

# Overweight and Obesity Among Latino Youths

**Leadership for  
Healthy Communities**  
Advancing Policies to Support  
Healthy Eating and Active Living

**Fact Sheet | February 2009**

**W**hile childhood obesity has increased significantly throughout the general population, children from minority communities have been disproportionately affected. Sharply higher rates of overweight and obesity have occurred among Latino,\* African-American and Native American children and adolescents.

This fact sheet highlights the prevalence, consequences and causes of overweight and obesity among Latino youths. Additional fact sheets and resources on childhood obesity can be found at [www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org](http://www.leadershipforhealthycommunities.org).

---

\* The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) and Leadership for Healthy Communities (LHC) generally use the word “Latino” to describe people in the United States who are of Central or South American descent. However, when citing research that uses “Hispanic” or “Mexican American,” RWJF and LHC defer to the researchers’ terminology.

## Facts At A Glance

- Latino children and adolescents are at greater risk of overweight and obesity than their white or African-American peers.
- Latino adolescents born in the United States are more likely to carry excess weight than Latino adolescents born elsewhere.
- Limited availability of healthy foods and safe recreational facilities contribute to higher rates of overweight and obesity among Latino children and families.



## Prevalence of Overweight and Obesity Among Latino Youths

Latino youths suffer disproportionately from overweight and obesity.

- Currently, 38 percent of Mexican-American children ages 2 to 19 are overweight or obese, compared with 31.9 percent of all children those ages.<sup>2</sup>
- Mexican-American boys ages 2 to 19 are more likely to be overweight or obese than white or African-American boys. The prevalence of overweight and obesity is 40.8 percent among Mexican Americans, 30.8 percent among African Americans and 31.9 percent among whites.<sup>3</sup>
- More Mexican-American children ages 2 to 11 are obese than their peers. Among Mexican Americans, 16.7 percent of children ages 2 to 5 and 23.8 percent of those ages 6 to 11 are obese. By comparison, 10.7 percent of white children ages 2 to 5 and 15 percent of white children ages 6 to 11 are obese.<sup>4</sup>

## Consequences of Childhood Obesity

Overweight and obese children are more likely to suffer from serious, lifelong illnesses than their healthy weight peers. The higher prevalence of overweight and obesity among Latino children places them at a higher risk of developing chronic diseases.

- Childhood obesity is associated with increased risk of asthma, type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, sleep apnea and social stigmatization.<sup>5</sup>
- Hispanic children are more likely to develop diabetes than other children. Among children born in 2000, white boys have a 26.7 percent risk of being diagnosed with diabetes during their lifetimes, while Hispanic boys have a 45.4 percent lifetime risk. White girls born in 2000 have a 31.2 percent risk of being diagnosed with diabetes during their lifetimes, while Hispanic girls have a 52.5 percent lifetime risk.<sup>6</sup>

## Causes and Determinants of Overweight and Obesity

A complex interplay of social, economic and environmental factors contributes to higher overweight and obesity rates among Latino children.

### The Food Environment

Latino communities often lack access to affordable, healthy foods.

- Hispanic neighborhoods have approximately one-third as many chain supermarkets as other communities.<sup>7</sup>
- Hispanic high school students have more access to fast food at school than their peers. Hispanic students can select brand-name fast food from their high school cafeteria's a la carte line an average of two days a week, while African-American and white students only have that option approximately once a week.<sup>8</sup>

### Media Influence

The presence and influence of media among Latino households pose a significant challenge to healthy eating and regular physical activity among children.

- Hispanic youths spend more time watching television compared with white youths and are more likely to have a television in their bedroom. Hispanic children and adolescents watch an average of three hours and 23 minutes of television daily, compared with two hours and 45 minutes for white children and adolescents.<sup>9</sup>
- Research shows that the number of hours spent watching television is positively associated with increased caloric intake, overweight and obesity. A study of sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders in the Boston area found that an extra hour of television is associated with the consumption of an additional 167 calories daily.<sup>10,11</sup>
- In 2007, advertisers spent more than \$566 million on food, beverage and restaurant advertising in Hispanic media.<sup>12</sup>

### The Built Environment

Environmental factors involving transportation, infrastructure and safety limit Latino children's options for physical activity.

- Hispanic parents of youths ages 9 to 13 report more barriers to their children's physical activity than do white parents. These barriers include transportation problems, concerns about neighborhood safety and the expense and availability of local opportunities. Hispanic parents are especially concerned about safety, and 41.2 percent report it as a barrier to physical activity compared with 8.5 percent of white parents.<sup>13</sup>
- Hispanic youths are significantly less likely than their white peers to get involved in organized physical activity outside of school. Among ages 9 to 13, 25.9 percent of Hispanic youths are involved in organized physical activity outside of school, compared with 46.6 percent of white youths.<sup>14</sup>

### Acculturation

Acculturation to the American way of life is associated with less physical activity, poor eating habits and excess weight among Latinos.

- Hispanic adolescents born in the United States are more likely to gain excess weight than Hispanic adolescents born outside the United States. A study found that the obesity rate in California is almost twice as high among Latino adolescents born in the United States compared with the rate for Latino adolescents not born in the United States.<sup>15,16</sup>
- Acculturation to the United States is significantly associated with fewer days of moderate-to-high-intensity physical activity and more frequent consumption of fast food, according to a study of Hispanic sixth- and seventh-graders in Southern California.<sup>17</sup>

## Summary

Because of the many barriers to healthy eating and active living, Latino children and adolescents are more likely to suffer from overweight and obesity than their white peers. Consequently, they are at a higher risk of developing serious, chronic illnesses. Comprehensive solutions, which include increasing

access to affordable healthy foods in communities and schools, limiting the marketing of unhealthy foods, addressing neighborhood safety and improving the built environment, are necessary to prevent childhood obesity and safeguard the health of Latino children.

## Endnotes

1. Most data on the prevalence of childhood obesity among racial and ethnic populations are for African Americans and Latinos.
2. Ogden C, Carroll M and Flegal K. "High Body Mass Index for Age Among U.S. Children and Adolescents, 2003-2006." *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 299(20):2401-2405, May 2008.
3. Ibid
4. Ibid
5. U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Overweight and Obesity, Health Consequences. Available at <http://cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/obesity/childhood/consequences.htm>.
6. Venkat Narayan K, Boyle J, Thompson T, et al. "Lifetime Risk for Diabetes Mellitus in the United States." *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 290(14):1884-1890, October 2003.
7. Powell L, Slater S, Mirtcheva D, et al. "Food Store Availability and Neighborhood Characteristics in the United States." *Preventative Medicine*, 44(3):189-195, March 2007.
8. Delva J, O'Malley P and Johnston L. "Availability of More-Healthy and Less-Healthy Food Choices in American Schools: A National Study of Grade, Racial/Ethnic, and Socioeconomic Differences." *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 33(4S):S226-S239, October 2007.
9. Roberts D, Foehr U and Rideout V. *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-olds*. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005. Available at <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/7251.cfm>.
10. Delva J, Johnston L and O'Malley P. "The Epidemiology of Overweight and Related Lifestyle Behaviors: Racial/Ethnic and Socioeconomic Status Differences Among American Youth." *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 33(4S):S178-S186, October 2007.
11. Wiecha J, Peterson K, Ludwig D, et al. "When Children Eat What They Watch: Impact of Television Viewing on Dietary Intake in Youth." *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, 160(4):436-442, April 2006.
12. "Hispanic Fact Pack 2008 Edition: Annual Guide to Hispanic Marketing and Media." *Advertising Age*, 2008. Available at <http://adage.com/images/random/datacenter/2008/hisfactpack08.pdf>.
13. Duke J, Huhman M and Heitzler C. "Physical Activity Levels Among Children Aged 9-13 Years - United States, 2002." *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 52(33):785-788, August 2003.
14. Ibid
15. Popkin B and Udry J. "Adolescent Obesity Increases Significantly in Second and Third Generation U.S. Immigrants: The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health." *The Journal of Nutrition*, 128(4):701-706, April 1998.
16. Rodriguez M, Kane M, Alonzo-Diaz L, et al. *Health Policy Fact Sheet: One Out of Three Latino Adolescents Overweight or At Risk*. Los Angeles, UCLA Center for Health Policy Research and the Latino Coalition for a Healthy California, 2005. Available at <http://healthpolicy.ucla.edu/pubs/publication.asp?pubID=139>.
17. Unger J, Reynolds K, Shakib S, et al. "Acculturation, Physical Activity, and Fast-Food Consumption Among Asian-American and Hispanic Adolescents." *Journal of Community Health*, 29(6):467-481, December 2004.