

Obesity Facts Residents Living in Public Housing

While obesity rates are alarming throughout the United States, the prevalence of this serious health condition among residents of public housing exceeds that of the general population. Contributing factors to the high incidence of obesity among residents of public housing include lack of convenient places to get healthy meals, unsafe neighborhoods for outdoor activities, few supermarkets at which to buy healthy foods, and poor facilities for exercise. These factors amplify poor lifestyle choices for this demographically at-risk population.

General Information

- Obesity has become a serious health problem in the last 20 years. In 1990, no states had an obesity prevalence rate of over 15%. By 2007, only a single state, Colorado, had a prevalence rate of less than 20%.¹
- The median percentage of obese adults for all 50 States, Washington, D.C. and US Territories now stands at 26.3%.¹
- Childhood obesity has increased dramatically as well. In 1980 the prevalence rate stood at 7% for 6 to 11 year olds and 5% for 12 to 19 year olds. In 2004 this had increase to 19% and 17%.²
- Obesity is a dangerous health condition as it is a major contributor to other health issues such as high blood pressure, osteoarthritis, high cholesterol, type 2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, stroke, gallbladder disease, sleep apnea, respiratory problems and certain cancers.³
- The financial impact of obesity is staggering. In the United States alone, the direct costs (treatment of illness) and indirect costs (lost wages and productivity) is estimated to be \$117 billion.⁴

Obesity in Public Housing

- The demographic composition of residents of public housing makes them a particularly vulnerable population. A 2006 Center for Disease Control (CDC) study indicates that obesity prevalence is higher among lower income individuals, minorities, women and persons with disabilities than among the general population.⁵ While no specific data is yet available for those who reside in public housing, the above demographic groups closely mirror the population composition of residents who reside in public housing. The following statistics are from the CDC report.
 - Individuals with an income of less than 130% of the poverty threshold (\$1,799 per month for a family of three) had an obesity rate of 35%, while the rate for those above this line was 33%.⁵
 - The study indicates that obesity prevalence is significantly higher among African Americans, as compared to Hispanic and White Americans: 45% of African Americans were obese, as opposed to 35% of Hispanic Americans and 32% of White Americans.⁵
 - Obesity rates were higher among women at 34% vs. 32% for men.⁵
 - Persons with disabilities had an obesity rate of 39%, as opposed to 32% for non-disabled individuals.⁵

- In a survey conducted in Boston, MA, 31% of residents of public housing reported ever being diagnosed as obese as compared with 18% of the residents from the general population in Boston.⁶

High Cost of Healthy Foods

- While calorie-dense meals like fast-food are relative cheap, nutrient rich foods remain expensive. A United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) study showed that that inflation adjusted prices for fresh fruits and vegetables rose more than 140% between 1984 and 2002, while prices for sugars and sweets fell by 12%, and soft drinks fell by 30%.⁷
- The USDA also reported an inverse relationship between the cost of a food and its calorie density. Based on a standard of 2000 calories per day, a person would spend \$3.52 daily on a diet consisting of primary calorie-dense foods versus \$36.32 daily on low calorie-density food diet.⁸

Lack of Access to Healthy Foods

- Wealthier neighborhoods had three times the number of grocery stores as poor neighborhoods in a study that looked at access to healthy foods in several US states. Additionally, predominantly African American neighborhoods had only a quarter the number of grocery stores found in predominantly white neighborhoods.⁹
- A San Francisco study clearly demonstrated the frequent disparities in access to supermarkets and healthy foods in affluent and poor communities. Residents in affluent areas could reach three different grocery stores within 10 minutes roundtrip, while those in poor communities spent about an hour roundtrip traveling to the nearest supermarket.⁹
- A study of the neighborhoods surrounding 14 Kansas City public housing communities found that residents have limited access to healthy food stores. Several fast food stores were found within walking distance, but there were few other options for the residents.¹⁰

Lack of Physical Activity/ Perceptions of Danger

- There is little data available concerning physical activity levels of minority and low-income individuals, however available data suggests that physical activity is less common among the elderly, poorly educated, persons of lower socio-economic status, minorities and women than among the general population.¹¹ These groups closely mirror the population composition of residents of public housing.
- A study that compared physical activity data from 452 adults living in 12 public housing communities found that only 21% met moderate physical activity guidelines. However, persons with greater access to more physical activity resources and greater street connectivity, were more likely to be physically active.¹²
- The perception that one's neighborhood is unsafe was found to be a significant barrier to physical activity among residents of public housing communities in Boston. Harvard researchers found that people, and particularly women, who felt unsafe had significantly lower physical activity rates, than those who did not.¹³

Physical Impediments to Activity/Lack of Resources

- Urban sprawl and obesity risk have found to be strongly correlated. In a nationwide study controlled for gender, age, race/ethnicity, income, and education, a Boston University researcher found that as urban sprawl increased, so did the risk of obesity for an individual living in that area.¹⁴ As public housing developments are often found in urban areas this becomes an added risk factor for this population.
- A Kansas City study found public housing communities to be severely lacking in physical activity resources. While comfort and safety needs were made a priority, less attention was given to physical activity needs. The study suggested this was a contributing factor in explaining why obesity prevalence is higher among persons who live in public housing communities.¹⁵

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