Children's Hospital of Philadelphia
PolicyLab

How Have Rates of Childhood Obesity Changed Amid COVID-19 in 200 Words

Population Health Sciences

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Strategies to protect families from COVID-19, like “shelter-at-home” recommendations, made it difficult for youth to engage in physical education and physical activity. The pandemic also disrupted family routines and with more time at home, increased access to unhealthy snacks.

My colleagues and I wanted to explore this issue further, so we looked at rates of obesity for patients visiting Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia’s Care Network. We measured body mass index (BMI) for patients aged 2-17 years monthly from January 2019 to December 2020, and compared them to obesity rates prior to the pandemic.

What we found is concerning. Average obesity prevalence increased from 13.7% to 15.4%, and was particularly pronounced among patients aged 5-9 years and Hispanic, non-Hispanic Black, publicly insured and lower-income youth. While a 2% increase may seem small, this translates to an additional 6,000 children in our Care Network, or an additional 1.5 million children nationally, who are now obese. Additionally, our study suggests that during the pandemic, preexisting disparities in obesity significantly widened.

Entering pandemic recovery, there are steps we can take to address these trends. Pediatricians can work with caregivers to recommend strategies tailored to families, such as virtual activities that promote physical activity, or connect them to nutritious meals offered through community settings. As we look ahead, it will also be essential to ensure children can safely return to school where they have more opportunities to engage in physical education, have access to healthy meals and more.

While these short-term strategies are important, our findings also uncover an urgent need for larger policy changes to support children's health now and in the future.

This post is part of our "____ in 200 Words" series. In this series, we tackle issues related to children's health policy and explain and connect you to resources to help understand them further, all in 200 words. If you have any suggestions for a topic in this series, please send a note to PolicyLab's Strategic Operations & Communications Director ***Lauren Walens****.*

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