



RESEARCH PROPOSAL

Determinants and Public Health Responses to Obesity Among Young Adults Aged 18–24 in the UK

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1. Prevalence of the Problem

According to recent national data, the prevalence of obesity has been steadily rising over the last ten years, making it a significant public health concern in the United Kingdom. According to the Health Survey for England (2024), approximately 30% of adults are living with obesity, while 66% are classified as either overweight or obese ([NHS England Digital](#)). Similarly, government statistics report that 26.5% of adults in England were living with obesity in 2023–2024, reflecting a steady upward trend since 2015 ([gov.uk](#)).

Although obesity prevalence is often higher among older adults, emerging data indicate that young adults are increasingly affected. For instance, around 18% of individuals aged 16–24 were classified as obese in recent national surveys, highlighting that obesity is already established in early adulthood ([NHS England Digital](#)). Given the clear correlation between early weight increase and long-term health concerns and persistence into later life, this is especially troubling.

The World Health Organization identifies obesity as a major contributor to non-communicable diseases, including cardiovascular conditions and type 2 diabetes, which are increasingly being diagnosed at younger ages. Recent UK evidence shows a significant rise in type 2 diabetes among individuals under 40, linked directly to increasing obesity rates and poor dietary environments ([theguardian.com](#)).

Socioeconomic inequalities remain a key driver of obesity prevalence. National data consistently show that obesity rates are significantly higher in more deprived populations, reflecting disparities in access to healthy food, physical activity opportunities, and health education ([NHS England Digital](#)). These inequalities are particularly relevant for young adults transitioning into independent living, where financial limitations often shape lifestyle choices.

Behavioural factors also contribute significantly to obesity risk in this age group. National surveillance data highlight that physical inactivity and poor dietary patterns remain prevalent, with approximately 22% of adults classified as inactive despite policy efforts to improve activity



levels ([gov.uk](https://www.gov.uk)). Additionally, the increasing availability of high-calorie, low-cost foods and sedentary lifestyles driven by digital technology further exacerbate obesity risk.

Overall, a complex interplay of behavioural, social, and environmental factors is responsible for the increased incidence of obesity among young adults. Despite ongoing public health interventions, the persistence of these trends suggests that current strategies may not adequately address the specific needs of this population.

2. Introduction and Literature-Based Background

It is often acknowledged that obesity is a complicated, multifaceted disorder impacted by social, environmental, and behavioural factors. Recent research on public health highlights that obesity must be viewed within larger social and environmental factors rather than as a personal problem. (Public Health England, 2017; OHID, 2022).

Young adulthood represents a critical period characterised by increased independence and lifestyle changes. During this stage, individuals often experience shifts in dietary habits, reduced physical activity, and increased exposure to unhealthy environments. These changes are strongly associated with weight gain and long-term health outcomes (NHS Digital, 2023).

The concept of the “obesogenic environment” remains central to understanding these patterns. Modern environments, particularly in urban UK settings, promote excessive calorie intake through the widespread availability of energy-dense foods while simultaneously limiting opportunities for physical activity. Government reports highlight that food environments, pricing strategies, and marketing practices significantly influence dietary behaviours, particularly among young adults (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021).

Digitalisation has further intensified these challenges. Increased screen time, online food delivery platforms, and targeted advertising of unhealthy foods contribute to sedentary behaviour and poor dietary choices. Recent evidence suggests that such environmental



influences are particularly strong among younger populations, who are more engaged with digital platforms (OHID, 2022).

In response, the UK government has implemented several policy measures, including calorie labelling in restaurants and restrictions on the promotion of foods high in fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS). These interventions aim to modify the food environment and support healthier choices (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021). However, recent evaluations suggest that these policies may have limited impact on young adults, as they often rely on individual decision-making rather than addressing structural barriers (The Lancet Public Health, 2018).

This highlights the need for research that synthesises existing evidence to better understand how young adults experience obesity and respond to public health interventions.

3. Rationale

Despite the growing recognition of obesity as a major public health concern in the United Kingdom, research and policy efforts have historically focused on children and older adults, leaving young adults aged 18–24 comparatively underexplored. This represents a significant gap, particularly as recent national data indicate that obesity is increasingly established during early adulthood and continues to track into later life (NHS Digital, 2023; Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2022). Evidence suggests that weight gained during this transitional life stage is more likely to persist, thereby increasing the long-term risk of chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes (Public Health England, 2017).

Young adulthood is characterised by major life transitions, including entry into higher education or employment, increased independence, and changing social environments. These transitions often disrupt established health behaviours and are associated with increased consumption of convenience foods, irregular eating patterns, and reduced physical activity (Monteiro et al., 2019; OHID, 2022). Unlike younger populations, who may benefit from structured school-based interventions, young adults are required to make independent lifestyle choices, often within environments that promote unhealthy behaviours. This highlights the importance of



understanding obesity within the context of broader social and environmental influences rather than viewing it solely as an issue of individual responsibility (The Lancet Public Health, 2018).

The concept of the obesogenic environment is particularly relevant in explaining rising obesity rates among young adults. Contemporary UK environments are characterised by the widespread availability of inexpensive, energy-dense foods, aggressive marketing strategies, and limited opportunities for physical activity, all of which contribute to unhealthy weight gain (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021; Swinburn et al., 2019). In addition, the rapid expansion of digital technologies and food delivery platforms has further shaped dietary behaviours, increasing accessibility to high-calorie foods and reinforcing sedentary lifestyles (OHID, 2022).

Socioeconomic inequalities further compound these challenges. Young adults from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately affected by obesity due to limited access to healthy food environments, safe recreational spaces, and health education (OHID, 2022). These structural inequalities highlight the limitations of interventions that focus solely on individual behaviour change without addressing the wider determinants of health.

Although the UK government has implemented a range of public health strategies, including calorie labelling and restrictions on foods high in fat, sugar, and salt (HFSS), there is limited evidence regarding their effectiveness among young adults. Many of these policies rely on assumptions of rational decision-making and health literacy, which may not adequately reflect the lived realities of this population group (Department of Health and Social Care, 2020). Recent literature suggests that such interventions may have limited impact when broader environmental and social influences are not addressed (The Lancet Public Health, 2018).

Furthermore, there is a notable lack of qualitative evidence synthesising how young adults perceive and respond to these interventions. Understanding these perspectives is essential for designing more effective, targeted, and equitable public health strategies. Without such insights, policies risk being poorly aligned with the needs and behaviours of young adults.

Therefore, this study is justified as it seeks to address a critical gap in the literature by conducting a qualitative systematic review of recent evidence. By adopting an inductive approach, the research will generate a nuanced understanding of the determinants of obesity and the effectiveness of public health responses among young adults in the UK. This will contribute to the development of more context-specific interventions and inform future policy decisions aimed at reducing obesity and improving long-term health outcomes.

4. Research Question, Aim and Objectives

I. Research Question

What are the determinants of obesity in young adults in the UK between the ages of 18 and 24, and how successful are the existing public health initiatives in resolving this problem?

II. Aim

The aim of this study is to synthesise recent qualitative evidence to develop a comprehensive understanding of the behavioural, social, and environmental determinants of obesity among young adults in the UK, and to critically evaluate the effectiveness of current public health policies and interventions.

III. Objectives

- To identify and synthesise key behavioural determinants such as diet, physical activity, and lifestyle habits among young adults (OHID, 2022)
- To examine broader social and environmental influences, including socioeconomic status, food environments, and digital influences (Public Health England, 2017; Monteiro et al., 2019)

- To explore how young adults perceive and respond to public health interventions, including calorie labelling and HFSS policies (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021)
- To critically evaluate the effectiveness and limitations of current UK obesity strategies
- To identify gaps in policy and practice that may inform future public health interventions

These objectives are designed to move beyond descriptive analysis and provide a deeper, evidence-based understanding of obesity within this specific population group.

5. Research Methodology

Using secondary data, this study will employ a **qualitative systematic review methodology** to investigate the factors that contribute to obesity in young people and assess public health interventions. Because they allow for the thorough synthesis of current information using transparent and repeatable methodologies, systematic reviews are widely acknowledged as a rigorous technique within public health research. (Higgins et al., 2019).

A **qualitative approach** has been selected because obesity is a complex and socially influenced condition that cannot be fully understood through quantitative data alone. Qualitative research allows for exploration of lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual factors that shape health behaviours (Green and Thorogood, 2018). This is particularly relevant for young adults, whose behaviours are influenced by social norms, transitions, and environmental factors.

The study will follow an **inductive approach**, meaning that themes and patterns will emerge from the data rather than being imposed by predefined theoretical frameworks. This approach is appropriate for exploratory research where there is limited existing synthesis focused specifically on young adults (Thomas and Harden, 2008). It allows for a more flexible and data-driven interpretation of findings.

To ensure methodological rigour, the review will be conducted in accordance with the **Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA)** guidelines (Page et al., 2021). PRISMA provides a structured framework for identifying, screening, and selecting studies, thereby reducing bias and enhancing transparency.



A comprehensive search strategy will be implemented across multiple electronic databases, including PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. In addition, grey literature from organisations such as the World Health Organization and the UK Department of Health and Social Care will be included to capture policy-related evidence (WHO, 2023; DHSC, 2021).

Search terms will include combinations of keywords such as:

“obesity”, “young adults”, “18–24”, “UK”, “determinants”, “public health interventions”, and “policy effectiveness”. Boolean operators (AND, OR) will be used to refine results and improve search sensitivity.

6. Research Design

This study will employ a **qualitative systematic review design**, focusing on the synthesis of existing research rather than the collection of primary data. This design is particularly appropriate for addressing complex public health issues, as it allows for the integration of findings across multiple studies to generate new insights (Booth et al., 2016).

The review will include qualitative studies, as well as mixed-methods research where qualitative findings can be extracted and analysed. This approach enables a comprehensive understanding of both behavioural determinants and contextual influences.

The decision to focus on qualitative evidence reflects the study’s aim to explore perceptions, experiences, and social influences, which are often overlooked in quantitative research. By synthesising qualitative findings, the study will provide a deeper understanding of how obesity is experienced and understood by young adults.

7. Inclusion & Exclusion Criteria

A clear set of inclusion and exclusion criteria will be applied to ensure the relevance and quality of selected studies.

Inclusion Criteria

- Studies published between 2015 and 2025
- Research focusing on individuals aged 18–24
- Studies conducted in the UK or comparable high-income countries
- Qualitative or mixed-methods studies with extractable qualitative data
- Peer-reviewed journal articles and credible government reports

Exclusion Criteria

- Studies focusing exclusively on children or older adults
- Quantitative-only studies without qualitative insights
- Non-English language publications
- Studies lacking relevance to obesity determinants or public health interventions

These criteria ensure that the review remains focused, relevant, and aligned with the research objectives (Higgins et al., 2019).

8. Data Collection Methods

A methodical search of electronic databases will be used to gather data, employing a methodical and repeatable search approach. Keyword combinations and search result refinement will be accomplished through the use of boolean operators.

Example search string:

“(obesity OR overweight) AND (young adults OR 18–24) AND (UK) AND (determinants OR behaviour OR environment) AND (public health OR policy)”

Grey literature will also be included to ensure comprehensive coverage of policy-related evidence (DHSC, 2021).

The study selection process will follow the **PRISMA framework**, which includes:

1. Identification of studies
2. Removal of duplicates
3. Screening of titles and abstracts
4. Full-text review
5. Final inclusion

This structured approach enhances transparency and reduces selection bias (Page et al., 2021).

9. Data Analysis

Data will be analysed using **thematic synthesis**, a widely used method for analysing qualitative data in systematic reviews (Thomas and Harden, 2008).

The analysis will involve three stages:

1. Line-by-line coding

Text from selected studies will be coded to identify key concepts and patterns.

2. Development of descriptive themes

Codes will be grouped into broader categories representing key determinants of obesity, such as:

- Behavioural factors
- Environmental influences
- Socioeconomic determinants

3. Generation of analytical themes

Higher-level themes will be developed to provide deeper insights into how these factors interact and influence obesity.

An **inductive approach** will be used throughout, allowing themes to emerge naturally from the data. This approach is particularly valuable in public health research, where complex interactions between factors are common (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis will also enable critical interpretation of findings, moving beyond description to explore underlying patterns and relationships.

10. Ethical Considerations

As this study is based on secondary data, formal ethical approval is not required. However, ethical principles will still be strictly followed.

These include:

- Accurate representation of findings
- Avoiding plagiarism and properly citing sources
- Utilising reliable, peer-reviewed sources
- Transparency in reporting procedures and conclusions

Following these guidelines guarantees the research's legitimacy and integrity. (Bryman, 2016).

11. Implications of the Research

The UK's public health practice and policy will be significantly impacted by this study.

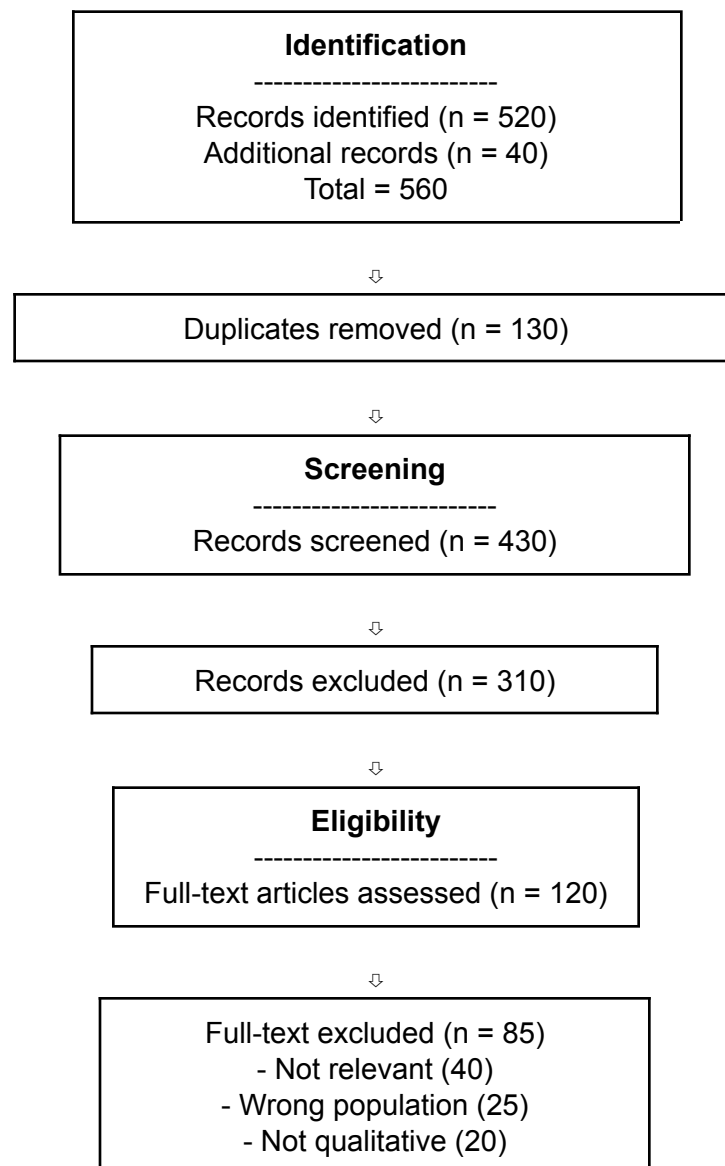
First of all, it will contribute to a better understanding of the unique determinants of obesity among young adults, enabling the development of more targeted interventions. Current policies often adopt a broad approach, which may not effectively address the specific needs of this age group (OHID, 2022).

Secondly, the findings will provide insights into how young adults perceive and respond to public health interventions, which can inform the design of more effective strategies. For example, interventions that address environmental and social factors may be more effective than those focusing solely on individual behaviour change (The Lancet Public Health, 2018).

Thirdly, the study will identify gaps in existing policies, highlighting areas where improvements are needed. This is particularly important given the rising prevalence of obesity and its associated health and economic costs.

Finally, the research will contribute to the broader evidence base, supporting future studies and informing long-term strategies aimed at reducing obesity and improving population health outcomes.

12. Prisma (Flow Diagram)





Included

Studies included in review (n = 35)

13. Plan of Work and Time Schedule (Gantt Chart)

Activity	Timeline
Literature Review	Weeks 1–3
Proposal Development	Weeks 3–5
Ethics Approval	Weeks 6–8
Data Collection	Weeks 9–12
Data Analysis	Weeks 13–15
Report Writing	Weeks 16–18

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