

A systematic review of methods, study quality, and results of economic evaluation for childhood and adolescent obesity intervention

Zanganeh, Mandana; Adab, Peymane; Li, Bai; Frew, Emma

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1 *Review*

2 **A systematic review of methods, study quality, and** 3 **results of economic evaluation for childhood and** 4 **adolescent obesity intervention**

5 **Mandana Zanganeh, Peymane Adab, Bai Li and Emma Frew***

6 Institute of Applied Health Research, College of Medical and Dental Sciences, University of Birmingham,
7 Birmingham, B15 2TT, UK; MXZ666@bham.ac.uk (M.Z.); P.ADAB@bham.ac.uk (P.A.);

8 B.Li.3@bham.ac.uk (B.L.)

9 * Correspondence: E.Frew@bham.ac.uk; Tel.: 0121-414-3199

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11 **Abstract:** Many suggested policy interventions for childhood and adolescent obesity have costs
12 and effects that fall outside the health care sector. These cross-sectorial costs and consequences
13 have implications for how economic evaluation is applied and although previous systematic
14 reviews have provided a summary of cost-effectiveness, very few have conducted a review of
15 methods applied. We undertook this comprehensive review of economic evaluations, appraising
16 the methods used, assessing the quality of the economic evaluations and summarising
17 cost-effectiveness. Nine electronic databases were searched for full-economic evaluation studies
18 published between January 2001 and April 2017 with no language or country restrictions. 39
19 economic evaluation studies were reviewed and quality assessed. Almost all the studies were from
20 Western countries and methods were found to vary by country, setting and type of intervention.
21 The majority, particularly “behavioural and policy” preventive interventions, were cost-effective,
22 even cost-saving. Only four interventions were not cost effective. This systematic review suggests
23 that economic evaluation of obesity interventions is an expanding area of research. However,
24 methodological heterogeneity makes evidence synthesis challenging. Whilst upstream
25 interventions show promise, an expanded and consistent approach to evaluate cost-effectiveness is
26 needed to capture health and non-health costs and consequences.

27 **Keywords:** cost effectiveness; methods; children; adolescents; obesity; prevention; treatment

29 **1. Introduction**

30 Childhood obesity is a major global public health problem with associated health, social and
31 emotional consequences, as well as long term direct and indirect costs [1-4]. Effective obesity
32 prevention and treatment in children and adolescents is therefore a priority as it is far more
33 cost-effective to prevent the onset of obesity in childhood compared to a lifetime of
34 obesity-associated costs. However, despite an increasing number of intervention studies, there are
35 relatively few published economic evaluations [5-7].

36 In many countries, the scarcity of public resources requires decision makers to seek information
37 on cost-effectiveness as well as clinical effectiveness in the knowledge that the use of resources in
38 one way prevents their use in others [8]. Economic evaluation is a means to aid decisions about
39 public resource allocation [9, 10] and as obesity prevention and treatment often involves lifestyle
40 interventions that have costs and consequences that fall outside the health care sector, a societal
41 perspective for evaluation is usually recommended [10]. This means that all relevant resource
42 use/costs and consequences are measured, outlining how these fit within a given sector, such as
43 health, education or the wider community [11]. However, when incorporating costs and outcomes

44 that span across multiple sectors, it is not always clear how much society is willing to pay for a
45 'non-health' effect caused by an intervention funded from a 'health care budget'. Also, the valuation
46 of resources for which no market exists, such as informal care, or patient time costs, requires specific
47 methods [8].

48 Seven recent reviews [12-18] have summarised the cost-effectiveness of obesity prevention
49 and/or treatment interventions in young people however none were designed to offer a rigorous
50 review of methods applied for economic evaluation. Five reviews had language restrictions [12-15,
51 17] and four excluded studies that were conducted in developing countries [12, 13, 15, 17], limiting
52 global interpretation. Only two reviews appraised methods for handling inter-sectoral costs [13, 17].
53 Just three of the reviews used established criteria e.g. Drummond checklist [19] to assess the quality
54 of the primary studies [13, 14, 17]. The search strategy was inadequate (e.g. search terms not fully
55 reported) in three reviews [12, 15, 20], and in the remaining four there were omissions of relevant
56 databases, which means that relevant studies could have been missed [13, 14, 16, 17]. Furthermore,
57 the most recent review, which only focused on interventions in pre-school children, included studies
58 reported up to November 2015 and, at least 3 new economic evaluation studies of childhood obesity
59 interventions have been published since then [21-23].

60 This paper reports on a systematic review of published economic evaluations of obesity
61 prevention and/or treatment interventions in children and adolescents (0-19 years) with the primary
62 objective of appraising the methods used and assessing the quality of the economic evaluations
63 using the Drummond checklist [19]. A secondary objective was to undertake a narrative synthesis of
64 the evidence of the cost-effectiveness.

65 2. Materials and Methods

66 The systematic review follows the reporting guidelines of Preferred Reporting Items for
67 Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) [24] and a completed PRISMA checklist is
68 presented in Section A (see Supplementary Material). The protocol is registered with the
69 international prospective register of systematic reviews (PROSPERO) database ref
70 (CRD42017062236) and has previously been published [25].

71 2.1. Literature Search

72 The following electronic health economics/biomedical databases were searched: MEDLINE
73 (Ovid); EMBASE (Ovid); Web of Science; CINAHL Plus; EconLit; PsycINFO; Cochrane Database of
74 Systematic Reviews (CDSR); Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effects (DARE); the National
75 Health Service Economic Evaluation Database (NHS EED); Health Technology Assessment (HTA)
76 and Cost-Effectiveness Analysis (CEA) Registry. The following sources were also used to identify
77 potential additional studies: Google Scholar; relevant National Institute for Health and Care
78 Excellence (NICE) guidelines; the reference lists of eligible studies and review articles; and Grey
79 literature such as OpenSIGLE, National Obesity Observatory, NHS Evidence, National Technical
80 Information Service, Healthcare Management Information Consortium (HMIC) and RePEC
81 (Economic Working papers) database. The search was conducted in May 2017 and studies were
82 sought between January 2001 and April 2017. The year 2001 was chosen since the first study
83 evaluating the cost-effectiveness of a childhood obesity treatment intervention was published then
84 followed 2 years later by the first economic evaluation of a childhood obesity prevention
85 intervention [16]. Search strategies included Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms and text words
86 of key papers that were identified beforehand. The search terms and text words were adapted for
87 use within other bibliographic databases. The full search strategy is presented in Section B (see
88 Supplementary Material).

89 2.2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

90 Economic evaluations were included or excluded based on the following criteria:

91 Types of study: Primary full economic evaluations were included (studies in which both the
92 costs and outcomes of the alternatives are examined and in which a comparison of two or more
93 interventions or case alternatives are undertaken) including trial-based and model-based (using trial
94 data) evaluations. Partial economic evaluations; qualitative studies; conference abstracts; and study
95 protocols were excluded.

96 Participants/ population: Children and adolescents aged 0-19 years at the start of the
97 intervention and/or their parents/guardians were included. Family based interventions were also
98 included when the target participants were the children. Economic evaluations undertaken within
99 any country context were included. Interventions to tackle obesity due to a secondary cause (e.g.
100 Prader-Willi syndrome) were excluded.

101 Intervention(s), exposure(s): All behavioural (focused on individual behaviour change
102 techniques), environmental (focused on modifying the local environment) or policy (focused on
103 population-wide legislative or fiscal action) interventions for the treatment or prevention of
104 overweight/obesity in children and/or adolescents were included. Pharmacological or surgical
105 interventions were excluded.

106 Comparator(s)/control: Only studies with a clearly defined comparator were included with no
107 restrictions on the types of comparator(s).

108 Outcome(s): No restrictions on outcomes measures. Potentially relevant outcomes were:
109 Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs); Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALYs); effectiveness
110 outcomes such as kilogramme weight loss; % Body Fat; Body Mass Index (BMI) z-score; waist
111 circumference; overweight and obesity cases avoided; additional minute of Moderate to Vigorous
112 Physical Activity (MVPA); increase in overall physical activity level and Metabolic Equivalent
113 (MET) hour gained.

114 Other criteria: There were no restrictions based on language.

115 2.3. Study Selection Procedure

116 The review followed a two-stage method. First, the main researcher and an independent
117 researcher individually screened titles and abstracts of identified publications against the selection
118 criteria. If in doubt, the full text version was requested. Second, full-text papers were reviewed by
119 both researchers and a final decision made with respect to the inclusion/exclusion criteria. There was
120 85% agreement between the 2 reviewers. Any disagreements between the reviewers over the
121 eligibility of specific studies were resolved by discussion between all authors. To aid study selection
122 and analysis of non-English language articles, translation either in part or in whole was undertaken
123 by academic colleagues with the appropriate language skills. The literature search results were
124 managed using Endnote 7 (Thomson Reuters).

125 2.4. Data Extraction

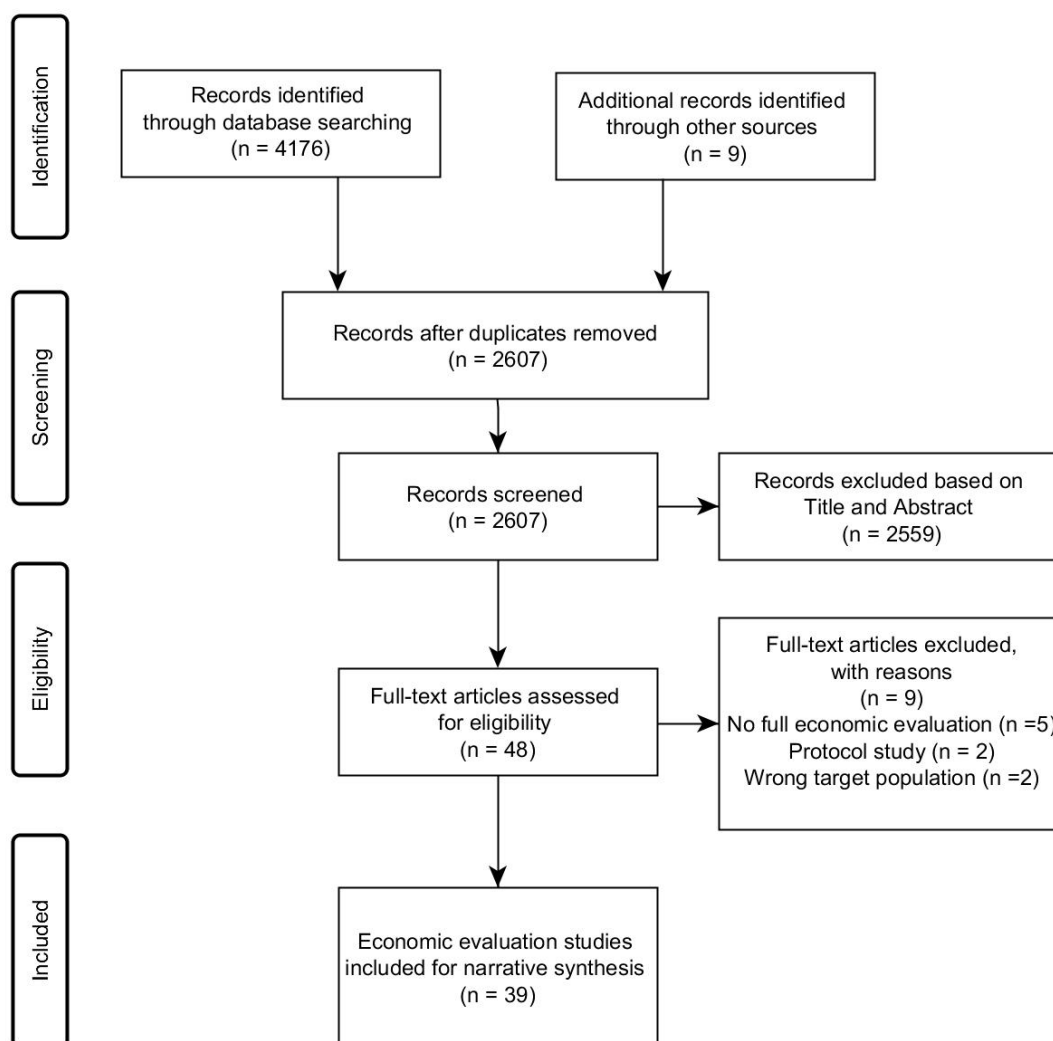
126 The study characteristics and findings were recorded using a standardised, pre-piloted data
127 extraction form (see Tables S1 (i) – S1 (iv) and Tables S2-4 (i) – S2-4 (iv) in Supplementary Material).
128 This process was checked for completeness and accuracy by an independent researcher. Any
129 discrepancies between the reviewers over the data extraction process was identified and resolved by
130 discussion or by consensus with all authors.

131 2.5. Quality Assessment of Included Studies

132 The quality of the economic evaluations were judged against standard criteria (Drummond
133 checklist) [19], see Table S5 (see Supplementary Material). Quality assessment of the included
134 studies was independently checked for completeness and accuracy by an independent researcher
135 and any discrepancies were resolved by discussion with all authors.

136 3. Results

137 From the 4,185 references initially identified, 39 economic evaluations were included – see
 138 Figure 1. The most common reasons for exclusion were the lack of (full) economic evaluations, being
 139 a protocol study, or including an ineligible target population.



140
 141 **Figure 1.** PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow
 142 diagram.

143 *3.1. Details about Study Context*

144 Full details about study context are presented in Tables S1 (i) – S1 (iv) (see Supplementary
 145 Material), and summarised in Table 1.

146 **Table 1.** Summary of general characteristics of the studies.

Study characteristics		Number of studies identified (%)
Year of publication		
2001-2009		17 (44)
2010-2017		22 (56)
Study approach		
Trial-based	Prevention	9 (23)
	Treatment	7 (18)
Model-based	Prevention	19 (49)
	Treatment	4 (10)
Comparator selected		

Usual care	33 (85)
Another intervention	6 (15)
Country	
High-income	
Australia	15 (38.5)
New Zealand	2 (5)
The USA	12 (31.5)
Canada	1 (2.5)
The UK	4 (10)
Germany	2 (5)
Finland	1 (2.5)
Spain	1 (2.5)
Low and middle-income	
China	1 (2.5)
Setting	
School Prevention	21 (54)
US/Australian state	5 (13)
Community	1 (2.5)
Home	1 (2.5)
Clinical Treatment	9 (23)
School	1 (2.5)
Community	1 (2.5)

147 3.1.1. Intervention and Comparator

148 Approximately half of the economic evaluations (23/39) were model-based [12, 23, 26-41]
 149 compared to trial-based evaluations. A range of interventions were identified, all containing
 150 individual behaviour change elements (Figure 2). A large proportion (25/39) (including all treatment
 151 interventions) were focused exclusively on behaviour change techniques, the rest combined
 152 individual behaviour change elements with either an environmental component (modifying the
 153 local environment e.g. active school transport) [22, 30-34, 42, 43] or a policy component
 154 (population-wide legislative or fiscal interventions such as banning unhealthy food advertising or a
 155 physical education policy) [26, 28, 29, 36, 39, 44]. Approximately half of the interventions (21/39; 12
 156 prevention and 9 treatment) targeted a combination of physical activity and dietary behaviours [12,
 157 21, 27, 33, 37-43, 45-51], the rest focused on either physical activity [22, 26, 30-32, 34, 44, 52-54] or
 158 dietary habits only [12, 23, 28, 29, 36, 55].

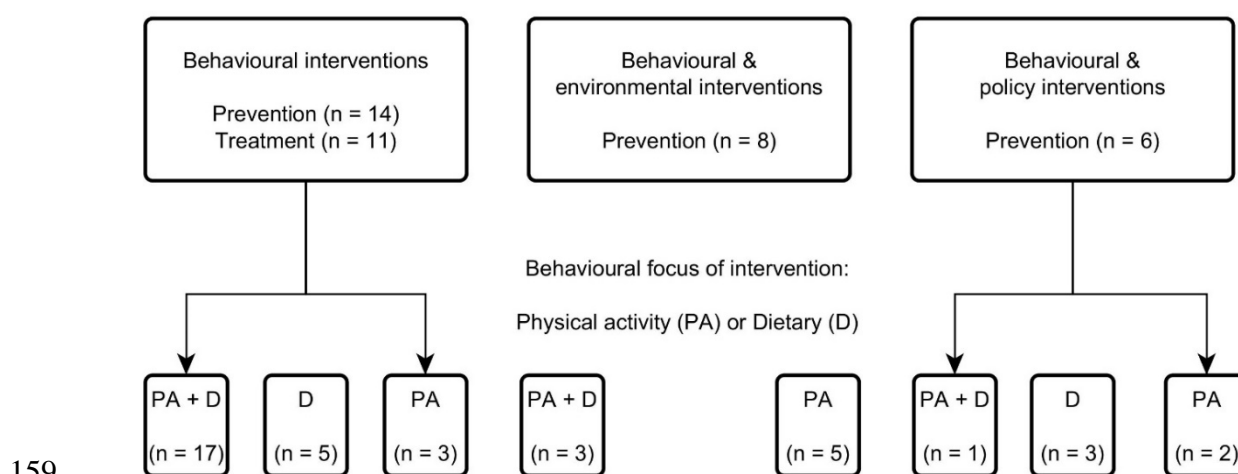


Figure 2. Summary of the interventions.

161 The intensity of the interventions differed considerably. For prevention interventions, this
 162 ranged from one session per 3 months [45] to approximately 2 sessions per month [52]; and for
 163 treatment interventions, ranged from one [21] to 12 sessions per week [47]. The duration of the

164 interventions also differed, ranging from 8 months [54] to 4 years [53] for prevention studies; and
165 from 3 months [21] to 1 year [47] for treatment studies. Overall therefore, the treatment interventions
166 were generally more intensive but delivered over a shorter time period compared to prevention
167 interventions. The comparison or control group was not always clearly specified but was assumed to
168 be “usual care” in most of the studies (33/39) and often the studies did not justify their rationale for
169 choosing the comparator.

170 3.1.2. Country and Setting

171 The evaluations were spread across a wide range of countries and study settings. The vast
172 majority (38/39) originated from high-income countries, mainly Australasia (Australia (n=15) [12, 22,
173 29-33, 41, 45, 51] and New Zealand (n=2) [35, 42]), with 13 from North America (USA (n=12) [23,
174 26-28, 36-39, 43, 44, 47, 50], Canada (n=1) [48]) and 8 from Europe (UK (n=4) [21, 34, 40, 49], Germany
175 (n=2) [52, 53], Finland (n=1) [55], Spain (n=1) [54]). Only one study was from a developing country
176 context - China [46]. In terms of study setting, the majority of prevention interventions (21/28) were
177 school-based [22, 23, 27, 30-33, 35, 37, 38, 42, 43, 46, 50, 52-54] and for treatment interventions, most
178 (9/11) took place in clinical settings [12, 21, 40, 41, 47-49, 51, 55].

179 3.2. Review of Economic Evaluation Methods

180 A detailed account of the economic evaluation methods are presented in Tables S2-4 (i) – S2-4
181 (iv) (see Supplementary Material).

182 3.2.1. Type of Economic Evaluation and Measures of Effectiveness

183 The majority of studies that conducted a Cost-Effectiveness Analysis (CEA) used raw or
184 standardised BMI as a measure of clinical outcome (26/39) (18 prevention and 8 treatment), whilst
185 other studies used one or more measures from: cases of overweight/obesity prevented; unit increase
186 in MET minutes; reduction in body fat or waist circumference. Approximately half of the studies
187 that undertook a CEA also conducted a Cost-Utility Analysis (CUA) [21, 28-34, 36, 41] with QALYs
188 as the primary outcome measure. The review found that the vast majority of trial-based economic
189 evaluations (15/16) did not use QALYs/DALYs whereas most model-based evaluations (n=20)
190 tended to report QALYs/DALYs as the primary economic outcome. When QALYs were used, the
191 age of the participants was between 6 and 11 years in the trial-based economic evaluation [21], and
192 between 2 and 19 years in the model-based economic evaluations.

193 A pattern with preferred type of economic evaluation by country context was apparent. Within
194 Australasia (13/17) a CUA or a combination of CUA and CEA [12, 29-33, 35, 41] was most popular,
195 whereas the majority of studies from North America (7/13) [26, 39, 43, 44, 47, 48, 50], and the only
196 study from China [46] conducted a CEA only. Across Europe, only UK-based studies used CUA [21,
197 34]. In terms of study setting, a CEA was most common in clinical settings (7/9), whereas within
198 school settings a mixed approach was applied with around half conducting a CEA (12/22). There
199 was no clear pattern found in terms of approach taken to evaluate prevention or treatment
200 interventions.

201 3.2.2. Evaluation Perspective Taken

202 Most (35/39) studies clearly reported the study perspective. The majority (n=29) were from a
203 societal perspective. Interestingly, none of the UK studies [21, 34, 40, 49], compared to most of those
204 conducted within Australia and the USA, applied a societal perspective. Two studies reported using
205 a health care perspective, but from the data reported it was clear that wider societal costs were
206 included within a secondary analysis [21, 51].

207 For all interventions that included either a policy or environmental component (12/14), the
208 perspective was societal, whereas for interventions focused exclusively on individual behaviour
209 change a combination of societal (17/25) and healthcare (6/25) perspectives was undertaken. A

210 societal perspective was also adopted by the vast majority of interventions implemented in school
211 settings (19/22).

212 3.2.3. Time Horizon Considered and Type of Modelling Approach Taken

213 The time durations for the trial-based economic evaluations were predicted by the period of the
214 trial. Of interest this ranged from 8 months [54] to 6 years [53] in the prevention studies; and from
215 10 months [50] to 15 months [51] for the treatment interventions. For the model-based evaluations,
216 the time horizon was more at the analysts discretion and within this review ranged from at least 10
217 years (n=5) [26, 28, 36, 38, 39] to a lifetime (15/23) [12, 23, 29-33, 35, 40, 41]. The time horizon was also
218 found to be much shorter within clinical settings (6/9) [21, 47-49, 51, 55] compared to the other study
219 settings such as schools for example. The majority of the studies did not justify their choice of time
220 horizon.

221 With respect to modelling, the vast majority of model-based studies (18/23) applied Markov
222 modelling [12, 26, 28-33, 35, 36, 39-41] compared to decision analytic modelling [23, 27, 34, 37, 38].
223 The majority of the model-based studies did not justify their model choice and the description of
224 model details was suboptimal in most of them.

225 3.2.4. Choice of Discount Rate

226 For the majority of the trial-based studies (10/16) (4 prevention and 6 treatment), discounting
227 was not appropriate as the time horizons considered were relatively short (less than one year) [21,
228 43, 46-50, 52, 54, 55]. For all the trial-based studies of more than one year, all reported using a
229 discount rate in accordance with the relevant country guidelines apart from one prevention trial
230 from New Zealand [42], which used a 5% discount rate per year for costs, rather than the 3.5%
231 discount rate per year for both costs and outcomes recommended [56]. Most model-based studies
232 (22/23) applied a discount rate for both costs and outcomes (3% per year for Australia (n=12) [12,
233 29-33, 41], the USA (n=8) [23, 26-28, 36-39] and the UK (n=1) [40], and 3.5% per year for New Zealand
234 (n=1) [35]. Interestingly, the rates used for studies from Australia and the UK were not in accordance
235 with their respective country guidelines (which is 5% per year for Australia according to PBAC and
236 3.5% per year for the UK according to NICE) [57, 58]. However, different state governments in
237 Australia recommend different rates and the discount rate used in the included Australian and UK
238 studies was consistent with the US panel recommendations [59]. Most of the studies did not justify
239 their choice of discount rate.

240 3.2.5. Methods for Collecting and Estimating Resource Use/Costs

241 Half of the trial-based evaluations (8/16) (4 prevention and 4 treatment) reported their methods
242 for collecting resource use [21, 22, 45, 47, 49, 51-53], while only 10 out of 23 model-based evaluations
243 (9 prevention and 1 treatment) did so [23, 26, 28, 30-33, 36, 39, 41].

244 As expected, the choice of inclusion of a particular type of cost varied considerably according to
245 the study purpose, perspective, setting and the nature of the intervention being evaluated. Costs
246 tended to be categorised into programme delivery, direct medical (e.g. healthcare visits), direct
247 non-medical (e.g. travel time/cost for participants) and indirect (e.g. productivity losses because of
248 parents' absence from work). In line with recommendations for CEA [60], the development/set up
249 costs were not considered in the vast majority of studies, apart from one trial-based prevention
250 study from the USA [44].

251 Of the 9 studies (5 prevention and 4 treatment) that included indirect costs incurred by parents
252 [21, 30, 31, 33, 41, 43, 47, 51, 53], these were mainly from Australia (n=5) and most of them were for
253 preventive "behavioural" interventions within a school-based setting (5/9). Also, direct non-medical
254 costs were reported by 4 prevention studies from Australia [30, 33, 41, 51] and 1 treatment study
255 from the USA [47]. Most of these types of costs (3/5) were for "behavioural" interventions
256 implemented within a clinical setting.

257 3.2.6. Sensitivity Analysis Undertaken

258 The majority of the trial-based studies (10/16) conducted a deterministic sensitivity analysis to
259 assess the robustness of the results [21, 22, 42, 43, 45, 51-55]. Most of the model-based studies (22/23)
260 apart from the study by Pringle et al (2010) from the UK [34], conducted at least one type of
261 sensitivity analysis with the majority (n=20) applying both deterministic and probabilistic sensitivity
262 analysis in line with recommendations. Half of these studies however did not justify the choice of
263 covariates for the sensitivity analysis.

264 3.3. Narrative Synthesis of Cost-Effectiveness Evidence

265 The most common method for presenting cost-effectiveness evidence was the Incremental
266 Cost-Effectiveness Ratio (ICER) (30/39). The vast majority of the studies (33/37), excluding the CCA
267 ones, reported results that were cost-effective. Some of these (13 of the model-based
268 prevention/treatment studies including 5 by Carter et al (2009)), [12, 28, 29, 34, 36-40] illustrated cost
269 saving results. For instance, Long et al (2015) concluded that a sugar-sweetened beverage excise tax
270 would increase benefits in terms of DALYs averted and result in healthcare cost savings in the USA
271 [28]. Almost half of these 13 studies that illustrated cost-savings were from Australia, followed by 5
272 from the USA and 2 from the UK. None of the trial-based evaluations reported cost saving results,
273 probably due to shorter time horizons. Whilst the findings are not directly comparable between
274 studies due to the heterogeneous nature of the methods used, all of the studies which evaluated
275 interventions targeting only dietary habits (8/8) and the majority of the studies targeting both
276 physical activity and dietary habits (19/21) indicated cost-effective or cost saving results. However,
277 the studies which focused on only physical activity indicated a proportionally smaller number of
278 cost-effective or cost saving results (7/10). Furthermore, the evidence suggests that the majority of
279 behavioural interventions supported by a policy intervention (4/6) were cost-saving [28, 29, 36, 39].

280 A small number of studies (n=4) [21, 30-32] reported interventions to not be cost-effective. The
281 UK trial-based treatment study [21], which targeted a combination of physical activity and dietary
282 habits with the aim to reduce weight gain in children with obesity remained not cost-effective using
283 a CEA/CUA approach regardless of the choice of perspective. Also, the 3 model-based studies that
284 targeted only physical activity were not cost-effective, for example, the "Walking School Bus"
285 programme which had a high cost of delivery coupled with low participation rates [30].

286 3.4. Quality Assessment of the Included Studies

287 The quality of reporting the economic evaluations was assessed using the Drummond checklist.
288 Full details of the quality assessment are presented in Tables S6 (i) – S6 (iv) (see Supplementary
289 Material). None of the included studies fulfilled all of the quality criteria however only a small
290 number of the studies were categorised as poor. One challenge regarding the quality assessment was
291 that quality was judged based on the published data only and there might be a difference in what
292 has been reported and what has actually been done. So a bad scoring study might just be due to lack
293 of transparency rather than lack of quality.

294 Certain criteria were simply not applicable to each respective study (e.g. items 12–15, due to
295 different perspectives chosen), while others were not reported. The three criteria which were least
296 well addressed were the rationale for the comparator, the justification for the choice of discount rate,
297 and the model choice. Whilst the time horizon for each study was generally well specified, most
298 studies omitted to provide reasons for choice. Additionally, approximately half of the studies did
299 not justify the choice of economic evaluation nor offered justification for what was explored within a
300 sensitivity analysis.

301 4. Discussion

302 To the best of our knowledge this is the first study to conduct a review of the methods for
303 economic evaluation and to determine how these methods vary by setting, country and intervention
304 design.

305 The review identified some emerging patterns. We found that among the published economic
306 evaluations, there was no consistent measure of outcomes. Around half of the studies reported
307 clinical (e.g. BMI), rather than health-related outcome measures commonly used within economic
308 evaluation (QALYs/DALYs). This suggests that the measurement of QALYs/DALYs within obesity
309 trials is not firmly established. This heterogeneity of outcome measures will hinder comparability of
310 cost-effectiveness.

311 No evaluation applied a Cost-Benefit Analysis (CBA) approach. Consideration of broader
312 outcomes going beyond the health sector allows for inclusion of costs and effects from multiple
313 sectors and is particularly relevant for obesity intervention. This is an emerging area of
314 development within economic evaluation and efforts are being made to adapt methodologies to
315 promote the use of CBA [61]. These approaches have been recommended by the UK Treasury
316 guidance to evaluate (usually non-health) public sector projects [62].

317 Model-based evaluations offer the opportunity to improve the generalisability of results as they
318 combine data from a variety of sources. However the findings from five of the model-based
319 evaluations identified within this review were based on small samples [23, 27, 34, 37, 38] and only
320 one of these offered data based on a lifetime horizon. Furthermore, all of the model-based
321 evaluations were for interventions that targeted individual health behaviours and were therefore
322 highly dependent on cultural, infrastructural and other system-related aspects. So the
323 generalisability of results to other contexts, particularly from developed to developing country
324 settings, would be questionable [63]. The majority of the papers did not make explicit mention of
325 procedures for checking their models and no study assessed the sensitivity of their results to the
326 choice of model-type. Despite associated assumptions with modelling studies, the studies evaluated
327 are important as model-based health economic evaluations are today widely accepted as
328 policy-making tools that can inform resource allocation decisions. Almost half of the model-based
329 studies chose a lifetime perspective and the vast majority of them applied Markov modelling.

330 Most trial-based and model-based evaluations in this review applied recommended discount
331 rates in accordance with the relevant country guidelines. Methods for collecting resource use and the
332 type of cost included were found to vary across the studies. In particular, the indirect costs of
333 overweight and obesity (e.g. productivity losses) were not generally collected alongside the trials. It
334 is considered good practice to report results both with and without indirect costs. Including indirect
335 costs (e.g. costs incurred by families) has the potential to alter the treatment recommendations.

336 The narrative synthesis of the economic evidence and the quality assessment of the included
337 studies are useful for informing health economists/modellers and the direction for future research in
338 this area. In terms of judging cost-effectiveness of interventions, context-specific assessment is
339 problematic as there are different thresholds for cost-effectiveness in different countries. For
340 example, in the UK, NICE recommends a threshold willingness to pay of £20,000-£30,000 per QALY
341 [64], by contrast in Australia the recommendation is AU\$ 50,000 per QALY [30] and in many
342 countries there are no clearly defined thresholds at all. Whilst most interventions in this review
343 appear cost-effective using standard rules of cost-effectiveness, there is substantial variation by
344 intervention design.

345 4.1. Comparison with Previous Systematic Reviews

346 Our finding that most interventions were cost-effective or even cost-saving, is similar to those
347 reported by two other reviews [14, 20], with some overlap between included studies. Other reviews
348 have focused on particular age groups (e.g. pre-schoolers [13]), specific interventions (e.g. only
349 physical activity [17]), or particular outcomes (e.g. anthropometric measurements [13]). Two
350 additional reviews from Australia [12] and the US [15] used the Assessing Cost-Effectiveness (ACE)
351 obesity approach to summarise and compare the cost-effectiveness of a range of interventions.
352 However, none of the previous studies reviewed the methods of the economic evaluations in the
353 way we have outlined.

354 4.2. Strengths and Limitations of this Review

355 One of the important strengths of this review is the comprehensive search strategy applied
356 encompassing a broad range of electronic bibliographic databases of published studies and the grey
357 literature (six additional studies were identified). Furthermore, the results were not limited to only
358 those published in English (two non-English publications identified) and there were no country
359 restrictions (there was one publication from china as a developing country), resulting in a more
360 complete review than those published previously. Also, the formal quality assessment of the
361 economic evaluations undertaken adds strength to the conclusions. The vast majority of the studies
362 were found to be of very good reporting quality.

363 The review had some limitations. As we focused on full economic evaluations, some important
364 data contained within partial evaluations may have been missed. Further limitations relate to the
365 shortcomings of the included studies and underlying evidence base. There was heterogeneity in
366 both the methods used and with the type of intervention being evaluated, which made synthesising
367 the evidence base challenging. Not all included studies used the same definition of obesity, which
368 may impact on the results. Most of the included studies reported an economic evaluation for an
369 intervention that had previously been reported as clinically effective. It is possible that any trial
370 which had ineffective results did not conduct an economic evaluation or, if they did, failed to get it
371 published, introducing potential publication bias.

372 5. Conclusions

373 This systematic review suggests that current economic evaluations are mainly set in developed
374 countries and the majority focus on the prevention of obesity in children, compared to treatment.
375 Our findings show that the majority of published economic evaluations are for interventions with an
376 individual behaviour change component. The majority, particularly “behavioural and policy”
377 preventive interventions, were cost-effective, even cost-saving. However the review found
378 heterogeneity with respect to methods applied. So, to improve the evidence base further and to
379 enhance comparability across interventions, we recommend a consistent and expanded form of
380 economic evaluation which captures both health and non-health costs and consequences beyond
381 health-gain.

382 **Supplementary Materials:** Additional supporting information may be found online in the supplementary
383 material file for this article. This file includes: Section A: Completed PRISMA checklist; Section B: Search
384 strategy; Tables S1 (i) – S1 (iv): Data extraction (Details about study context); Tables S2-4 (i) – S2-4 (iv): Data
385 extraction (Detailed account of the economic evaluation methods); Table S5: Drummond checklist for critically
386 appraising relevant studies; and Tables S6 (i) – S6 (iv): Quality assessment of the included studies.

387 **Author Contributions:** MZ, PA, BL and EF led the development of the design of this study. PA, BL and EF
388 provided methodological advice and supervised the study. MZ conducted the literature search. Full-text
389 articles were assessed by MZ for eligibility. MZ extracted the data and assessed the quality of the included
390 studies. Any disagreements between the main researcher and the independent researcher (acknowledged
391 above) over the eligibility of specific studies, the data extraction process and the quality assessment process
392 were resolved by discussion between all authors. MZ analysed the data and interpreted the results. MZ drafted
393 the manuscript. All authors were actively involved in revising the drafts of the manuscript and interpreting the
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