



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Childhood Obesity

The focus of this year's President's Message, *Childhood Obesity* is one of the most pressing public health threats facing our nation. Rates of childhood obesity in the United States have quadrupled over the past three decades, and the epidemic is widely recognized as a public health crisis.

If current trends continue, today's young people could be the first generation in American history to live sicker and die younger than their parents' generation. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) is dedicated to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic by improving the environments in which children live, learn and play, and by supporting policy changes that promote healthier eating and increased physical activity. We place special emphasis on reaching African-American, Hispanic, Native American and Asian/Pacific Islander children living in low-income communities, who are at greatest risk for obesity and its related health threats.

Two years ago, Congress passed the Child Nutrition and WIC Reauthorization Act, which required nearly all schools to develop wellness policies by the start of the 2006–2007 academic year. Because schools hold enormous potential to improve children's eating and activity patterns, the Foundation has focused on encouraging schools to include the most promising obesity-prevention practices in their wellness policies.

To provide guidance to schools, RWJF helped initiate and fund the Alliance for a Healthier Generation's Healthy Schools Program, which developed and promoted policy recommendations for nutrition, physical activity and staff wellness. Two hundred thirty-one schools serving diverse populations in 13 states have been recruited as pilot sites for the Healthy Schools Program. Those schools are receiving hands-on support to implement their wellness policies, and they are helping us learn what it will take to expand the program nationwide. The Alliance has created the Healthy Schools Builder, an online tool that is available to schools throughout the country to help them learn about wellness policies and customize their own programs. All schools that implement the Healthy Schools recommendations will receive national recognition and help in making their schools even healthier.

Because evaluation is a fundamental building block of our policy efforts, RWJF is supporting two phases of evaluation for the Healthy Schools Program. The first will explore what changes were made in schools; the second will examine what effect those changes had on kids' nutrition, physical activity and—ultimately—body mass index (BMI). The Healthy Schools



Program will continually refine its recommendations based on these findings and will work to spread the most effective policies and practices to schools nationwide.

We have invested in other major initiatives to help us learn how to prevent childhood obesity and to identify the key policy levers for doing so. RWJF's *Bridging the Gap: Research Informing Practice and Policy for Healthy Youth Behavior* initiative is combining information about policies with school survey data to generate a complete understanding of how policies related to physical activity, nutrition and BMI screening are being implemented on the ground, as well as the impact of those policies on student behavior. The study will examine state and school district policies, school practices and community characteristics, to identify and drive effective obesity-prevention practices. We also are working with the National Cancer Institute to measure the adequacy of school-based food, physical activity and BMI policies based on their likelihood of affecting student behavior and BMI.

Through RWJF's *Healthy Eating Research: Building Evidence to Prevent Childhood Obesity* program, we support evaluations of statewide nutrition-related wellness policy initiatives in California, Connecticut, Maine, North Carolina, Pennsylvania and Washington. These projects place special emphasis on assessing which policies are most effective in improving nutrition for children at greatest risk for obesity.

In Arkansas we are funding an independent evaluation of efforts to implement a state law passed in 2003 that mandated a comprehensive approach to addressing childhood obesity in all public schools. This evaluation project and a separate RWJF-funded initiative to analyze BMI data for all Arkansas public school students should point the way to which approaches being tried in Arkansas schools are most successful. The BMI initiative already has demonstrated that, in just three years, Arkansas has halted the progression of the epidemic in the state.

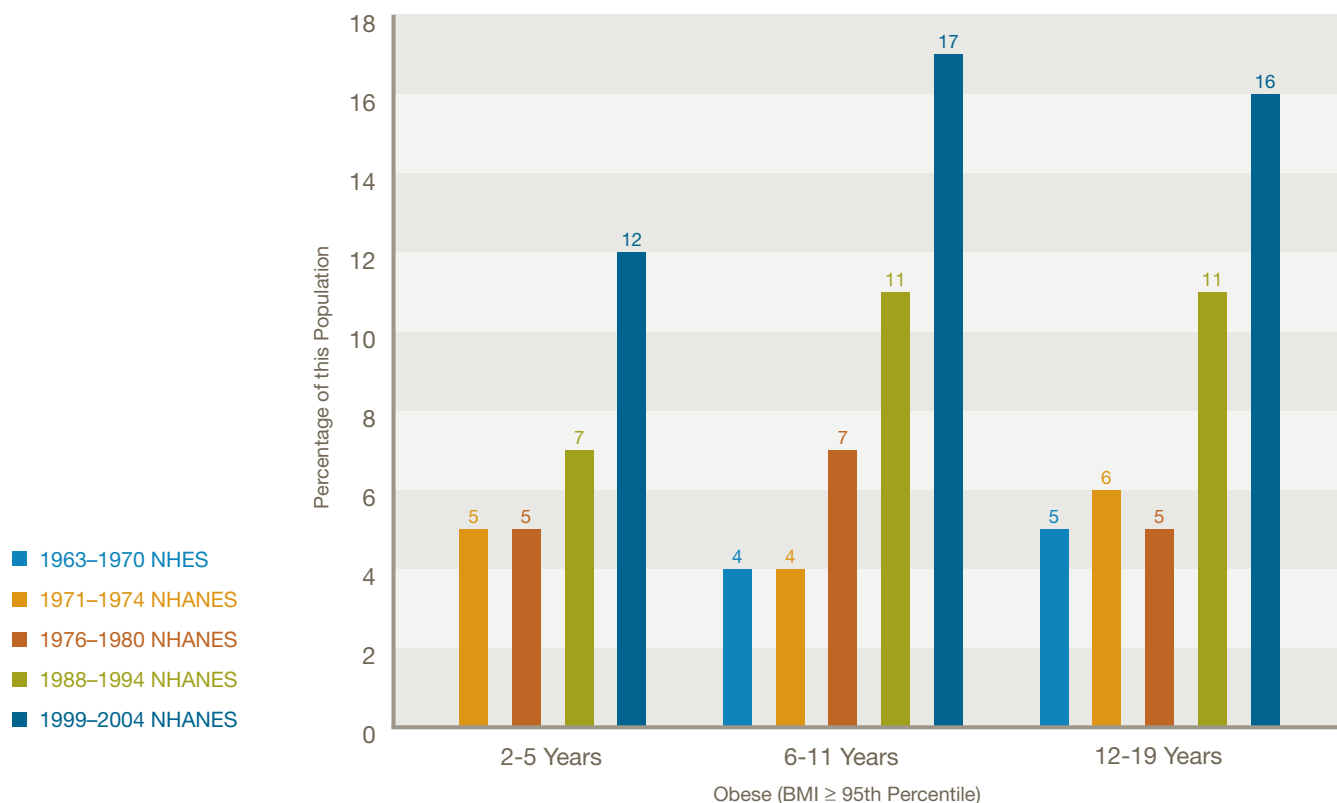
Core to RWJF's mission is a focus on translating research into effective policy and practice to improve health. To that end, RWJF funded an innovative effort by California's Project LEAN and the California School Board Association to develop ways to quickly distribute information about promising wellness policies and to help other states replicate California's highly regarded programs. Partners in the Foundation's *Active Living Leadership* program are supporting the efforts of state and local policy-makers to implement school wellness policies that promote good nutrition and increased physical activity. Among the many efforts of these important partners, the National Conference of State Legislatures produced a legislative brief on school wellness policies for its members, and the American Association of School Administrators and the National League of Cities are teaming up to offer a leadership academy on the topic.



RWJF is poised to communicate the results of these school-based efforts to policy-makers, educators, parents and public health leaders throughout the nation. In 2007 the Foundation will continue its focus on school-based childhood obesity prevention programs and will monitor the implementation and impact of new school wellness policies. Beyond the school grounds, we will work to promote policy and environmental changes at the state and local level that encourage healthy eating and physical activity for all children and families, but especially those at greatest risk for obesity and related harms.

For additional information about our initiatives and objectives, visit www.rwjf.org/obesity, and the 2006 President's Message.

Obesity Prevalence Among U.S. Children and Adolescents by Age and Time Frame, 1963–2004



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey for 2003 and 2004.

NOTE: NHES=National Health Examination Survey. NHANES=National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey. Data for 1963 to 1965 are for children ages 6 to 11 years; data for 1966 to 1970 are for adolescents 12 to 17 years instead of 12 to 19 years.