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New Studies Show Children Surrounded by Unhealthy Options

School policies, food outlets and TV ads among factors that contribute to childhood obesity

Chicago, September 25, 2007— Unhealthy options and pressures influence nearly every part of children's daily lives, according to studies released today in a special supplement of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (AJPM). The studies reveal that, in most middle and high schools across the nation, contracts with soft drink bottling companies give students easy access to sugary beverages; lower-income neighborhoods have more fast-food restaurants than higher-income neighborhoods; and television advertisements steer kids to spend their money on junk food.

For the supplement, *Bridging the Gap* (BTG), a national research program funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and based at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, produced this groundbreaking collection of evidence on factors that contribute to the escalating rates of childhood obesity. The studies offer new insight about how current school policies, neighborhood characteristics and advertising collectively impact the childhood obesity epidemic—and together create an overwhelmingly unhealthy environment for young people.

"Research is showing us that we have in our schools and communities a perfect storm that will continue to feed the childhood obesity epidemic until we adopt policies that improve the health of our communities and our kids," said Frank J. Chaloupka, Ph.D., of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

While excessive calorie consumption and inactivity are obvious contributors to the alarming increase in obesity among children, research from the supplement suggests that changing policies to support improved access to affordable healthy foods and opportunities for physical activity may be the most promising approach for reversing the epidemic.

Schools Offer More Fat and Sugar, Less PE

Research from the supplement shows that schools offer students easy access to high-fat, sugary foods and drinks and provide fewer healthy options. A study by Lloyd D. Johnston, Ph.D., and

colleagues at the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center observes that, as of the 2004-2005 school years, the vast majority of middle schools (67 percent) and high schools (83 percent) had contracts with a soft drink bottling company, which in many cases provided students access to soft drinks all day long. Estimates show that the median annual revenue for beverage contracts in high schools is \$6,000 (\$6.48 per student), while annual revenue is about \$500 (\$.70 per student) for middle schools.

"The financial benefits of school contracts are modest in relation to the health threat that soft drink promotion entails," says Johnston.

Other studies found that physical education is lacking among older students and show more evidence of unhealthy school nutrition policies and serious racial disparities, including:

- Eighty-seven percent of 8th grade students attend schools that require PE, while only 20 percent of 12th grade students have PE requirements. There is also a corresponding drop in PE participation—more than 90 percent of 8th grade students actually take PE, compared with only 34 percent of 12th grade students;
- Racial and ethnic minorities have less access to healthier foods in schools, such as low-fat snacks;
- Students of low socioeconomic status have less access to healthy snacks than do students with higher socioeconomic status; and
- On average, Hispanic high school students are exposed to brand-name fast-food items twice weekly, while African-American and white students are offered these items once weekly.

Convenience Stores Increase BMI Among Teens, Fast-Food Outlets Common in Communities

Researchers also found that, outside of school, it does not get much easier for kids to consume a healthy diet. Too many kids live in neighborhoods where fast-food and convenience stores far outnumber supermarkets. This is especially true in lower-income communities.

Lead researcher Lisa M. Powell, Ph.D., of the University of Illinois at Chicago, found a statistically significant association between the availability of supermarkets and lower adolescent body mass index (BMI) and overweight status. In addition, Powell found a statistically significant association between the availability of convenience stores and higher BMI and overweight status.

"In communities where convenience stores outnumber supermarkets and fast-food restaurants are particularly prevalent, we're making it extremely difficult for parents and kids to eat balanced, healthy diets," said Powell. "These families simply don't have easy access to affordable, fresh foods."

In another study, Powell found that lower-income neighborhoods have a significantly higher proportion of fast-food restaurants than do higher-income neighborhoods. There are also racial disparities: predominantly African-American urban neighborhoods have a significantly higher proportion of fast-food restaurants out of total restaurants compared with predominantly white urban neighborhoods.

TV Brings More Trouble for Kids' Waistlines

Past studies show that the average teen watches more than three hours of television per day. Not only does television contribute to sedentary behavior, it brings thousands of ads promoting soda, chips, sweets and fast food into homes across the country. And there is big money at stake—each year children directly influence about \$330 billion in parental spending, and teens spend about \$159 billion of their own money.

Powell and colleagues from the University of Illinois at Chicago examined nearly a quarter of a million advertising spots shown during 170 top-rated shows in 2003-2004 and found that food-related advertising comprised about 20 percent of all national non-program content and 25 percent of all product ads viewed by teens ages 12 to 17. Of that food advertising, fast food was the category most commonly advertised, accounting for nearly one commercial in four (23 percent), followed closely by sweets (22 percent) and beverages (17 percent).

Comprehensive Approach and Research Essential to Reverse Childhood Obesity

The issues presented in the AJPM supplement underscore the importance of a comprehensive approach to reversing the childhood obesity epidemic that addresses the racial, ethnic and socioeconomic disparities observed in schools and communities across the country.

“Policy-makers, school personnel, local leaders and parents must demand changes in our schools and communities. We have to improve children’s access to affordable healthy foods and beverages and increase their opportunities for physical activity,” said C. Tracy Orleans, Ph.D., distinguished fellow and senior scientist at the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. “Our efforts must be rooted in research that shows us the most effective means for making change, and that’s why supplements like this one are so valuable.”

Articles appearing in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* will be available online at www.ajpm-online.net on Sept. 25, 2007.

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About Bridging the Gap

Bridging the Gap, which is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is a joint project of the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Institute for Health Research and Policy and the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research. It is intended to improve our understanding of the role of policy and environmental factors in youth alcohol consumption, illicit drug and tobacco use, as well as diet and physical activity. Bridging the Gap also evaluates the effectiveness of policies and changes in environmental conditions in reducing substance use and obesity among youth. For more information, visit www.impacteen.org and www.yesresearch.org.

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