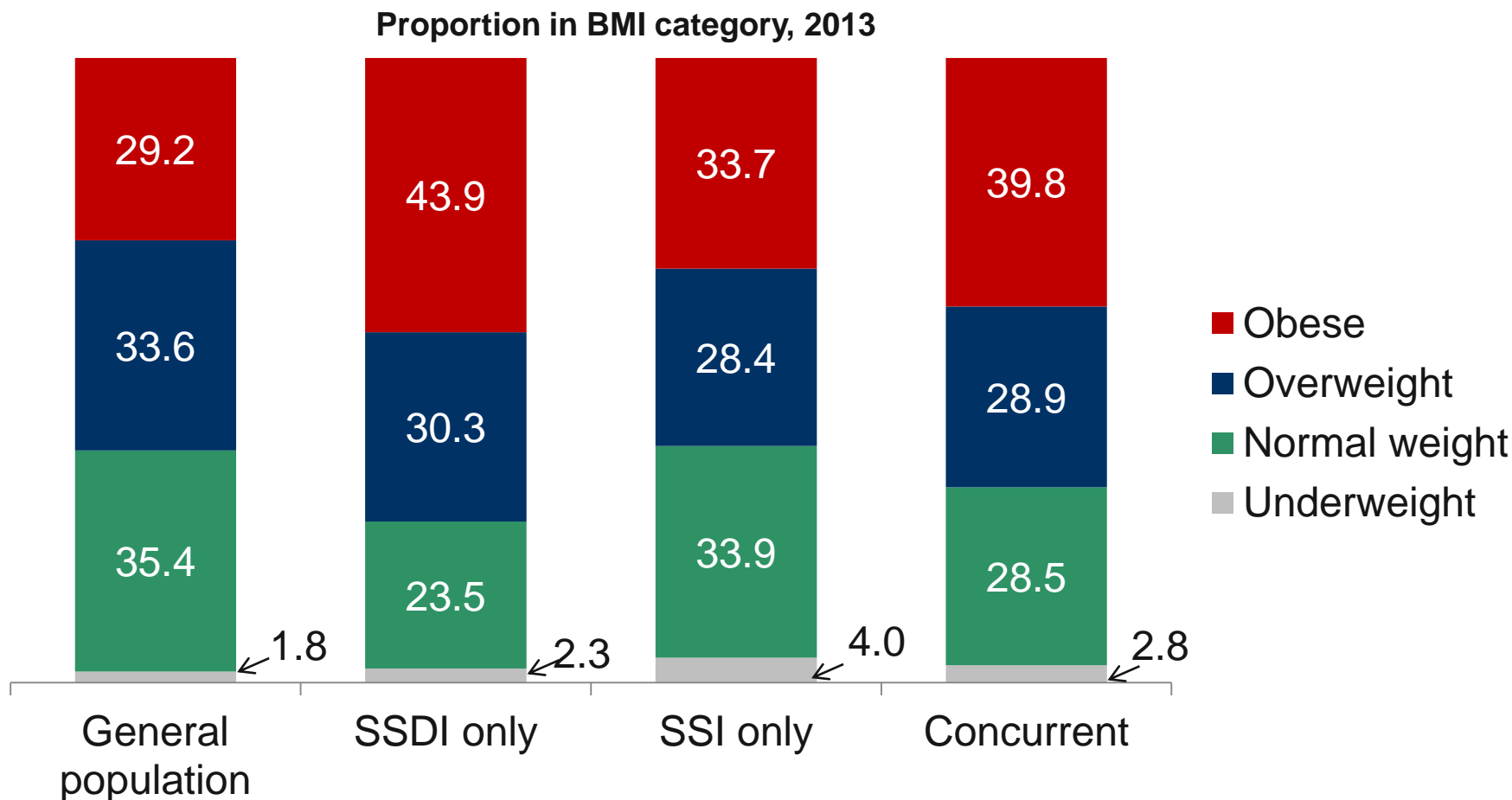
Data Source and Study Population

- **SSA's Electronic Disability Claiming System (EDCS), Form 3368**
 - Included all applications other than technical denials; ages 18-Full Retirement Age (FRA)
 - Collects self-reported height and weight→BMI
- **Focus presentation on initial applications from 2005 through 2013**
 - 2.7 to 3.5 million applicants per year

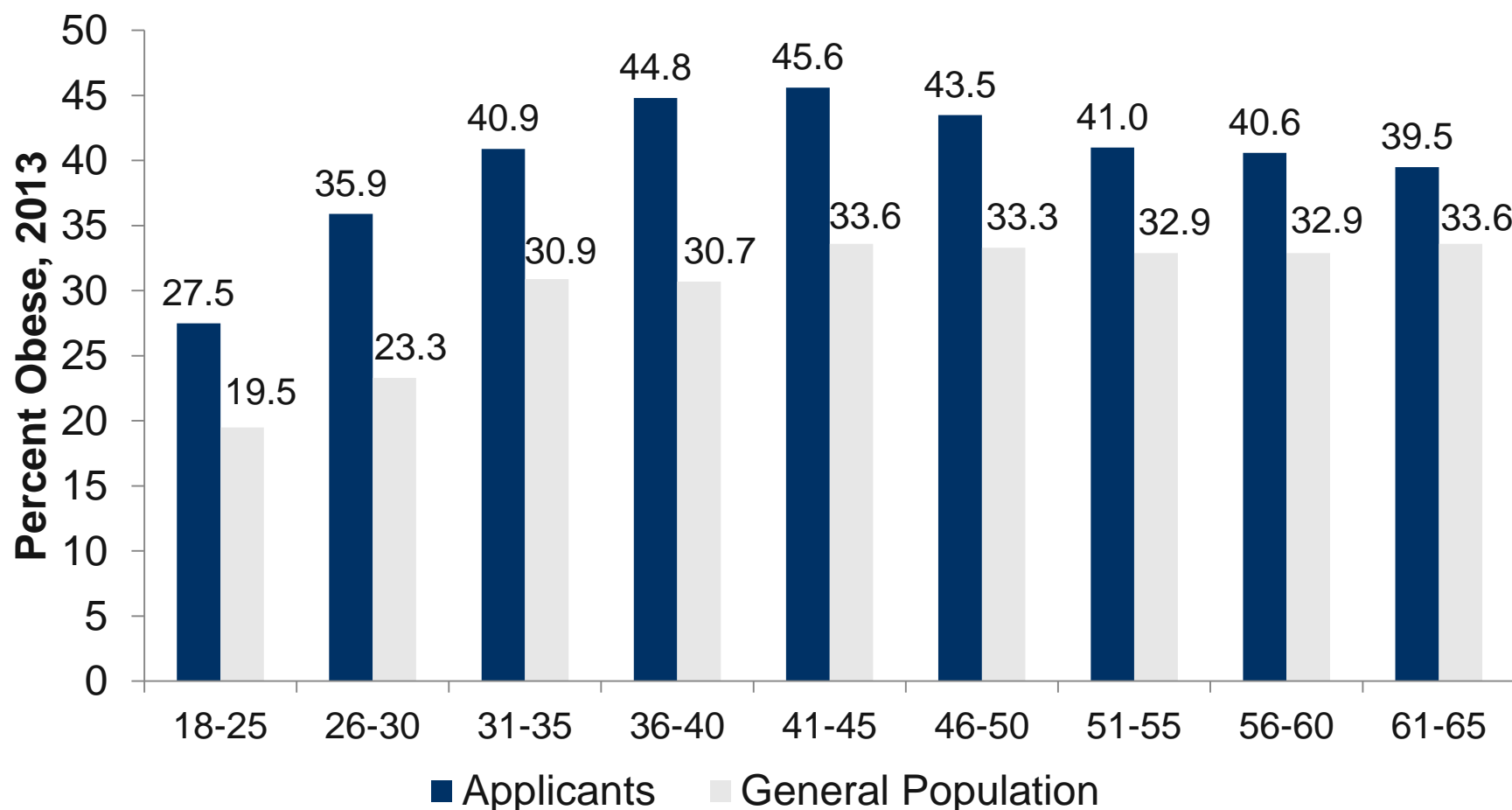
Applicant Obesity Often Mirrors Overall Prevalence at the State Level



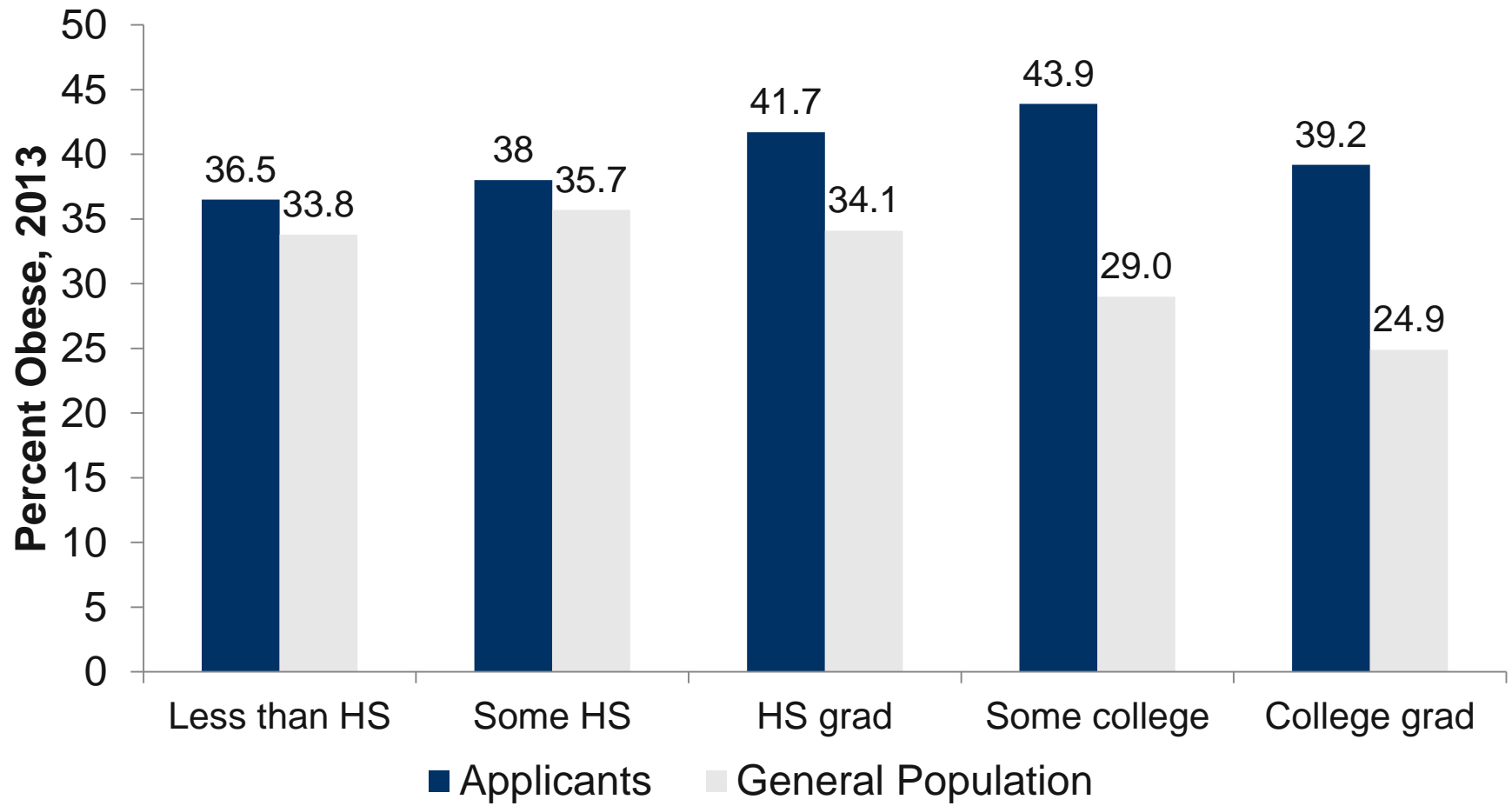
Initial Applicants More Likely to be Obese than the General Population



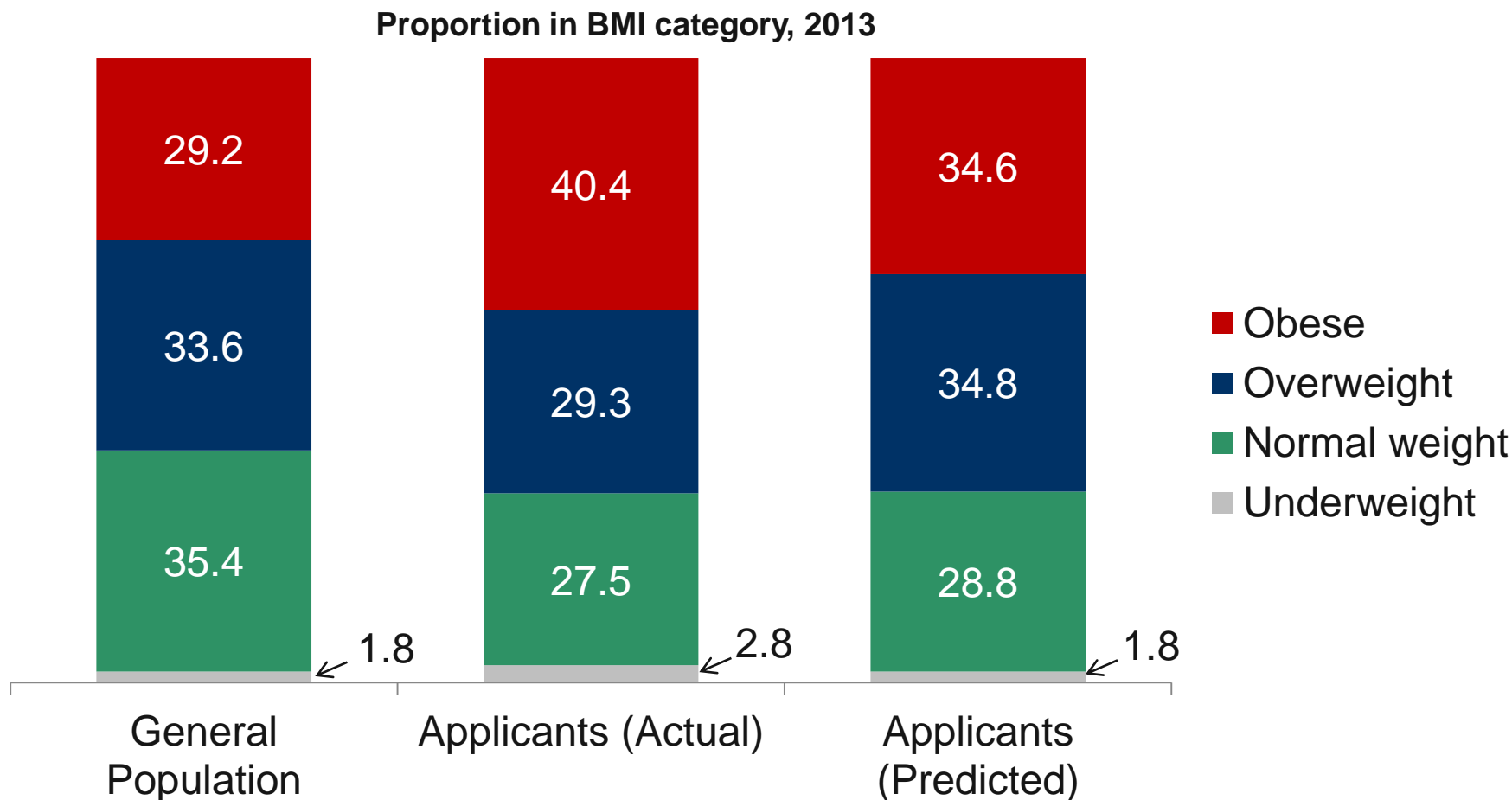
Comparing Obesity of Initial Applicants to the General Population, by Age Group



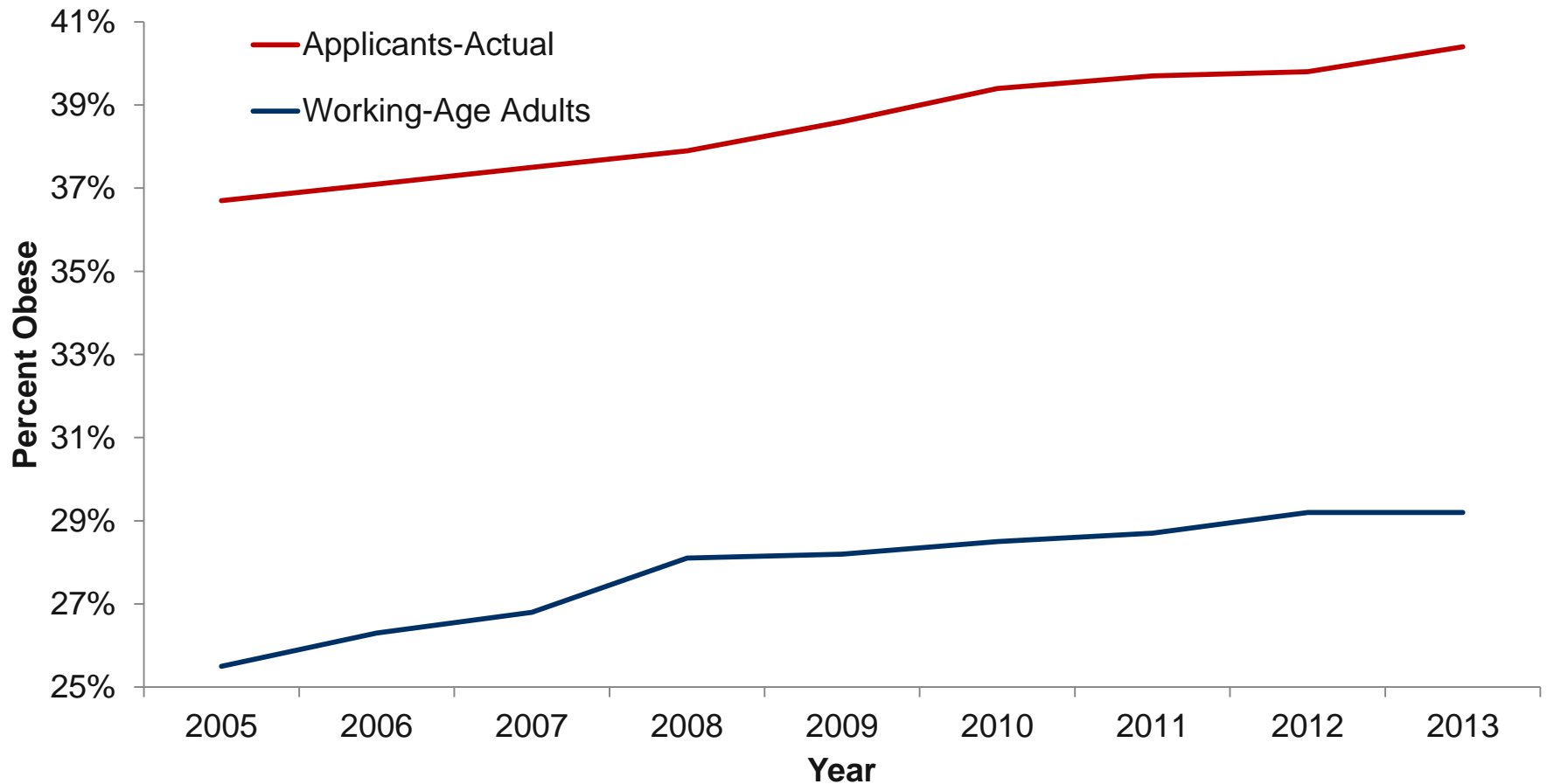
Comparing Obesity of Initial Applicants to the General Population, by Education Level



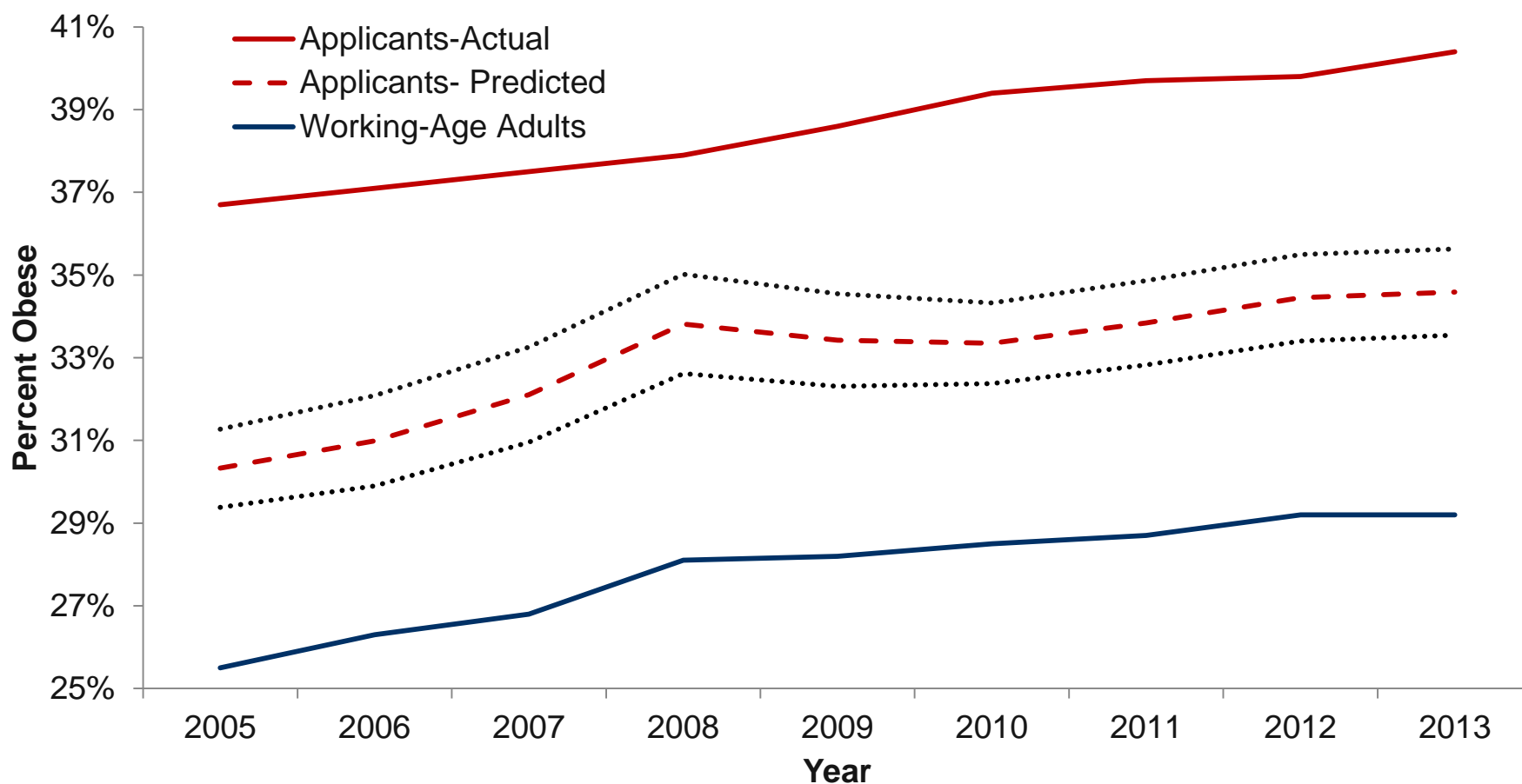
Demographic Differences Account for About Half of the Observed Obesity Gap



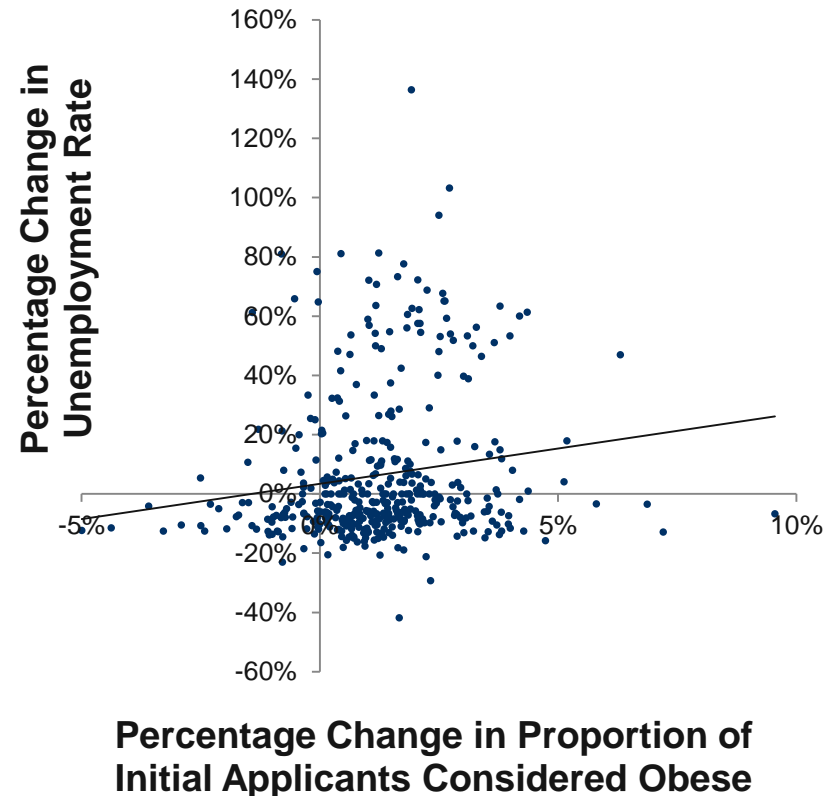
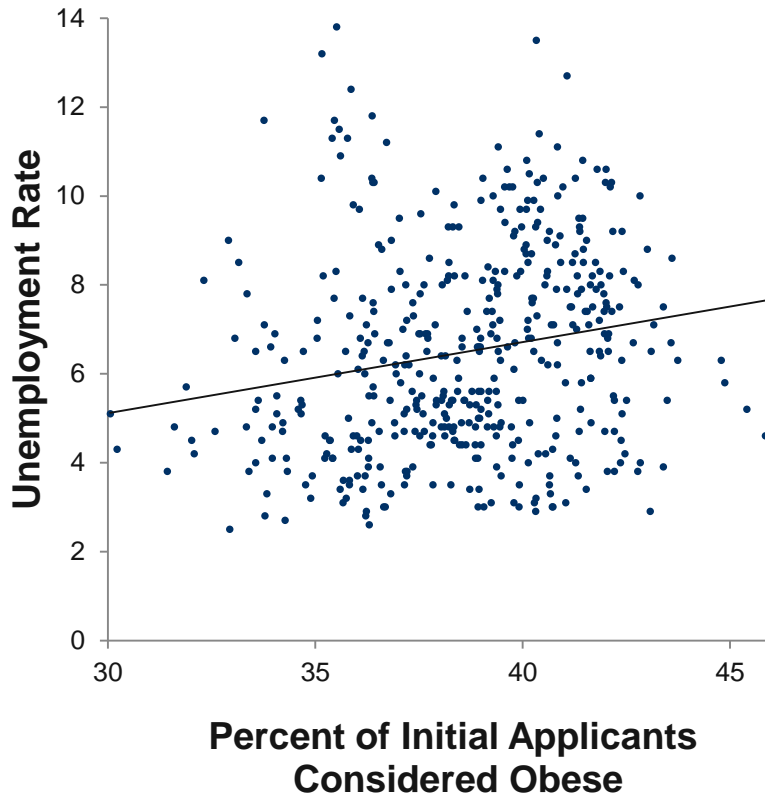
Applicant Obesity Has Increased at a Rate Similar to the General Population



Predicted Applicant Obesity Rates, Controlling for Demographic Differences



As Unemployment Increases, So Too Does the Proportion of Applicants with Obesity



Summary of Findings

- **Working-age applicants have higher obesity rates than the general population**
 - At least partly reflects demographic differences
 - Generally reflective of broader patterns and trends continues
- **Not presented: Suggestive evidence that applicants with obesity require more extensive review before allowance**
 - Consistent with expectations based current role of obesity in determination process

A Troubling Trend Seems Likely to Continue

- **No reason to expect that any effect of obesity on initial application rates will slow or reverse in the absence of policy changes**
 - Cumulative effects may imply earlier application if childhood obesity continues to rise
- **Evaluating co-morbid conditions makes the determination process more complex**
 - Increased administrative costs for SSA
 - Diminished work capacity among applicants while waiting for a determination

Contact Information

**Jody Schimmel Hyde
Center for Studying Disability Policy
Mathematica Policy Research
1100 1st Street NE, 12th Floor
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 554-7550**

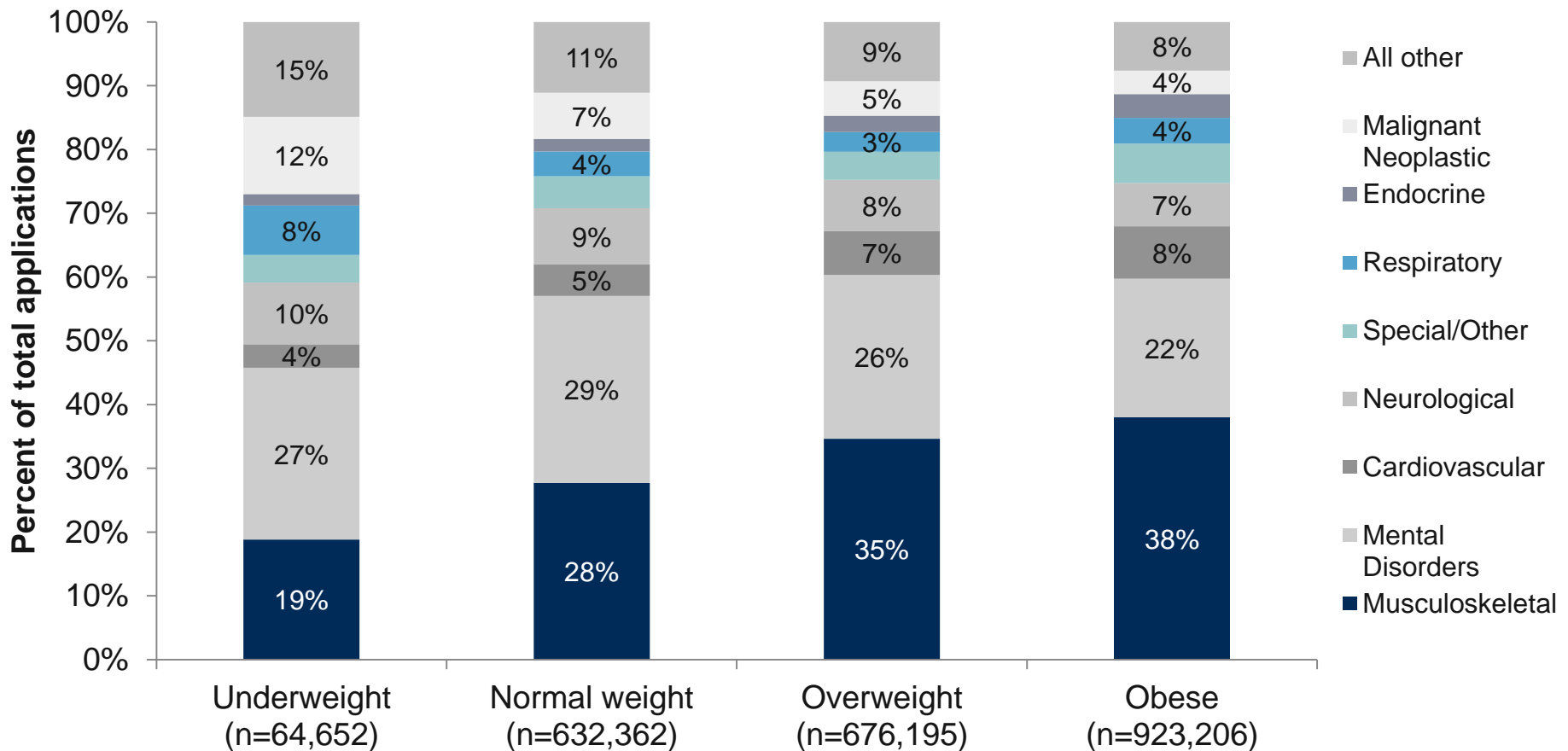
jschimmel@mathematica-mpr.com

<http://www.DisabilityPolicyResearch.org>

Coauthor Contact Information

- **Joseph Mastrianni**
 - jmastrianni@mathematica-mpr.com
- **Jae Song**
 - jae.song@ssa.gov
- **Yong Choi**
 - yong.choi@usuhs.edu

Distribution of Initial Determinations Made in 2013, by Body System and BMI Category



Initial Determinations and Allowances Made in 2013, by Body System and BMI Category*

