

Discussion of: “The Growing Disability Rolls: Obesity Prevalence Among Disability Applicants, 2005 – 2013”

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Overview

- Numerous studies linking obesity to increased risk of disability and receipt of SSDI (Burkhauser and Cawley, 2005; Lakdawalla, Bhattacharya, and Goldman, 2004; Ferraro et al., 2002; Narbro et al., 1996)
- Currently, we have a limited understanding of how being obese interacts with the disability application process
 - Not a listed impairment since October 1999



Contribution

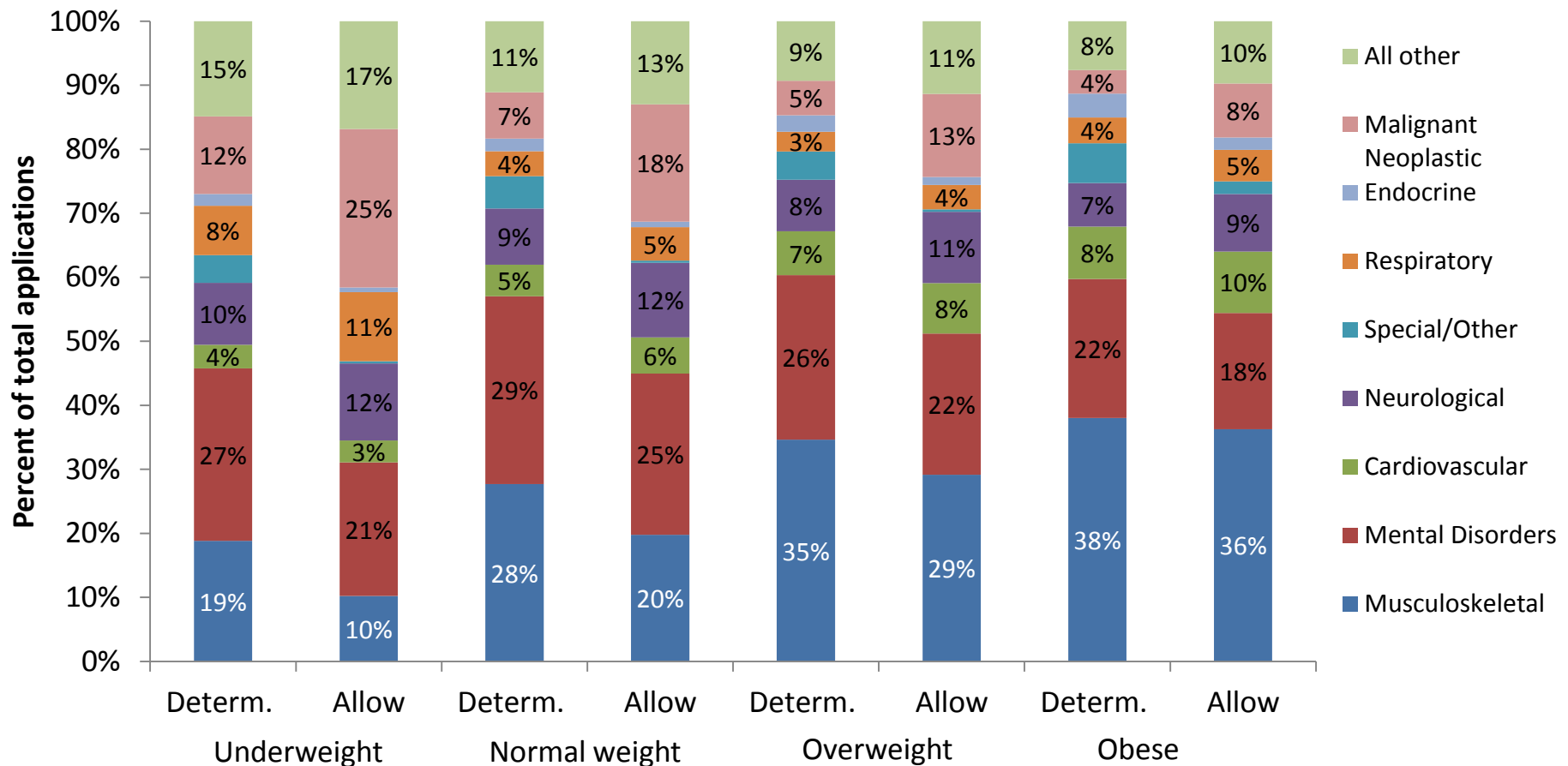
- Research purpose is to examine rates of obesity amongst SSDI and SSI applicants, as well as the role of obesity in disability determinations
- Use SSA administrative (EDCS) data to examine:
 - Trends in applicant obesity relative to population
 - Level of SSA review required by BMI category
 - Initial determinations and allowances by BMI category
- Data include self-reported weight and height at time of application



Summary of Findings

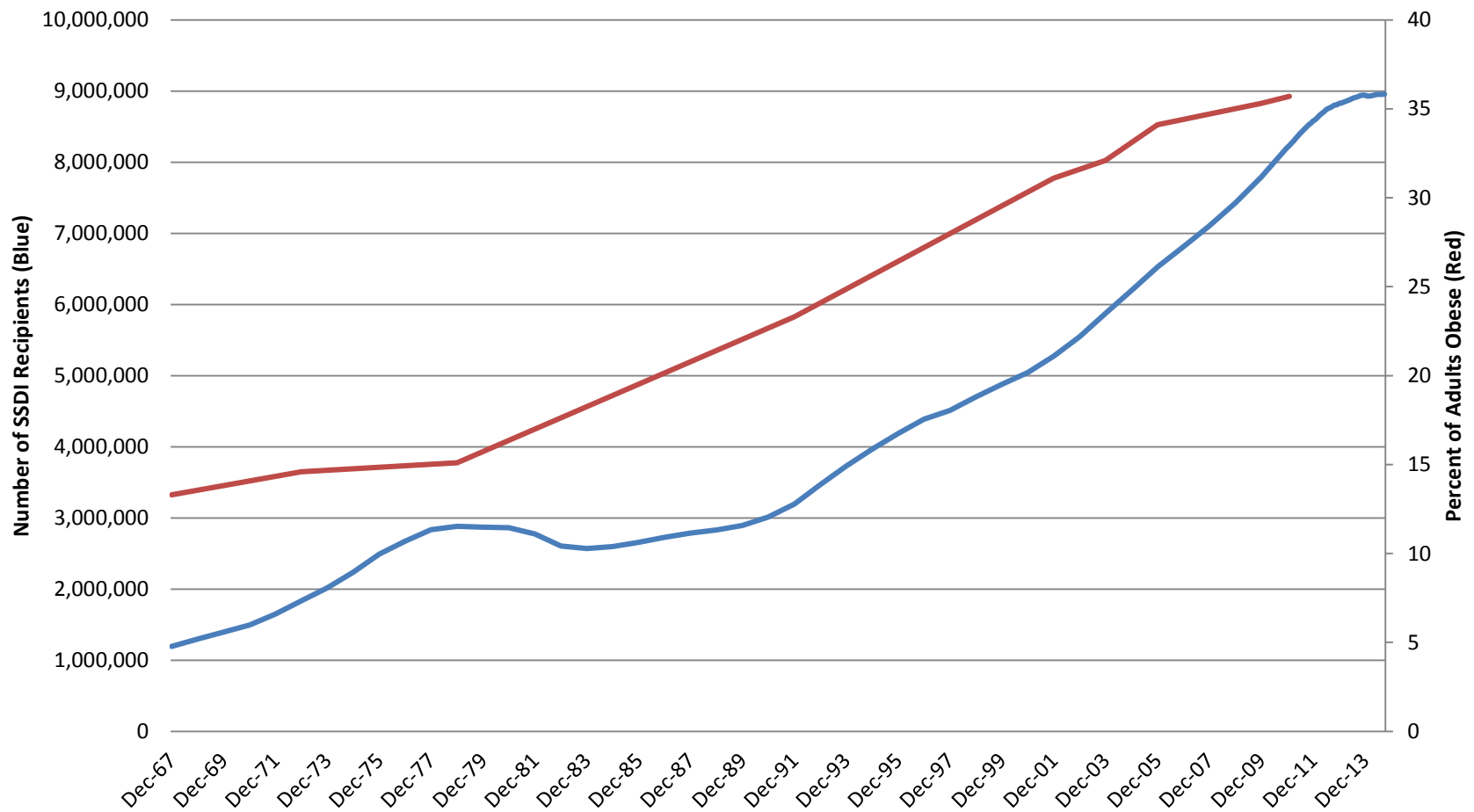
- Obesity prevalence amongst applicants has increased along with prevalence in general working-age population
- Obesity more prevalent amongst disability applicants
 - Partially driven by demographic (age, gender, education) differences
 - Not race?
- Musculoskeletal determination increases with BMI
- Greater prevalence of obesity among applicants at higher levels of review

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



Source: Schimmel et al (2014) calculations using the EDCS for initial applicants.

Trends in Obesity Prevalence and SSDI Receipt





Obesity and Disability Application

- Fundamentally, we are interested in causal relationships for shaping public policy responses
- Relationship between obesity and disability complex (potentially endogenous)
- Also complexity (ambiguity) in how obesity interacts with disability application, determination, and application review

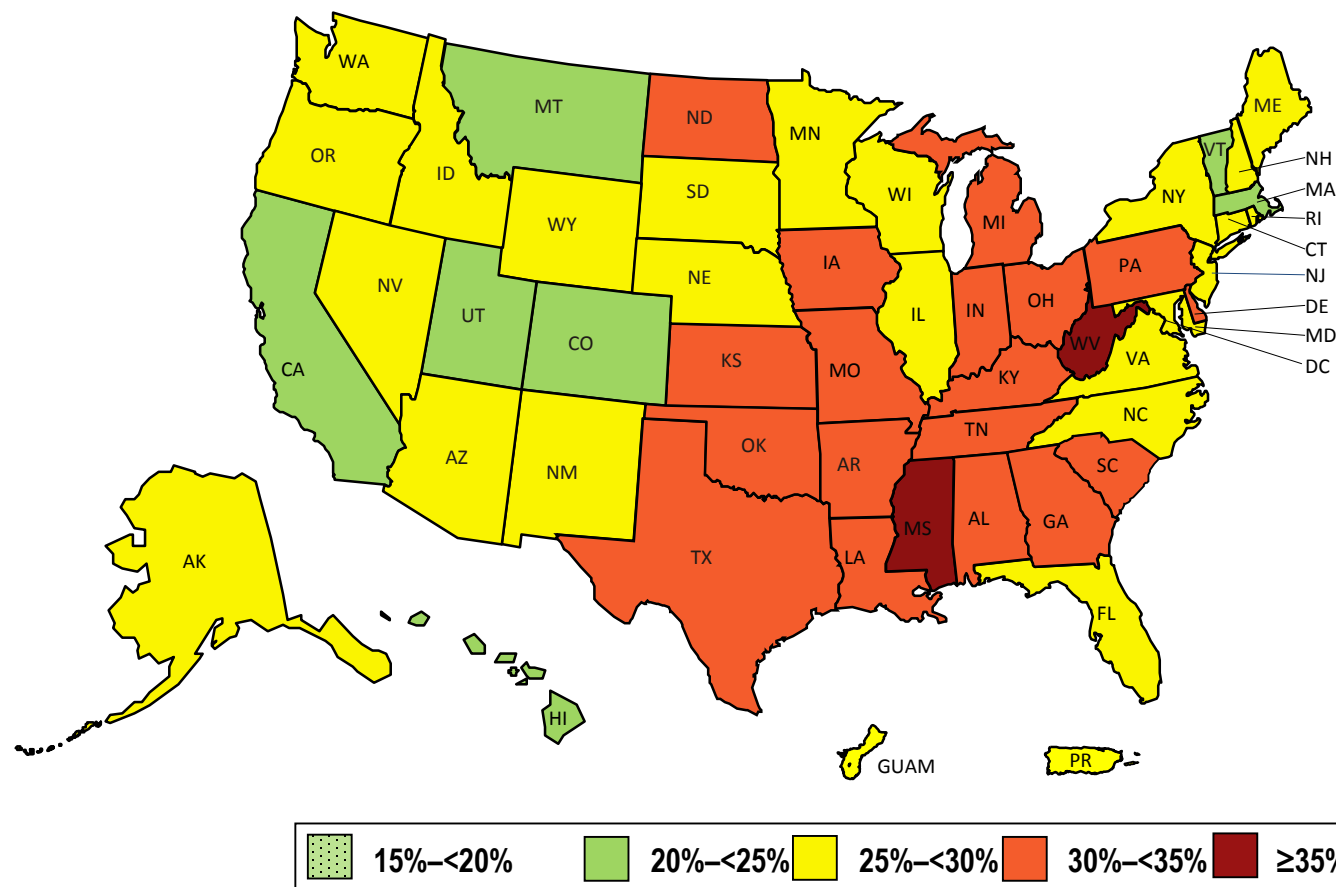


Obesity and Disability Application

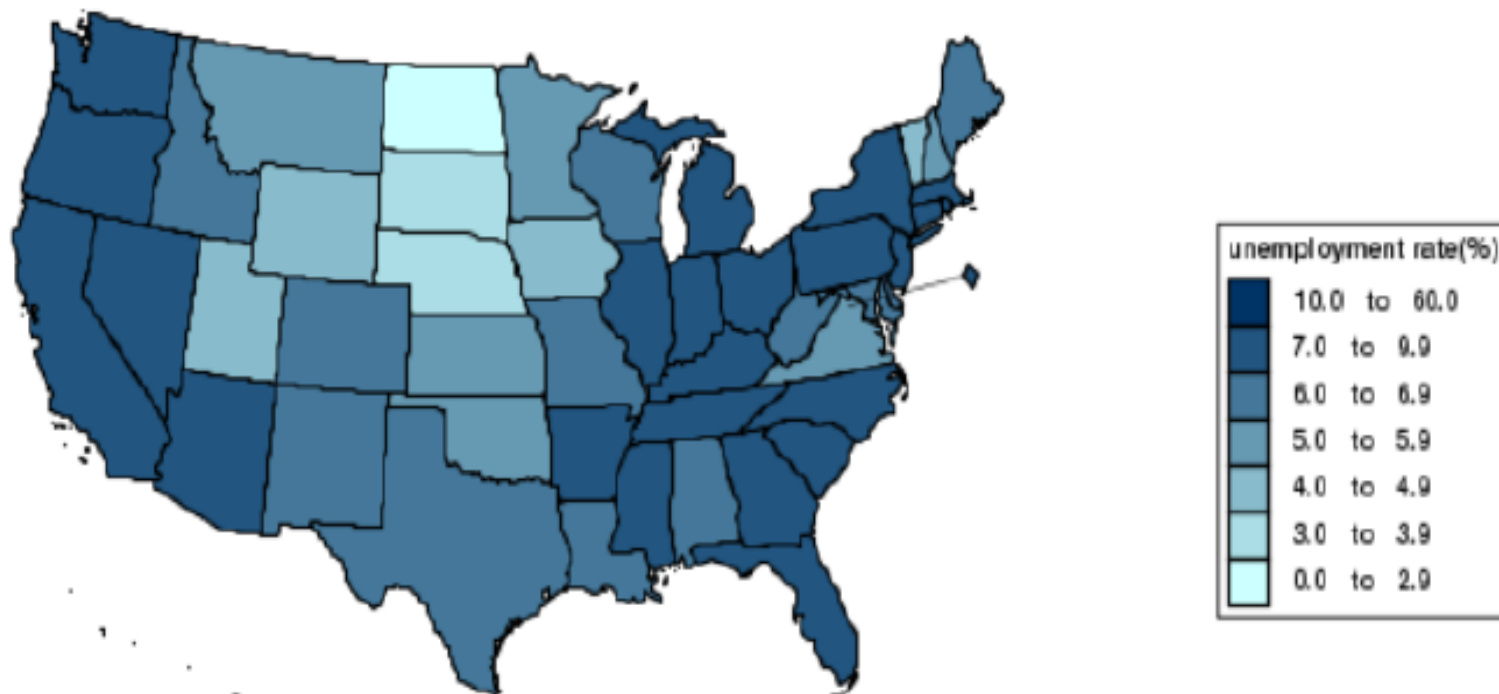
- Factors driving relationship between obesity and disability:
- At the individual level:
 - Disability (illness) can result in weight gain or loss
 - Certain demographic groups more prone to obesity and over-represented in disability applications
 - May face discrimination or a wage penalty for obesity
- At the macro level:
 - Obesity more prevalent in south and mid-west
 - Areas of high unemployment

Prevalence* of Self-Reported Obesity Among U.S. Adults by State and Territory, BRFSS, 2013

***Prevalence estimates reflect BRFSS methodological changes started in 2011. These estimates should not be compared to prevalence estimates before 2011.**



Unemployment Rates by State, 2013





Further Analysis

- NHANES data are particularly well-suited to analyzing the effect of obesity on disability application
 - Contain detailed health information (potentially prior to disability onset or at least application)
 - Have multiple measures of adiposity including percent body fat (BIA) and measured weight and height
 - Contain a reasonable set of demographic characteristics
 - Multiple waves linked to SSA MBR, SSR, PHUS, and 831 files
- Burkhauser, Cawley, and Schmeiser (2008)
 - Alternative measures of adiposity better predict SSDI application (although self-reported BMI performs reasonably well)
 - Adiposity mainly predictive of application for whites



Policy Implications

- Obesity leveling off, but at a high prevalence
 - Child obesity also leveling off
- If obesity increases probability of SSDI or SSI application, or makes SSA's determination process more difficult then the ongoing high prevalence will continue to be a burden on SSA



Policy Implications

- From a policy perspective, I'm most interested in the implications for how SSA handles obese disability applicants
 - Whether or not obesity increases disability or disability applications, beyond SSA's control
 - Plenty of public health and economic reasons to reduce obesity in general population
- Does SSA require clearer guidelines for assessing whether obese applicants are disabled?
Implications for obese recipient employment?
Something else?



Conclusion

- Area of inquiry is important given the prevalence of obesity amongst disability applicants
- Curious to see the implications of subsequent research for informing SSA's response to increased prevalence of obesity



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