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Childhood Obesity Epidemic Can Be Addressed, Reports Brookings, Princeton *Future of Children Journal*

Research-Based Solutions Proposed as 30 percent of U.S. Children are Obese or Overweight

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WASHINGTON, DC, MARCH 14, 2006—The rapidly rising incidence of obesity among American children poses significant public health hazards that can be reduced through concerted strategies, according to research published in the spring issue of *The Future of Children*.

This volume on “Childhood Obesity” was released today by the Brookings Institution and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. The strategies to reduce obesity include preventative public education, parental actions, medical policies, school-based programs, environmental changes, and regulatory policies.

Ten articles by leading scholars review the latest research on the causes and consequences of childhood obesity, and on interventions that may help reduce obesity among U.S. children. They examine why the share of overweight and obese American children has doubled to nearly 30 percent since about 1980, and the share of obese children has tripled to 15 percent. (State rankings, which show that childhood obesity ranges from a low of 21 percent in Utah to a high of 38 percent in Kentucky, are included below).

Although no smoking gun accounts for the sharp rise in childhood obesity during the last 20 years, factors that play some role include increases in TV and computer screen time, the expansion of fast food and unhealthy foods marketed to children, junk food in schools, working parents unable to cook nutritious meals or supervise active play, and a decline in physical activity as schools scale back physical education and as safe places to play and exercise dwindle.

The costs of obesity are not only shorter, less healthy lives, but rapidly rising economic costs of treatment, and reduced productivity and earnings in adulthood. Articles also address obesity-related medical problems such as cardiovascular diseases, type 2 diabetes, asthma, orthopedic complications, and sleep disorders and how physicians are trained to treat obesity. The greater risks faced by minority and low-income children, and the roles of schools, parents, and public policy also are addressed.

“Prevention of obesity in childhood must be the centerpiece of efforts to reduce health and economic consequences for all Americans,” according to issue editors, Princeton Professor Christina Paxson, director of the Wilson School’s Center for Health and Wellbeing, and Elisabeth Donahue, lecturer at the Wilson School. As a societal problem, obesity may be most effectively prevented by involving children and parents, schools, medical schools and physicians, and government in taking a variety of actions. These could include:

- Schools limiting sales of non-nutritious foods, increasing physical education, and implementing obesity screening and referring obese students for needed treatment;
- The medical community ensuring that pediatricians are better trained to prevent and manage obesity;
- Government providing consumers with better information to make healthy food choices;
- Government regulating advertising to children of unhealthy foods;
- Communities enacting zoning and land-use policies that facilitate safe places for play and exercise; and
- Parents helping their children develop healthful eating and physical activity habits.

“There has been a considerable increase in legislation introduced in state houses across the country,” say C. Tracy Orleans and Jeane Ann Grisso of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, who are also co-editors of the volume. “State legislators continue to focus their efforts on encouraging and/or enhancing the nutrition and physical education efforts of state public school systems in efforts to curb the rising prevalence of overweight and obese children.”

The journal’s editorial board includes Paxson; Isabel Sawhill and Ron Haskins, co-directors of the Brookings Center on Children and Families; Princeton Professor Sara McLanahan, director of the Wilson School’s Center for Research on Child Wellbeing, and Princeton Professor Cecilia Rouse, director of the university’s Education Research Section.

The Future of Children, a twice-yearly journal, also organizes briefings in Washington for Congress, the press, and the public, and conferences in Princeton and Washington for practitioners and state and local policymakers. A public briefing on childhood obesity will be held at the Brookings Institution on March 14, 2006. Future issues will focus on opportunity in America and teacher quality. For more information, please visit the project website at www.futureofchildren.org.

The Future of Children

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State Rankings of Overweight and Obese Children, Ages 10-17

RANK	State	Percentage
	United States	31
1	Utah	21
2	Colorado	22
3	Wyoming	23
4	Minnesota	24
5	Washington	25
6	Idaho	26
6	Iowa	26
6	Nebraska	26
6	Oregon	26
6	South Dakota	26
6	Vermont	26
12	Connecticut	27
12	Hawaii	27
12	Montana	27
12	Nevada	27
12	New Hampshire	27
12	North Dakota	27
18	Rhode Island	27
19	Oklahoma	28
20	Massachusetts	29
20	Michigan	29
20	New Mexico	29
20	Pennsylvania	29
20	Wisconsin	29
25	Arizona	30
25	California	30
25	Kansas	30
25	Maine	30
25	Maryland	30
25	Ohio	30
25	Virginia	30
32	Alaska	31
32	Illinois	31
32	Missouri	31
32	New York	31
36	Florida	32
36	Georgia	32
36	New Jersey	32
36	Texas	32
40	Arkansas	33
40	Indiana	33
42	North Carolina	34
43	Alabama	35
43	Delaware	35
43	Tennessee	35
46	Louisiana	36
46	South Carolina	36
46	West Virginia	36
49	Mississippi	37
50	Kentucky	38
Not ranked	District of Columbia	40