

RISING SOCIOECONOMIC DISPARITIES IN CHILDHOOD OVERWEIGHT IN BELGIUM

KEY MESSAGES

- ◆ Between 1997 and 2018, Belgium saw a significant rise in the prevalence of childhood overweight.
- ◆ This increase was especially pronounced among children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, exacerbating existing socioeconomic differences over time in absolute rather than relative terms.
- ◆ To address this growing public health concern, urgent policy interventions are needed to prevent overweight. Efforts should be targeted on supporting children and adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds.

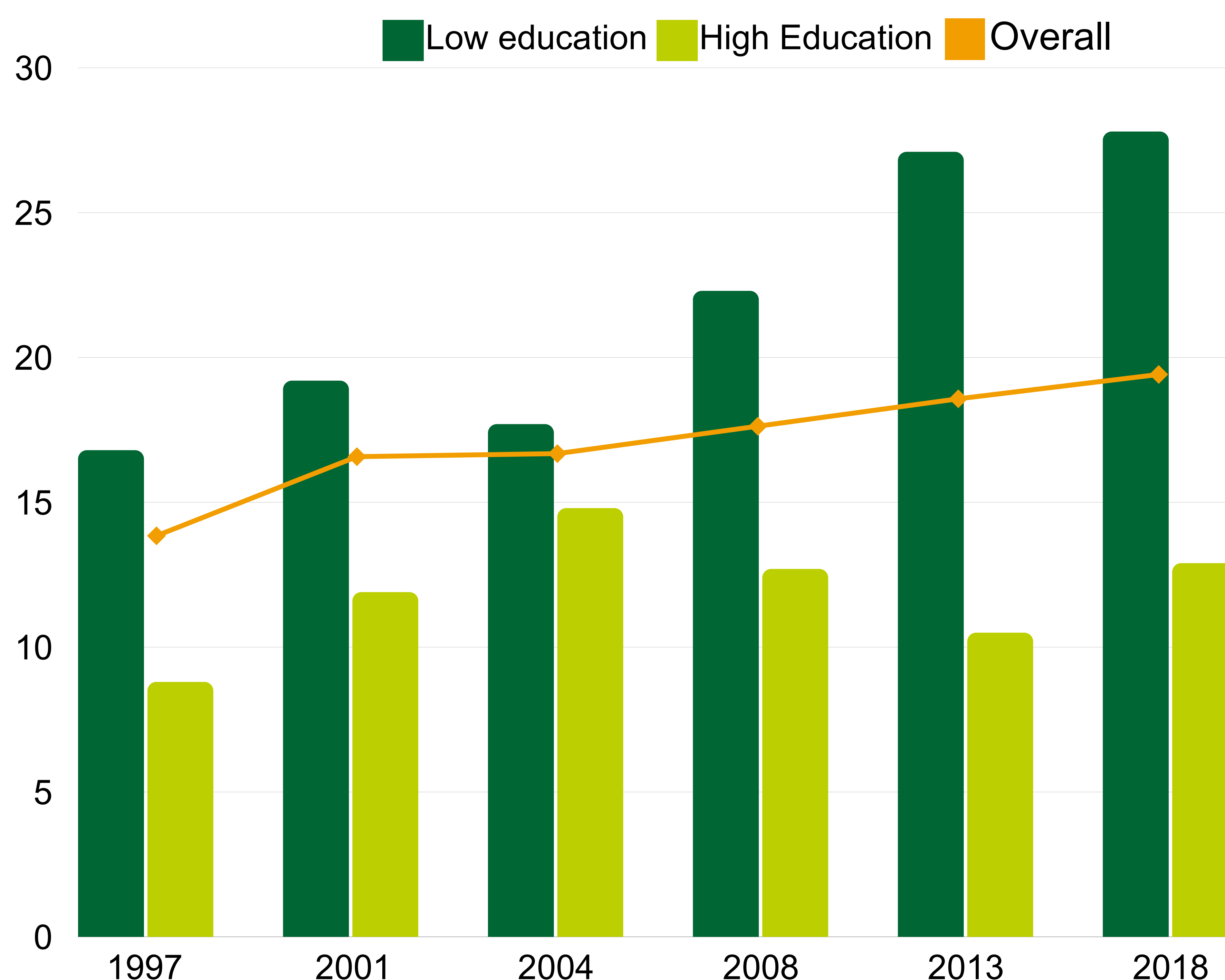
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- ◆ Childhood overweight negatively impacts quality of life by increasing metabolic and cardiovascular risks, leading to social challenges such as bullying and low self-esteem. These issues can contribute to mental health problems and increase the risk of chronic diseases in adulthood.
- ◆ Major risk factors for childhood overweight include poor eating habits, excessive sugar consumption, lack of physical activity due to increased screen time, and an obesogenic environment with easy access to unhealthy foods, particularly affecting children from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- ◆ The study analyses data from the Belgian Health Interview Survey (1997-2018) focusing on children aged 2-17, using BMI calculations from self-reported data to assess overweight prevalence and socio-economic status based on parent educational levels.

WIDENING SOCIO-ECONOMIC GAP IN CHILDHOOD OVERWEIGHT RATES

In Belgium, childhood overweight rose significantly from 13.6% in 1997 to 18.9% in 2018, with the absolute socio-economic gap widening from 8.0 percentage points to 14.9 percentage points during the same period.

This increase is primarily attributed to a rise in overweight among children and adolescents of parents with lower educational levels, which increased from 16.8% to 27.8%. However, relative socio-economic disparities in overweight remained fairly stable throughout this time.



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TO COMBAT CHILDHOOD OVERWEIGHT, POLICY INTERVENTIONS AIM TO CREATE A HEALTHIER ENVIRONMENT FOR ALL CHILDREN, WITH PARTICULAR FOCUS ON THOSE FROM LOWER SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUNDS.

KEY DOMAINS OF FOCUS TO TACKLE CHILDHOOD OBESITY INCLUDE :

School-based interventions:

Transform schools into health-promoting environments by providing nutritious meals and increasing opportunities for physical activity, like dedicating more hours to sports.

Healthy food environment policies:

Implement restrictions on fast food outlets and junk food availability near schools, along with regulations to limit unhealthy food marketing.

Economic interventions:

Introduce taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages and offer subsidies for whole grains, fresh fruits, and vegetables to reduce access to unhealthy foods and promote healthier choices.

READ MORE

<https://www.healthybelgium.be/en/health-status/factsheets/rising-socioeconomic-disparities-in-childhood-overweight-in-belgium>

Drieskens, S., Charafeddine, R., Vandevijvere, S., et al. Rising socioeconomic disparities in childhood overweight and obesity in Belgium. *Archives of Public Health* 82, 98 (2024).

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