

# El Paso County serves as a model for obesity prevention

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Researchers at the Michael & Susan Dell Center for Advancement of Healthy Living at The University of Texas School of Public Health Austin Regional Campus found the obesity prevention efforts in the El Paso region were the most effective in Texas in decreasing the prevalence of childhood obesity.

Deanna Hoelscher, Ph.D., director of the Michael & Susan Dell Center for Healthy Living, examined regional changes of child obesity from 2000-2002 to 2004-2005, after the implementation of several statewide policies and programs in Texas. The study found a 13 percent decrease in the prevalence of obesity among El Paso 4th graders.

"Data from the El Paso region show us that obesity prevention efforts, when implemented on a broad scale, can be successful," said Hoelscher, professor at the UT School of Public Health. This is one of the first reports of a population-wide decrease in child obesity prevalence levels in 4th grade children in the El Paso region of Texas. Research results from the SPAN (Schools Physical Activity and Nutrition) study are published in the October issue of *Obesity*.

The recent national obesity rates have shown no significant changes in child obesity during the last few years, with 16.3 percent of 2-19 year old children in the United States currently classified as obese, according to the latest National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey results. Although a decrease in child obesity was found in smaller controlled studies, according to Hoelscher, the SPAN study is the first to document

a regional decrease in the prevalence of child obesity due to implementation of community and school health programs in a 'natural' experiment.

"The results from the SPAN study show the first positive effects of a combined multi-level focus on state policies and local efforts to implement evidence-based community and school programs and media messages reinforcing the health messages in a large regional population," said Hoelscher. SPAN data illustrates the importance of measuring the prevalence of child obesity at a local level, rather than relying on national or state estimates to monitor trends and document successful programs and policies, she added.

During the past decade the Paso del Norte Health Foundation, has provided extensive funding for several obesity prevention initiatives, including the CATCH (Coordinated Approach To Childhood Health) El Paso program, an evidence-based school health program for elementary and middle school students; Walk El Paso, which encourages residents to adopt walking as a fun and safe form of exercise; and Qué Sabrosa Vida, a UT School of Public Health program that promotes healthy nutrition and physical activity while keeping the traditions of the Mexican-American diet and foods. Media advertisements were also used to emphasize nutrition and physical activity in the community during this time period.

"The Foundation's approach to fighting childhood obesity is to engage and unite community partners at all levels for improved quality of life through initiatives that promote healthy weight and a strong body," said Enrique Mata, senior program officer of the Paso del Norte Health Foundation. "The efforts we have made in promoting health policies and increasing healthy lifestyles will help develop a better quality of life for future generations in the Greater El Paso region."

Results from the SPAN study confirm the findings from previous research from another investigative team, which found that implementation of CATCH reduced the prevalence of obesity in children in elementary. "The programs and policies implemented in Texas helped to stabilize the prevalence of obesity among all grade levels in all regions. However, the rate of child obesity in all counties is greater than the targeted national health goal of 5 percent prevalence," said Hoelscher.

Hoelscher believes statewide mandates for coordinated school health programs, the Texas Public School Nutrition Policy, school health advisory councils and required daily physical education in elementary schools may slow the rise in childhood obesity in Texas when combined with community programs and media outreach that emphasize consistent messages. However, resources are necessary for the implementation and sustainability of these effective programs in communities, Hoelscher said. "Support and funding for these mandates and programs is needed at both the state and local levels to see a significant decrease in the childhood obesity prevalence in Texas," said Hoelscher, "The future health of our children and our society depends on us implementing effective [obesity](#) prevention programs that target the entire community."

Source: University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston ([news](#) : [web](#))

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