

# Research & Policy Brief Series

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## Childhood Obesity: Do New Yorkers Support Policies to Reduce it?\*

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### What is The Issue?

The issue of youth obesity has received a great deal of media and policy attention in recent years. Since 1970, the percentage of U.S. children who are overweight has more than tripled, and the percentage of U.S. teenagers who are overweight has more than doubled. This trend represents a significant public health issue with critical social and economic consequences. In this brief, we report perceptions of childhood obesity, support for specific anti-obesity policies, and willingness to pay higher taxes to reduce childhood obesity. The data for this study come from the 2006 Empire State Poll, a survey of 800 New York State residents conducted annually by Cornell University's Survey Research Institute.

### Do New Yorkers think childhood obesity is an important problem?

**81% of New Yorkers think that youth obesity in the U.S. is a "major problem"**

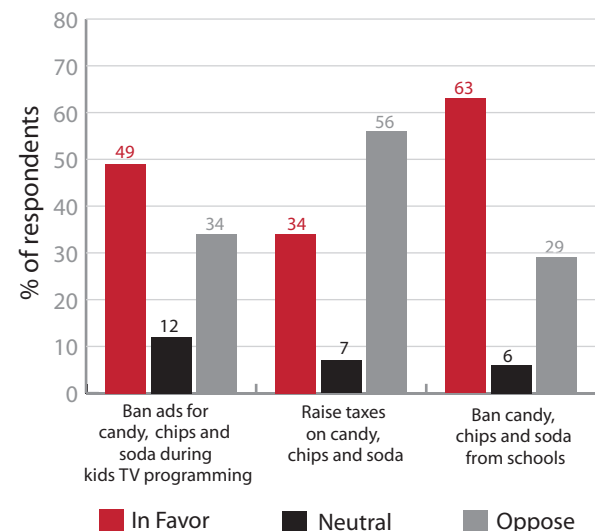
- 81% of respondents think that youth obesity in the U.S. is a "major problem" and an additional 12.9% think that it is a "minor problem." Only 3.4% of New Yorkers said youth obesity was "not a problem at all."
- When asked how youth obesity ranks among a series of problems facing youth (specifically, risky sex, drug use, smoking, and underage drinking) the majority of respondents (53%) ranked obesity as somewhere in the middle in terms of its importance. The remainder was equally split between ranking it among the most important and among the least important.

- Respondents were also asked how the public health budget should be divided between those same problems confronting American youth. 39.9% said obesity should receive a larger budget share than the other problems, 22.5% said it should receive an equal share, and 37.6% said it should receive a smaller budget share than the other problems.

### Do New Yorkers support targeting of candy, chips and soda in order to reduce childhood obesity?

- Roughly half of respondents (48.9%) think the government should ban the advertisement of candy, chips and

**Figure 1:** New Yorkers' relative support for targeting candy, chips and soda.



Source: Empire State Poll, 2006

soda during children's television programming. A third (33.7%) was opposed to such a ban and 12% were neutral.

- More than half of respondents (56%) were opposed to the government raising taxes on candy, chips and soda pop. A third (33.9%) were in favor of such a tax hike, and 7% were neutral.
- Almost two-thirds of respondents (63.4%) think the government should ban candy, chips and soda from schools. 28.8% were opposed to such a ban, and 5.8% were neutral.

## Are New Yorkers willing to pay higher taxes to reduce childhood obesity?

Respondents were asked a series of questions to determine their willingness to pay higher taxes for policies to reduce youth obesity. They were asked: "Suppose there is a new voter referendum in your town. The referendum will enact policies that will reduce youth obesity in your town by 50%...If the referendum passes, you and everyone else will have to pay \$50 more in taxes every year. Given your current budget, would you vote for or against this referendum?" Respondents who indicated they were willing to pay \$50 were then asked about their willingness to pay a higher amount, and respondents not willing to pay \$50 were asked about their willingness to pay a lower amount.

- There is considerable variation in New Yorkers' willingness to pay for reductions in childhood obesity. More than a third (36.3%) refuse to pay even \$10 a year in taxes to cut childhood obesity in half, while one-sixth

**The average New York State resident is willing to pay \$47.25 in higher taxes each year to reduce youth obesity.**

(15.9%) are willing to pay more than \$200 a year for such a reduction.

- Those with more children, who have higher incomes, who describe themselves as liberal or a Democrat, or who believe that obesity is a major problem are willing to pay more.

- Those who are unhappy with the current tax situation, who think that obesity is due to individual choices or genetics rather than the environment, or who self-identify as a Republican, report lower willingness to pay.

All together, this translates into a total willingness to pay of adult New York State residents of \$692.3 million per year. Interestingly, this is far more than what New York State would save in lower health care costs by halving youth obesity, which implies that New Yorkers value a reduction in childhood obesity on its own merit.

## Summary

This study provides some new, important information for policymakers and practitioners in New York State. While many New Yorkers consider childhood obesity to be a major problem, people differ in terms of the types of policies they would like to see implemented to address the issue, as well as the amount of money they are willing to spend on it. The most popular policy solution was banning candy, ships and soda from schools, while the least popular was raising taxes on these same items. While the average New Yorker is willing to pay considerable sums to address childhood obesity, this willingness varies depending on characteristics of the respondent.

## What are the Policy Implications?

Results from this study suggest that policies aimed at addressing food sold in schools could receive the most support from the public. Additionally, many New Yorkers are prepared to pay higher taxes, if confident that the money would be effective in reducing youth obesity. However, the 2005 Institute of Medicine report on preventing childhood obesity noted that there is little evidence regarding which anti-obesity policies are effective. Cost effectiveness studies of various anti-obesity interventions are needed in order to ensure that any tax revenues collected to prevent childhood obesity are used to maximum effectiveness. ♦

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