



**Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies  
Health Policy Institute**

**Research and Policy Analysis to Address Childhood Obesity**

Childhood obesity is now recognized as one of America's most serious public health threats. Being overweight during childhood and adolescence increases one's risk later in life of having high cholesterol, hypertension, heart disease, respiratory ailments, diabetes and other major ailments.

On top of this, obesity disproportionately affects children of color, who, as a group, already contend with a number of other disparities – such as not having health insurance or a regular doctor – that limit opportunities to enjoy good health. African American and Mexican American children and adolescents are more likely to be overweight, at 21 percent and 23 percent respectively, than non-Hispanic white adolescents (14 percent). A national survey of Native American children 5-18 years old found that 39 percent were overweight or at risk for becoming overweight. And the problem starts early: a study of four year-olds found that more than 30 percent of those who are Native American and more than 20 percent of those who are African American and Hispanic were obese, compared to just 16 percent of white and 12 percent of Asian American four-year-olds.

The Health Policy Institute (HPI) of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies is engaged in a program of research and policy analysis to address racial and ethnic disparities in childhood obesity. Our work focuses on identifying the root causes of these disparities, which are often linked to differences in neighborhood conditions that contribute directly to obesity – beginning at an early age – by shaping health behaviors such as diet and physical activity.

For example, many low-income neighborhoods lack access to a full-service supermarket. These so-called "food deserts" are often dominated by liquor, fast food, and convenience stores, where fresh produce is not only scarce but comparatively expensive and poor quality. Residents of these areas are more likely to rely on public transportation, further compounding the problem of access to better supermarkets that are further away. Many low-income communities also lack access to safe parks and recreational facilities that promote active lifestyles.

**PLACE MATTERS**

Through HPI's PLACE MATTERS initiative, we help community leaders identify and address social and economic conditions in neighborhoods that shape health and health inequities. PLACE MATTERS teams, located in 24 communities around the country, are comprised of leaders in public health, as well as business, civic, and faith groups.

Several PLACE MATTERS teams are focused on building support for community-based initiatives to improve children's health. The most successful of these promote strategies to address the wider causal factors of poor health outcomes. Some of the teams, for example, are focused on encouraging local governments to take steps to increase access to healthy food choices. They are asking school districts to help by providing fruits and vegetables at lunch and as snacks at low or no-cost to

students, and by limiting access to high-calorie, nutrient-poor, highly-processed foods. They are asking local governments to take steps to reduce marketing of nutrient-poor foods and beverages to children in grocery stores and restaurants, and to encourage these businesses to offer healthier food choices by creating incentives for major grocery chains and other commercial food vendors to set up stores in areas with few such resources. In addition, the teams look for strategies that promote safe neighborhoods and communities and encourage physical activity in daily life.

### **Community Health Equity Reports**

This year, the Joint Center will release three Community Health Equity Reports focusing on childhood obesity and its relationship to social determinants of health, such as the quality of the retail food environment and the availability of safe recreational facilities. Funded by the National Institutes of Health, these reports will document the distribution of health risks and resources – such as the availability of grocery stores relative to fast-food and carryout restaurants – in PLACE MATTERS communities, and will identify evidence-based policy strategies to address them. For example, the Cook County (IL) report will assess the relationship between the geographic availability of supermarkets and farmers’ markets and residents’ self-reported fruit and vegetable intake. The South Delta (MS) report will analyze the relationship between the availability of parks and recreational facilities and local children’s body-mass index. All reports will feature secondary analysis of U.S. Census and other data, as well as mapping and spatial analysis to document how social and economic conditions in communities shape children’s bodyweight and health.

### **Information Dissemination and Education**

The Joint Center helps PLACE MATTERS community leaders to actively disseminate report findings and share best practices, using a combination of traditional educational outreach (e.g., community forums) and web-based social networking and data-sharing platforms. For example, we are currently assisting the PLACE MATTERS teams in creating web-based maps to show the distribution of health risks and resources through an innovative interactive website, [www.Map4change.org](http://www.Map4change.org), that allows users to better understand the structural causes of health inequities. Map4change illustrates how communities of color face greater health risks than majority white communities through displays of demographic data, such as the concentration of people of color in high poverty communities, as well as multimedia content that allows viewers to understand conditions on the ground (e.g., through video and pictures). In addition, the site features a blog, discussion forum, and a letter-writing tool to help users share information with elected officials.

The Joint Center is also developing a catalogue of evidence-based solutions designed to improve the retail food environment. Drawing upon research literature and evaluation of local and state policies, we will highlight effective practices – such as the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania’s Fresh Food Financing Initiative – that encourage supermarkets, farmer’s markets and other sources of nutritious foods to locate in underserved communities. Such efforts commonly use a combination of tax and financing incentives, along with local zoning and land use policies, to stimulate better nutritional options in so-called “food deserts.”