

# Obesity among state's low-income teens nearly triple that of more affluent peers

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California's low-income teenagers have a lot in common: Sugary soda. Fast-food restaurants. Too much television. Not enough exercise. The result: Low-income teenagers are almost three times more likely to be obese than teens from more affluent households, according to new research from the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

In California, 21 percent of teenagers living in low-income families are obese, according to the new policy brief, "Low-Income Adolescents Face More Barriers to Healthy Weight." Low-income is defined as having income of less than \$19,971 for a family of four or \$12,755 for a family of two, according to federal poverty guidelines. In contrast, only 8 percent of teenagers living in families making more than \$59,913 (family of four) or \$38,265 (family of two) are obese.

California is home to about 480,000 obese adolescents from all income levels. But the high rate of obesity among low-income teens suggests that barriers to healthy behaviors, healthy foods and physical activity not only continue to exist but have grown even larger. Those barriers include high numbers of neighborhood fast-food restaurants and low numbers of parks and other opportunities for physical activity.

"Our neighborhoods are literally making us fat," said Susan H. Babey, one of the policy brief's authors. "We need better strategies and more thoughtful urban planning if we are going to make our towns and cities livable, not just places where we live."

Among other recommendations to combat teen obesity, the policy brief's authors urge city planners to consider zoning ordinances to regulate the number of fast-food restaurants while providing incentives to attract grocery stores and other outlets that stock fresh fruits and vegetables. The Los Angeles City Council recently used data from the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research to support such a moratorium on new fast-food restaurants in South Los Angeles.

The policy brief's authors also called for greater opportunities for physical activity and education, as well as campaigns to promote family dinners and discourage excessive television viewing.

"The disparity in teen obesity prevalence among low-income and more affluent communities should serve as a wake-up call to policymakers," said Dr. Robert K. Ross, president and chief executive officer of The California Endowment, which funded the policy brief. "Where we live plays a critical role in shaping our health status. Elected officials can help improve the environmental factors that contribute to the poor health of Californians through local ordinances and statewide policy."

Among the findings of the policy brief:

- More sugary soda: 67 to 71 percent of low-income teens reported having at least one glass or can of soda on the previous day, compared with 55 percent of more affluent teens.
- More fast food: 46 to 49 percent of low-income teens reported eating fast food on the previous day, compared with 37 percent of more affluent teens.
- Fewer family meals: Up to 11 percent of low-income teens reported that they had never eaten dinner with a parent or guardian during the previous week. The rate is twice that of more affluent teens.
- Fewer opportunities for organized sports: 36 to 37 percent of low-income teens were on a school sports team in the previous year, compared with 49 percent of more affluent teens.

- Less physical activity: Nearly one in five, or 18 percent, of low-income teens did not get at least 60 minutes of physical activity in a week — the minimum amount of physical activity recommended by the 2005 federal Dietary Guidelines for Americans.
- More television: 56 percent of low-income teens watch more than two hours of television per day, compared with 46 percent of more affluent teens.

Source: University of California - Los Angeles

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