



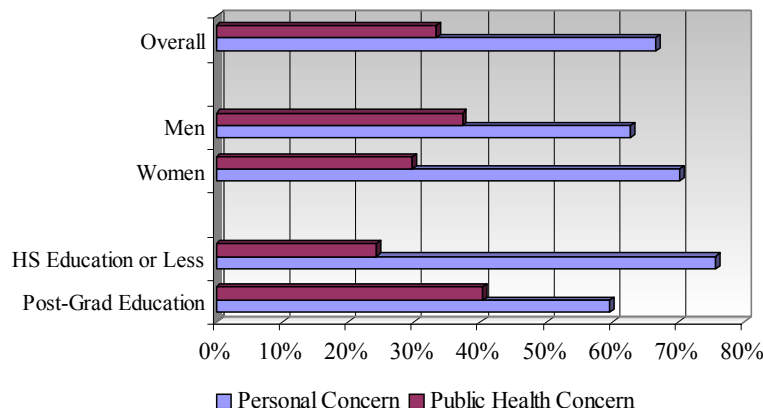
The Institute for Public Policy and Social Research

# Policy Brief

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## Obesity in Michigan: Public or Private Issue?

### Respondent Perceptions of Overweight as a Personal Concern or a Public Health Concern



### Welcome

Welcome to the fifth edition of IPPSR Policy Brief. This is a publication of the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research that is meant to bring the latest research in executive summary format to policymakers and those interested in public policy issues.

This edition of IPPSR Policy Brief was prepared in collaboration with MSU's Families and Communities Together Coalition (FACT). It includes analysis of recent survey research conducted by the Institute and sponsored by FACT on the views of Michigan residents related to adult overweight and obesity. The report focuses on the issue of whether obesity is a public or private issue in the minds of Michigan residents and includes residents' assessments of methods to address the issue and their concern about weight.

We value your input. Please let us know if you have any suggestions for future issues.

—Carol S. Weissert, IPPSR Director

### Context of the Issue

According to authors of a recent IPPSR policy report, Michigan is the eighth highest state for adult obesity (22.4 percent) and second among the states in being overweight (38.7 percent). (Kreulen, et al, 2002) Between 1990 and 2000 the level of obesity in Michigan increased by 41 percent. (CDC, 2000).

Research has shown that being overweight and obese increase risk for heart disease, diabetes and other chronic health conditions substantially. This translates into costs to Michigan both in terms of health care and lost wages. Health experts advocate for increased activity and improved dietary intake.

Efforts to impact this problem are being proposed at various governmental levels. The question is whether Michigan residents support the efforts and whether they see a need for them.

### Michigan Resident Perceptions

Between May 21 and July 17, 2002, 933 Michigan adults were interviewed via telephone in the 26th State of the State Survey. Conducted by Michigan State University's (MSU) Office for Survey Research at the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research, a series of 32 questions were commissioned by MSU's Families and Communities Together Coalition (FACT).

Respondents answered questions about their health and nutrition, including: questions on their perceptions of whether overweight is a public health issue or one of personal concern; support for methods that have been suggested to address the issue of overweight; likelihood of Michigan residents to smoke, choose healthy foods, and exercise; and concern about their own weight,

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# IPPSR

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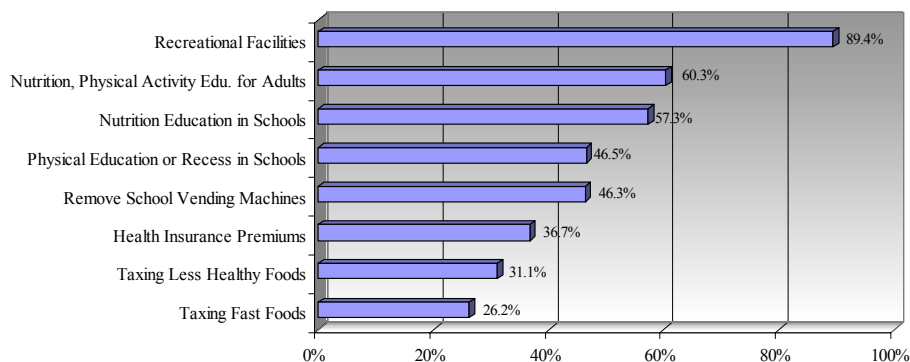
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as well as their spouse, children, and neighbors. In addition, respondents were asked to report their own height and weight. From this information the Body Mass Index (BMI) was calculated and compared to their own reporting of whether they believed themselves to be underweight, at a normal weight, or overweight.

## Is Overweight A Public or Personal Concern?

The central question of the survey was whether being overweight is a public health concern that should be addressed by society as a whole or whether it is a personal concern and only the business of individuals. Some 66.6 percent of Michigan residents thought it was a personal concern and 33.4 percent thought it was public. Slightly more women than men thought that being overweight was personal (70.2 versus 62.7 percent). Also based on education level, individuals with high school or less education were more likely than those with any level of college education to think it was personal (75.7 versus 62.3 percent). People with children at home were more likely to see it as a personal concern (72.6 versus 62.6 percent).

## Public Support for Methods of Addressing Obesity



Interestingly, 30.2 percent of respondents changed their opinion upon learning that the United States spends \$99.2 billion per year on overweight and obesity. Some 18.5 went from personal to public and 11.8 percent went from public to personal. Upon learning that 61 percent of Michigan adults are overweight and obese, 29.1 percent changed their minds. Some 11.7 percent went from personal to public and 17.4 went from public to personal. It appears that information on how the problem impacts people financially may be more compelling than the incidence of overweight. The data also suggest that more research on appropriate education is needed if those who wish to move public actions forward expect to garner the public's support.

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## Support for Solutions

When presented with various methods to address obesity in Michigan, respondents were not extremely supportive of most measures. Michigan residents were more supportive of proactive measures, such as recreational facilities, to help people reach healthy weights than punitive ones, such as higher health care premiums. Also, those who considered obesity to be a public health issue were more supportive of measures than those who thought it was personal.

### Recreational Facilities

Approximately 89 percent strongly and somewhat favored spending tax dollars on recre-

ational facilities in the community such as safer parks or more walking or bike paths. Some 50.2 percent strongly favored this approach.

### Nutrition and Physical Activity Education for Adults

Some 60.3 percent of Michigan residents favored spending tax dollars for nutrition and physical activity education programs for adults. Over 60 percent of women and 55 percent of men favored this.

### Nutrition Education in Schools

Some 57.3 percent of respondents favored increasing nutrition education in schools even if it meant decreasing the time spent on other academic subjects.

### Physical Activity at Work

Nearly 54 percent of the survey's respondents favored encouraging employers to provide ways to take part in physical activity at work such as having exercise equipment on site and extending lunch break times for physical activity, even if it might reduce money spent on wages. Nearly 60 percent of women and approximately 48 percent of men felt this way.

### Recess or Physical Education in Schools

Slightly less than a majority (46.5 percent) favored increasing recess time or physical education time in schools if it meant decreasing time spent on other academic subjects.

**Other Methods**

The least support existed for the following methods: banning vending machines that sell candy, soda pop or chips in schools (46.3 percent); making health insurance premium rates dependent on whether or not someone is overweight (36.7 percent); taxing less health foods purchased at the supermarket ( 31.1 percent); and, adding extra tax on food purchased at fast food restaurants (26.2 percent).

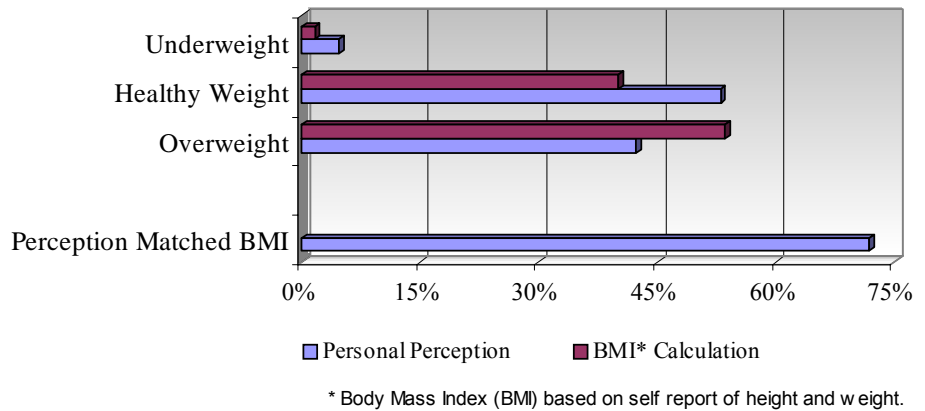
**Concern About Overweight**

Overall, respondents felt that being overweight would matter more to the people who were closer to them, such as spouses and family, than it would to friends and neighbors. Similarly, they said that they would be more concerned about those closest to them if they were overweight than they would be about random members of their community. They were most likely to say that it would matter to them if their children were overweight.

Approximately 73 percent of Michiganians were concerned about their own weight. Some 74.7 percent of women and 70.8 percent of men were concerned about their own weight. When asked if it would matter whether they were overweight, 96.2 percent responded that it would a lot, somewhat, or a little. Some 76.5 percent of respondents said that it would matter to their spouse, 67.9 percent to their family, 46 percent to their friends, and 19.7 percent to their neighbors.

Some 91.6 percent said that it would matter to them if their children were overweight, and 85.8 percent said it would matter if their spouse were at an unhealthy weight level. Even 38.9 percent of respondents said that it would matter to them if someone in their community were overweight.

**Personal Perception Versus BMI\* Reporting**



**Overweight Demographics**

Women (47.7 percent) were more likely than men (36.3 percent) to report that they were overweight. Being overweight also mattered to women (90 percent) more than it did to men (86.6 percent). When it came to being concerned about their spouses, men (87.6 percent) were more likely than women (83.9 percent) to be concerned.

Those with the highest incomes were the most likely to report being at a healthy weight (61.6 percent at \$40,000 and above versus 36.9 percent for those below this income level).

Whites were less likely to report being overweight than blacks (41.2 percent versus 53.9 percent).

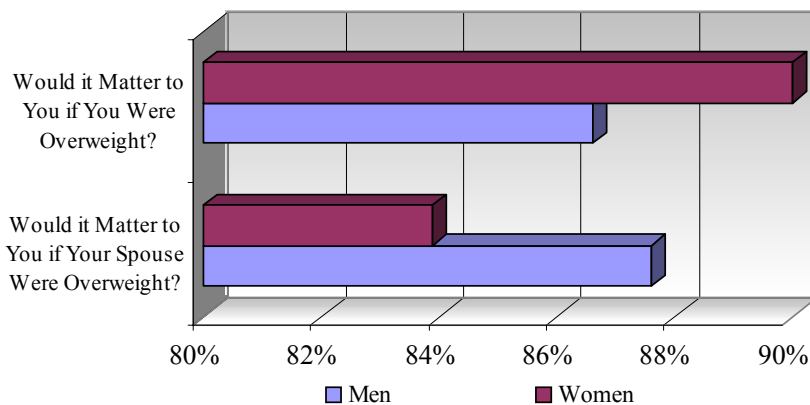
Those with more education were more likely to report being overweight. For example 30.4 percent of those with less than high school education versus 42.4 percent of those with college level education or more reported that they were overweight.

The likelihood of reporting current weight as overweight tended to increase with age.

**Healthy Lifestyles**

A final section of the survey that will be reported on here is self reporting of healthy food choice, physical activity, smoking and weight. For purposes of understanding various groups perceptions of issues related to the topic at hand, survey respondents were grouped into three categories based on their answers to questions on their lifestyles. The groupings identified 36.3 percent in the 'Most Healthy' category, 33.7 percent in the 'Somewhat Healthy' group and 25.3 percent in the 'Least Healthy' category.

**Concerns about Weight by Gender**



**About the State of the State Survey**

MSU's State of the State Survey (SOSS) is the only survey conducted in Michigan designed to provide a regular systematic monitoring of the public mood on important issues in the state.

SOSS is administered by the Institute for Public Policy and Social Research's Office for Survey Research. It is a quarterly state-wide telephone survey of about 1,000 adult residents of Michigan.

SOSS has been generously funded since 1994 by a number of on-campus units and off-campus organizations. IPPSR gratefully acknowledges all of their support.

The SOSS-26 interviews were conducted between May 21 and July 17, 2002. Complete statistical information can be found online at [www.ippsr.msu.edu/SOSS](http://www.ippsr.msu.edu/SOSS).

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## IPPSR Policy Brief is Online at:

[www.ippsr.msu.edu/ppie/policybrief.htm](http://www.ippsr.msu.edu/ppie/policybrief.htm).

Past issues include: *Americans Protect Civil Liberties*, *Telemedicine in Michigan*, and *Voting Reform Activity*.

## MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

*MSU is an affirmative-action, equal-opportunity institution.*

Interestingly, those who were in the 'Most Healthy' category were the most likely to consider obesity and overweight a public health issue. Some 40.9 percent of the 'Most Healthy' group saw it as a public issue versus only 31.3 percent of those in the 'Least Healthy' group.

Those in the 'Most Healthy' group were also slightly more likely to support measures to address obesity and overweight. Those in the 'Most Healthy' group were more likely to support all measures except for physical activity at work and increasing recess time in school. Additionally, over half

of the respondents in the 'Most Healthy' group supported at least four measures compared to 'Somewhat Healthy' and 'Least Healthy' categories who only garnered a majority of support for three measures.

The 'Most Healthy' group was the only one in which a majority supported banning vending machines in schools. Conversely, the only case

in which there was a majority of support for increasing recess time or physical education was among the 'Least Healthy' grouping.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, this survey has revealed that those who wish to move public actions forward to address the problem of obesity and overweight have some work to do if they wish to garner the public's support.

The individuals who were most likely to consider obesity as a public issue were men

those with more education, and those with children at home. Additionally, those who are most likely to support methods to address obesity are those who are already leading healthier lifestyles.

The methods that are most likely to be supported at this time are proactive measures such as recreational parks versus punitive ones such as increased insurance premiums.

## References

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## For More Information

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