Adolescent Obesity Bad for Health; Also Bad for Economy, National Security

Researchers: Obesity is to blame for 27 percent of healthcare cost increases since 1990; 1 in 4 not fit to serve in military

New York City – In their new publication, Adolescent Obesity in the United States: Facts for Policymakers, researchers at the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) synthesize research on obesity in adolescents (aged 12 to 19) by gender and ethnicity:

- Hispanic:
  - Boys: 25.5%
  - Girls: 17.5%
- Mexican-American:
  - Boys: 26.7%
  - Girls: 17.4%
- Non-Hispanic white:
  - Boys: 16.7%
  - Girls: 14.5%
- Non-Hispanic black:
  - Boys: 19.8%
  - Girls: 29.2%

At NCCP, a research center at the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, researchers also found that:

One out of every six adolescents is overweight, and one out of every three is at risk. Childhood obesity was found to be highest in the South, with eight of the 10 states with the highest rates of childhood obesity being in the South. In 2007, the prevalence of overweight and obesity was greater among publicly insured children aged 10 to 17 than their privately insured peers.

Health Consequences:

Being overweight increases the risk of developing diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, and cancer, among other adverse outcomes. The current generation of children could potentially live shorter lives than their parents. Overweight adolescents are more likely to become overweight adults than their normal weight peers, with one study showing 80 percent of children who were overweight at 10 to 15 years were obese adults at age 25. Overweight and obese teenage mothers are at increased risk for gestational diabetes and caesarean delivery.

Economic & National Security Consequences:

The direct and indirect costs of the obesity epidemic exceed $140 billion annually. The U.S. spends six to 10 percent of healthcare spending on costs attributable to obesity, compared to two percent to 3.5 percent in other Western countries.
Excess medical costs due to adolescent obesity are estimated at more than $14 billion per year. Adolescent obesity affects our nation’s ability to protect itself; more than 25 percent of 17 to 24-year olds are not fit to enroll in the military due to their weight.

**Recommendations:**

**Implement and enforce rules on nutritional information that make it easier for parents and adolescents to make healthy choices.** Clear food and menu labeling can enable families to make the better choices for themselves and their families.

**Increase access to healthy and affordable foods.** Government can promote access through a variety of initiatives, such as providing tax credits for supermarkets and grocery stores in underserved communities and incentives to promote production of fruits and vegetables.

**Ensure that families who need food assistance have access to it.** Policymakers can promote access to food assistance by simplifying the application process for food assistance programs, ensuring that people who qualify for these programs are aware of them, enabling the use of WIC and food stamps at greenmarkets, and providing subsidies for healthier foods.

**Limit childhood exposure to food marketing.** By limiting advertisements for unhealthy foods targeting young people, policymakers can make it more likely that adolescents will make healthier decisions about food.

**Improve quality of and safeguard funding for school food programs.** Improving the quality and reach of school food can tangibly improve the health of children.

**Improve quality of other foods sold at or near schools.** Many foods are sold at school that are not subject to federal nutrition standards and typically contribute to poor nutritional choices.

**Partner with the private sector to encourage safe pedestrian- and physical-activity-friendly development projects, especially in low-income communities.** Making neighborhoods safer and more pedestrian-friendly can encourage physical activity and reduce the negative effects of our modern environment.

The publication can be accessed free online at: [http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_977.html](http://www.nccp.org/publications/pub_977.html)

*The National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP) is the nation’s leading public policy center dedicated to promoting the economic security, health and well-being of America’s low-income families and children. Part of Columbia University’s Mailman School of Public Health, NCCP uses research to inform policy and practice with the goal of ensuring positive outcomes for the next generation.*

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