Public Perceptions of Childhood Obesity


Childhood overweight and obesity have reached epidemic levels in the United States. Rates of unhealthy body weight among children and adolescents have tripled since the 1980s to 15%. Media coverage of obesity also has increased, and the public is now highly aware of obesity-related health threats facing adults and children.

RTI International sponsored a survey of over 1,000 U.S. households that included detailed questions about the severity, causes, and public support for specific ways to combat childhood obesity. The people who took the survey considered childhood obesity to be as serious as other major childhood health threats, such as tobacco use and violence, but not as serious as drug abuse. They supported most school-, community-, and media-based strategies that involved offering health information, limiting unhealthy food promotion, and increasing healthy eating and exercise choices, but they were generally opposed to new regulations and tax- or cost-based policies.

This study reveals strong public support for strategies aimed at reducing overweight and obesity among children and adolescents. It also shows specific school, community, and media interventions that the public supports and opposes, and what consequences the public will accept in combating childhood obesity. These findings can help policymakers and public health professionals design and implement appropriate policies.