DOES LEGAL HERITAGE AFFECT OBESITY?  
THE CHANNEL OF MOTOR VEHICLE DEPENDENCE

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ABSTRACT

We find a robust relationship between legal heritage and obesity in OECD countries. Motor vehicle dependence is the link that connects the two phenomena. Our estimates indicate that an increase of 100 motor vehicles per thousand residents is associated with a six percentage point increase in obesity in common law countries, whereas it has a much smaller or insignificant impact in civil law countries. These relations hold whether we examine trend data and simple correlations, or conduct cross-section or panel data regression analysis. Our results suggest that obesity is higher in countries following a common law tradition where individual liberty is encouraged, whereas the link is small or statistically non-existent in countries with a civil law background where the rights of the individual tend to be circumscribed by the power of the state. Following La Porta et al (1999), disaggregating the civil law variable allows for distinctions between European legal heritages and sharpens the empirical results. The main finding implies that
governmental efforts to discourage over-reliance on the automobile would have the greatest obesity reducing impact precisely in those countries where it is most difficult, in terms of legal heritage, to implement such measures.

KEY WORDS: common law, civil law, obesity, motor vehicles, OECD

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