

GLUTTONY AND SLOTH? CALORIES, LABOUR MARKET ACTIVITY AND THE RISE OF OBESITY

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Abstract

The rise in obesity has largely been attributed to an increase in calorie consumption. We show that official government household survey data indicate that calories have declined in England between 1980 and 2013; while there has been an increase in calories from food out at restaurants, fast food, soft drinks and confectionery, overall there has been a *decrease* in total calories purchased. Households have shifted towards more expensive calories, both by substituting away from home production towards market production, and substituting towards higher quality foods. We show that the decline in calories can be partially, but not entirely, rationalised with weight gain by a decline in the strenuousness of work and daily life. (JEL: D12, I12, I18)

1. Introduction

The number of individuals who are overweight and obese has increased across the developed world, with the World Health Organization estimating that worldwide obesity has more than doubled since 1980, and that now “*most of the world’s population live in countries where overweight and obesity kills more people than underweight*” (Organization (2015)). The media, policy makers and the economics and medical literatures have largely emphasised an increase in calorie consumption as the main cause, based on evidence that: (i) food prices have fallen, (ii) real food expenditure has increased, (iii) expenditure on some high calorie foods categories has increased, including soft drinks and confectionery, fast food and food out at restaurants

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