

UConn report finds one-third of Hartford's preschoolers overweight or obese

November 29 2012, by Carolyn Pennington

(Medical Xpress)—A study conducted by University of Connecticut researchers finds more than one-third of Hartford preschoolers are overweight or obese with rates far above the national average for children of the same age. The report's findings were released during a news conference at Hartford City Hall today.

Researchers with the [Center for Public Health and Health Policy](#) (CPHHP) at UConn recorded the height and weight of 1,120 Hartford preschoolers and found that 20 percent were obese and 17 percent were overweight.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines show that 10 percent of preschool [children](#) nationally are overweight and 5 percent are obese.

"The results are alarming and we as a city must address this issue directly if we want to ensure a healthy, productive future for all residents in Hartford," Mayor Pedro Segarra said in a statement.

The report measured the weight status of children attending center-based preschool programs in Hartford. Seventy-three percent of three-year-old children attend such centers, compared to the national average of 43 percent.

The Department of Families, Youth, and Recreation realized this offered Hartford a unique opportunity to develop system-wide interventions that

could significantly reduce the prevalence of obesity in its children. To better evaluate the need, the department contracted CPHHP to provide baseline data on child weight status in city programs.

All 35 centers fully cooperated with the surveillance project resulting in a usable study sample of 1,120 Hartford preschoolers. The ethnicity of children in the centers closely paralleled that of the demographics in the city with 54 percent reported as African-American/black, and 37 percent as Latino.

Boys were just as likely to be overweight or obese as girls, but children with a reported ethnicity of Latino were significantly more likely to be overweight or obese than children listed as African-American. Children, ages four and five, were more likely to be overweight or obese than younger enrollees. At all centers except one, over 30 percent of the children were overweight or obese.

"Many children enter preschool programs already programmed for obesity," says Ann Ferris, director of UConn's Center for Public Health and Health Policy. "Children should not grow fatter in this age group. This is especially the case because during this stage of growth and development when incremental changes in height are greater than those of weight, resulting in longer legs and arms and increased trunk length, obesity prevalence should decrease. The data shows the opposite occurring among preschoolers in Hartford."

The report noted that as a greater percentage of the preschool population becomes obese, both parents and teachers lose perspective on what is a healthy weight for a child. Earlier studies in Hartford found that parents of preschool children do not see obesity as an issue, especially when they compare the weight of their children with playmates who also have unhealthy weights. These unhealthy weights are seen as "normal."

Ferris says although the problem seems insurmountable, the solutions are feasible. For [preschool children](#), the average change needed from current energy intake may be less than 35 Kcal/day. This equates to the reduction of about 2 oz. of apple juice or an increase of less than 15 minutes of activity. Creating these changes falls within the purview of a center-based program.

"However, these programs support children during one critical, but limited, phase in the children's lives," explains Ferris. "To have long lasting impact, supportive programming for home, health care, early childcare, and other school, faith, and community environments that provide opportunities for healthful living must bookmark their work."

Provided by University of Connecticut

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