

Nearly 40 Percent of Washoe Youths are Overweight

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The Washoe County District Health Department recently published the results of an extensive assessment of childhood overweight and obesity in our community. This important study was conducted in collaboration with the Washoe County School District Student Health Services.

Utilizing the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) formula for calculating an individual's Body Mass Index (BMI is essentially a measure that is a function of one's weight and height, and provides a screening tool to identify potential weight problems), the study's researchers calculated the BMI for each student in a randomly selected sample of elementary, middle-school, and high-school students in Washoe County.

The primary purpose of the study was to estimate the percent of youth in our community who are underweight, healthy weight, overweight, and obese. Local health and school officials were also interested in establishing baseline data on youth obesity and overweight in our community in order to compare local trends with national and regional rates.

The majority of Washoe County children are considered to be at a healthy weight (60.1 percent). However, study results indicated that 19 percent are overweight and another 18.5 percent are obese, and Washoe County youths are overweight or obese in greater rates than the nation.

While the results of this study confirmed what many health officials suspected, documentation of the fact that nearly two of five children in our community are overweight or obese is important for several reasons. Foremost, obese children and teenagers are developing diseases, such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular, formerly only seen in adults.

Additionally, obese and overweight children are more likely to become overweight and obese adults and thus face a lifetime of poorer health – indeed, recent research suggests that the current generation of children could be the first generation to have shorter, less healthy lives than their parents.

In its recent report, "F as in Fat: How Obesity Policies are Failing America," the Trust for America's Health contends that we have been slow to take action to deal with obesity because it has typically been seen as an issue of personal responsibility. In other words, there is the predominant view that individuals making decisions about what to eat and how active to be should bear the burden and blame for their unhealthy choices.

A public health perspective on obesity acknowledges that individual behavior and personal responsibility are important parts of the equation. However, there many factors beyond any individual's control that have contributed to rising obesity rates in Nevada and the rest of the US. These include the high cost of healthy foods, the location of grocery stores, access to safe places to exercise, and access to and the availability of preventive health care services.

To take one local example, there are a little over 70,000 children in Washoe County between the ages of 5 and 18, yet only five skateboarding parks in the Reno-Sparks (the area's only indoor skate park closed earlier this year). These parks are inaccessible to the vast majority of kids in that they require a willing parent or sibling with a car to drop off and pick them up at the park.

Skateboarding represents a relatively inexpensive form of physical activity – all five outdoor parks are free and equipment costs and maintenance are reasonable – that can be had as long as the weather is good and the pavement is dry.

To be sure, skateboarding comes with its own set of health risks – I've made more than one trip to the ER and have come to know three orthopedic physicians since my oldest son began skateboarding ten years ago.

Nonetheless, my admittedly unscientific observation has been that there are few, if any, overweight skateboarders.

The creation and strategic placement of a few more skate parks in residential areas of Washoe County thus represents a fairly straightforward and inexpensive opportunity to increase physical activity among local youth.

Addressing the obesity epidemic in our community must be a shared responsibility that will require us to collectively move beyond bland admonishments to young couch potatoes to "eat better" and "get more exercise."

As the Trust for America's Health succinctly puts it "we need to find ways to make healthy choices easy choices."

A copy of the Washoe County District Health Department's report on childhood overweight and obesity can be found at www.washoecounty.us/health/cdpp/epinews.html. The Trust for America's Health issue report on obesity can be found at <http://healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2008/>.

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