

California making headway in battle against childhood obesity but successes are uneven

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A new study released today offers hope that California may finally be getting a handle on its 30-year battle with childhood obesity, but it also showcases a patchwork of progress that leaves the majority of the state's counties still registering increases in obesity rates among school-age children.

According to the study, "A Patchwork of Progress: Changes in [Overweight and Obesity](#) Among California 5th, 7th and 9th Graders, 2005-2010," prepared by the UCLA Center for [Health Policy Research](#) and the California Center for Public Health Advocacy (CCPHA), the percentage of overweight and [obese children](#) in the state dropped 1.1 percent from 2005 to 2010. However, 38 percent of children are still affected — a rate nearly three times higher than it was 30 years ago, when the obesity epidemic began.

Even more concerning, according to the lead author of the study, UCLA's Susan Babey, Ph.D., is that improvements are not being seen statewide.

"Children's health is still at risk in a significant number of counties," Babey said. "We found that 31 of California's 58 counties experienced an increase in childhood overweight over the five-year period from 2005 to 2010. We hope this county-by-county analysis will help community leaders pinpoint and take action in counties in the greatest danger."

The highest rates in the state were found in Imperial (46.9 percent),

Colusa (45.7 percent), Del Norte (45.2 percent) and Monterey (44.6 percent) counties. Two of those counties, Del Norte and Colusa, also had the dubious distinction of having the highest increases over the last five years (16.2 percent and 13.3 percent, respectively).

Marin County, with 24.9 percent of children overweight or obese, had the lowest level in the state. However, the Marin County rate, historically the lowest in the state, has grown 5.5 percent since 2005.

The study describes both the health and economic repercussions of elevated obesity rates. According to the study, children who are overweight or obese often grow up to be obese adults with increased risk for chronic diseases like diabetes, cardiovascular disease, strokes and some cancers. What's more, the study says, California spends more public and private money on the health consequences of obesity than any other state — more than \$21 billion annually.

In 2004, California began implementing a series of state laws banning sugary drinks and junk food from public school campuses. That, along with other local and statewide policies addressing the availability, marketing and promotion of unhealthy foods and an increased emphasis on healthier food and expanding opportunities for physical activity, may be contributing to the statewide improvements revealed in this study.

"California led the nation in establishing many of the most innovative programs and policies that are improving our children's chances for a healthier life," said the CCPHA's Harold Goldstein, Dr.P.H. "Increased awareness and a growing array of school and community policies and programs are beginning to have an impact. But in light of the huge number of counties where childhood [obesity rates](#) continue to climb, our efforts must continue and even expand, especially in those areas where we now know children are most at risk."

Data for the study was drawn from the California Physical Fitness Test (Fitnessgram), which is administered annually to all California public school students in grades five, seven and nine. Measured height and weight data from the test were used to calculate body mass index (BMI), and BMI was used to determine rates of overweight and [obesity](#), based on the 2000 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention sex-specific BMI-for-age growth charts.

Provided by University of California - Los Angeles

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