

What Do Mississippians Think About Childhood Obesity?

January 2007

■ Purpose

Understanding the public perception of childhood obesity in Mississippi is important for formulating new health policies related to obesity and selecting the best interventions and strategies for curbing the alarming rise in childhood obesity in the state. This document highlights results from the 2006 Mississippi Public Perception Childhood Obesity Survey conducted by a multidisciplinary research team from the College of Health at The University of Southern Mississippi in October 2006.

This study surveyed a representative sample of adults in Mississippi in order to determine current attitudes about childhood obesity and assess support for an array of child and adolescent prevention initiatives. This study also compared Mississippi results to a recent national survey funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health. The complete report on the survey including detailed analysis of the data can be found at the Center's web site: www.mshealthpolicy.com.

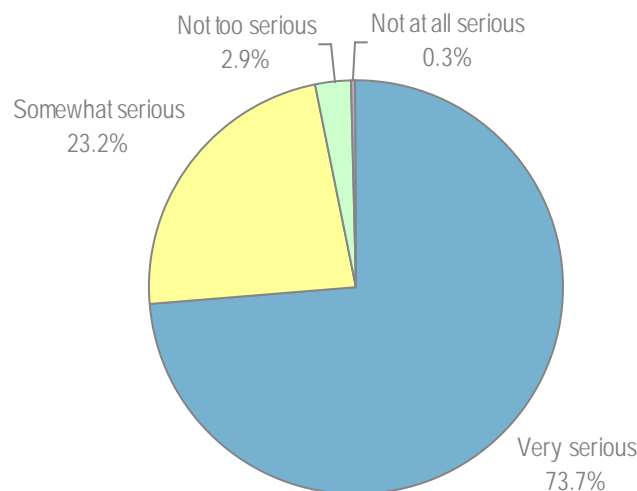
■ Significance

- Childhood obesity is of vital importance to the State of Mississippi, which has the highest rates of child obesity in the United States.
- The prevalence of child obesity in Mississippi is well documented; data show Mississippi children to be more overweight than ever rising national child obesity rates.
- The health consequences of child obesity include higher risks of developing type II diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, cancer, asthma, and orthopedic problems.
- There are risks of developing potentially life-threatening psychological problems as well, such as depression, eating disorders, discrimination and stigmatization, negative self image, and passivity and withdrawal from peers.

■ Public Perception

About 95 percent of Mississippi adults surveyed consider childhood obesity to be a serious national problem.

Figure 1: Mississippians' Views Regarding the Problem of Childhood Obesity



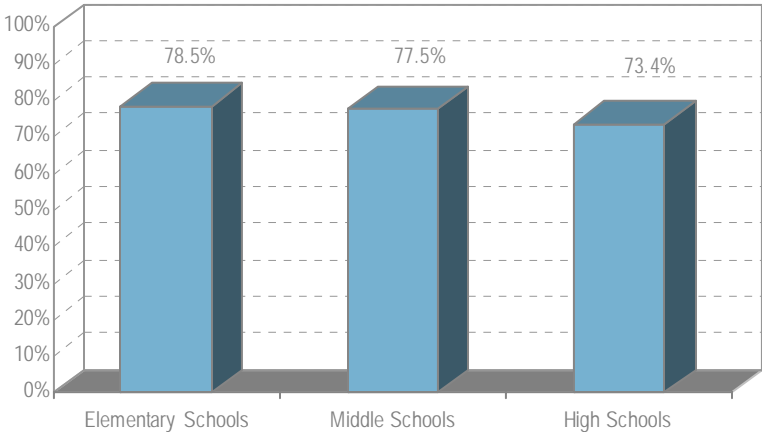
Mississippians were almost evenly divided on whether reducing childhood obesity was a personal issue (46.7%) that children and their families should deal with on their own, or a community issue (45.0%) that needs to be addressed by the entire community, including schools and community groups. This one question had the highest number of “No Opinion” responses in the entire survey (8.3%). About 56 percent of Mississippians thought that government should play a significant role in reducing obesity, while about 36.6 percent opposed this proposal. The study also revealed some variations in opinions by race, gender, age, education and BMI level. The only statistical differences were between women and men and between older and younger age groups in their opinion of child obesity as a very serious problem.

Figure 2: Perception of Child Obesity as a Serious Problem by Race, Gender, Age, Education, & BMI

| Category | Very Serious | Somewhat Serious | Combined |
|---|--------------|------------------|----------|
| African Americans | 76.4% | 17.8% | 94.2% |
| Caucasians | 70.0% | 25.5% | 95.5% |
| Women | 76.0% | 20.7% | 96.7% |
| Men | 68.2% | 24.7% | 92.9% |
| 55 Years of Age or Older | 79.6% | 14.4% | 94.0% |
| Younger than 55 | 68.2% | 26.0% | 94.2% |
| Four Years of College or Higher Education | 72.2% | 25.3% | 97.5% |
| Less than Four Years of College Education | 71.9% | 21.9% | 93.8% |
| Obese and Overweight Mississippians | 74.6% | 20.8% | 95.4% |
| Normal Weight Mississippians | 68.2% | 27.4% | 95.6% |

Mississippi adults favored passing a law to convert the contents of vending machines from high-sugar, high fat food to healthy snacks and beverages in elementary, middle, and high schools at rates of 78.5%, 77.5%, and 73.4% respectively.

Figure 3: Percent of Positive Responses to the Question “Should there be a law limiting vending machines in schools?”



Respondents were asked whether they would favor or oppose a variety of laws to fight obesity in children. More than half of the respondents would favor nine of the eleven initiatives. There were seven school initiatives and four government initiatives proposed.

Figure 4: Support for Childhood Obesity School Initiatives

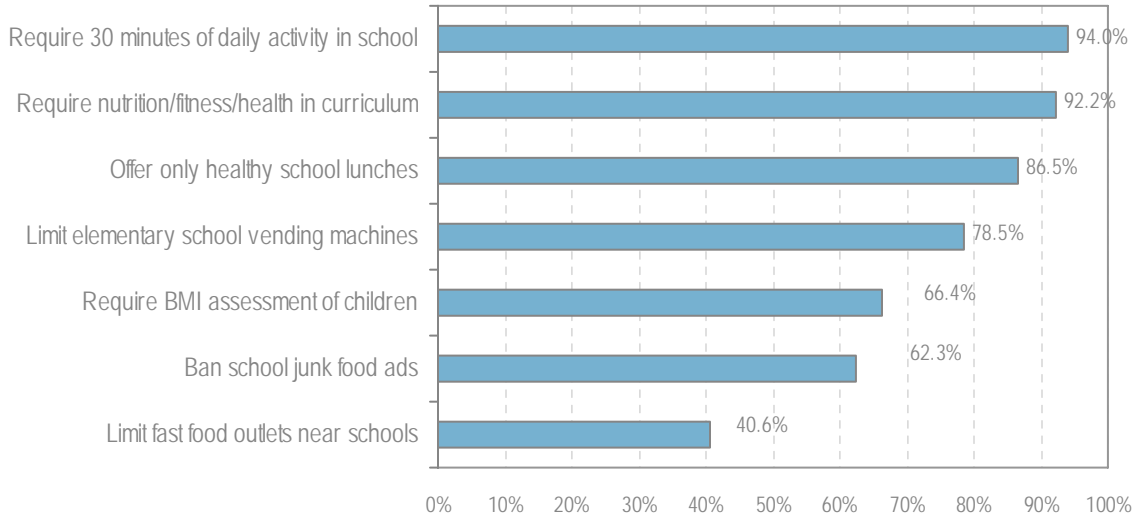
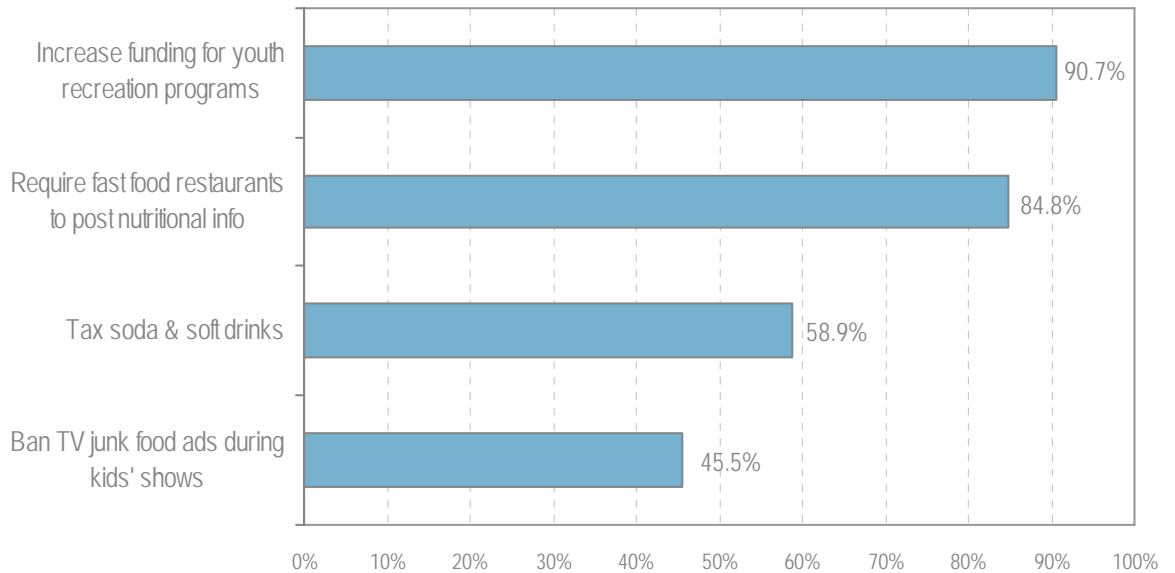


Figure 5: Support for Childhood Obesity Government Initiatives



Mississippi Compared with the Nation

Mississippians' responses on the survey questions agreed in direction with many of the responses from the national survey, although some opinions differed in strength of belief from those in the national survey. Mississippians tended to respond more favorably towards many of the initiatives presented. For example, Mississippians were more favorable to the following:

- To the government playing a significant role in reducing child obesity
- To laws limiting vending machines in elementary, middle, and high schools
- To a law requiring BMI assessments for children in schools
- To a law taxing soft drinks to use the money to fight child obesity
- To a law requiring fast food restaurants to post nutritional information

Figure 6: Support for Childhood Obesity School Initiatives – Mississippi Compared to the Nation

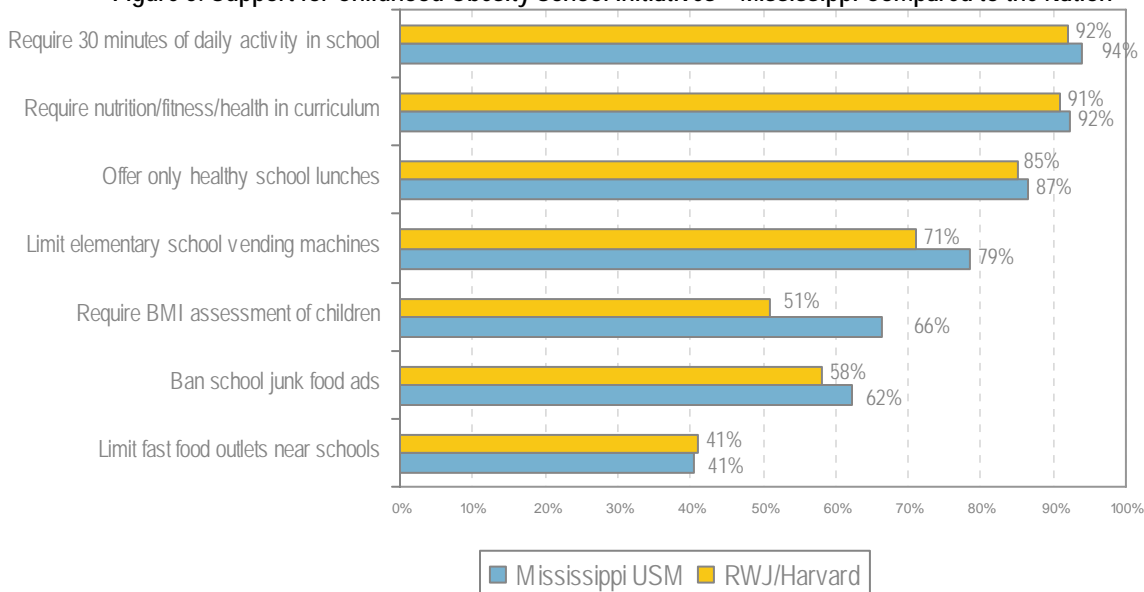
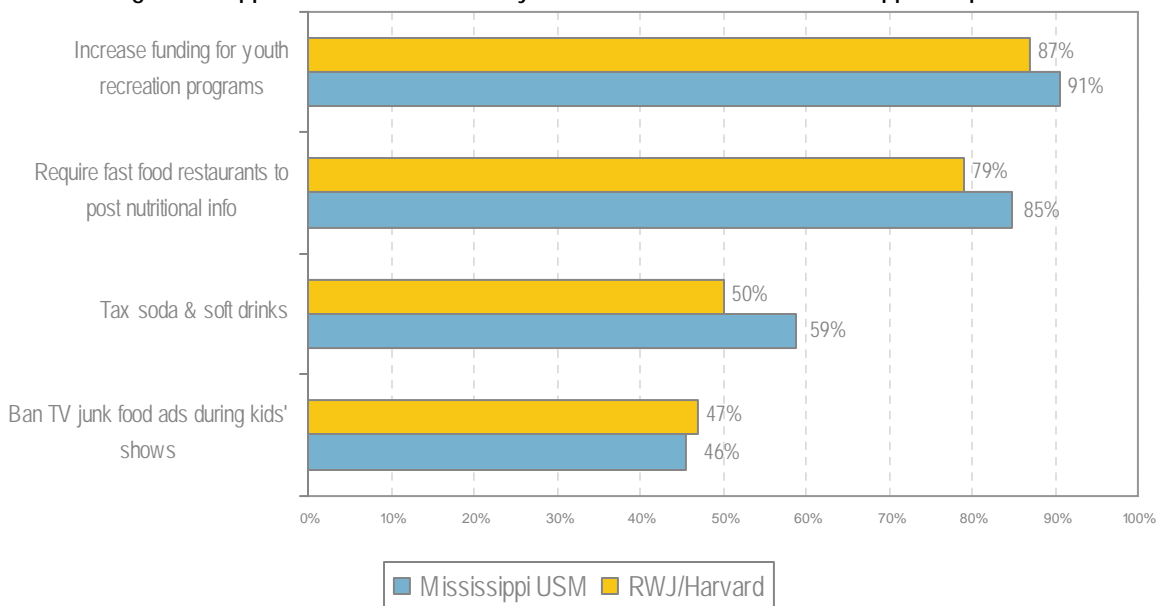


Figure 7: Support for Childhood Obesity Government Initiatives – Mississippi Compared to the Nation



Policy Implications

Mississippians clearly recognize the seriousness of the state’s high rate of childhood obesity and support an array of public policies to address the problem. At least one state, Arkansas, has demonstrated that aggressive, comprehensive action can halt the rise in child obesity rates. As policymakers in the legislative and administrative branches of Mississippi government consider implementing policies and programs designed to combat obesity in children, they should find a broad base of support from the general public for these efforts.

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