# Case in point: Obesity in Louisiana



Presented by the Prevention Research Center at Tulane University

#### Defining the health issue:

Obesity is the second leading cause of preventable death in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Obesity can be measured by Body Mass Index (BMI), which uses an individual's weight and height to estimate body fat. Adults are

considered obese if they have a BMI of 30 or greater.<sup>2</sup> For instance, a 5'4" person weighing 175 pounds is considered obese. Children and teens with a BMI equal to or greater than the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile for their age are considered obese.<sup>3</sup> Obesity increases the risk of developing a multitude of health problems from Type 2 diabetes to heart disease, certain cancers (breast, colon and prostate) and high blood pressure among others.<sup>2</sup>

# A problem of enormous magnitude:

- Louisiana has the 5<sup>th</sup> highest rate of adult obesity and the 4<sup>th</sup> highest rate of overweight and obese children in the nation.<sup>4</sup>
- 31.2% of adults in Louisiana are obese, compared with 22% nationwide.<sup>5</sup>
- 20.7% of Louisiana children are obese, compared with 16.4% nationwide.<sup>6</sup>
- Among children and youth, more males are overweight or obese than females, and more African Americans are overweight or obese than White and Hispanic kids.<sup>19</sup>
- 35.6% of New Orleans adults are overweight and 28.8% are obese.<sup>7</sup>

# The economic impact:

- Nationally, the total costs of overweight and obesity are \$139 billion annually.<sup>8</sup> These include direct health care costs (physician visits, medication and nursing home care) and indirect costs (wages lost, future earnings lost by premature death). Indirect costs are almost equal to direct costs.
- Overweight or obese employees' average medical costs are more than 50% higher than normal-weight employees.<sup>9</sup>
- Lost productivity related to obesity among Americans age 17 to 64 is an additional economic burden.







- Cost estimates are \$3.9 billion to \$15.4 billion annually.<sup>10</sup>
- Workdays lost are 39.3 million annually.<sup>10</sup>
- Physician office visits are 62.7 million annually.<sup>10</sup>
- Obese employees are nearly 75% more likely to experience high rates of absenteeism

(seven or more absences during a sixmonth period) than normal weight employees.<sup>11</sup>

### The underlying causes:

• Small choices in calorie consumption over time have a large impact on obesity.

• Drinking one 12-ounce can of soda every day for a year will cause a weight gain of 9 pounds.<sup>12</sup>

• Eating one snack-sized (1.5 ounce) bag of potato chips every day for a year will cause a weight gain of 15 pounds.<sup>12</sup>

• As a nation, we are consuming more calories and doing less physical activity to expend them.

• Only 34% of youth in Louisiana engaged in vigorous physical activity on a daily basis.<sup>13</sup>

• Less than 40% of Louisiana adults met the recommended levels of physical activity.<sup>14</sup>

• The more TV children watch, the more likely they are to be overweight. In Louisiana, 53% of youth spend more than 2 hours a day watching TV.<sup>19</sup>

In New Orleans,

• Only about one in five adults consume five or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day.<sup>15</sup>

- 40% drink soft drinks daily and 31% eat snack foods daily.<sup>16</sup>
- Only 25% walk outdoors for errands, and only 35% walk for pleasure three or more days a week.<sup>16</sup>

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# -The impact of our environment-

- People who live in walkable neighborhoods are less overweight.
  - Obesity rates are higher in counties with more sprawl and lower in communities where commercial and residential areas are mixed.<sup>17,18,19</sup>
  - Each additional hour a person spends in a car is associated with a 6% increase in the risk of obesity.<sup>19</sup>
  - Each additional kilometer a person walks per day is associated with a 4.8% reduction in the risk of obesity.<sup>19</sup>
  - People who live on a highway or streets without sidewalks are more likely to be obese.<sup>20</sup>
- High-calorie snack food is present everywhere, while fresh produce is hard to find in many neighborhoods.
  - 32.7% of elementary schools, 71.3% of middle/junior high schools and 89.4% of high schools have a vending machine, school store, canteen, or snack bar where students can buy snack food.<sup>21</sup>
  - Among schools that sell snack food, 58% of elementary schools, 84% of middle/junior high schools and 94% of high schools sell sodas, sports drinks or fruit drinks.<sup>21</sup>
  - A national study found that lower-income ZIP code areas had 1.3 times the number of fast-food restaurants than higher-income areas.<sup>22</sup>
  - Access to grocery stores is related to a reduced risk for obesity; access to convenience stores is related to an increased risk for obesity.<sup>22</sup>

### -A call to action-

- Make communities more accessible for walking and biking, and increase lighting in neighborhoods with high crime.
- Improve the nutritional quality of foods served in schools and replace calorie-dense foods and drinks in snack shops and vending machines with healthier alternatives or remove them.
- Restrict the location and/or number of new fast-food restaurants.
- Encourage retailers to sell fresh fruits and vegetables and other healthy foods in all neighborhoods.

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