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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Releases New Policy Briefs on Childhood Overweight and Obesity in Rhode Island

Newest data shows continued decline in childhood overweight and obesity in Rhode Island, disparities by race and ethnicity persist

Providence, RI (June 23, 2021): Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is releasing its newest publications, *Childhood Overweight and Obesity: Updated Data for Rhode Island* and *Childhood Overweight and Obesity: Trends in Rhode Island* at a virtual policy roundtable on Friday, June 25, 2021, from 12:30 p.m. – 2:00 p.m.

Featured speakers include Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT; Michele Lederberg, Executive Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer, Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island (BCBSRI); Ellen Amore, Center for Health Data and Analysis, Rhode Island Department of Health; Patrick Vivier, Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute; Karin Wetherill, Rhode Island Healthy Schools Coalition; and Allyson Ventura-Tesillo, Progreso Latino. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT Policy Analyst Katie Orona is presenting findings from the publications.

Childhood Obesity: A Need for Continued Data Collection

Childhood overweight and obesity puts children at risk for poor health. Children and adolescents who are overweight or obese are at immediate and/or long-term risk of many health problems, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease, asthma, joint problems, sleep apnea, and other acute and chronic health problems. Despite the persistence and severity of childhood overweight and obesity, accurate data is difficult to obtain. Most data on childhood obesity come from self-reported survey data, which can differ from clinical data. Although height, weight, and BMI are often collected by pediatricians, there are very few national or state-level clinical data sets.

Since 2016, Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, the Rhode Island Department of Health's Center for Health Data and Analysis, the Hassenfeld Child Health Innovation Institute, the State Innovation Model, and three health insurance plans – Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island, UnitedHealthcare, and Neighborhood Health Plan of Rhode Island – have collaborated on a project to collect the most accurate childhood overweight and obesity data at the state and city/town level that could also be analyzed by race/ethnicity, age, gender, and insurance status. In 2019 Tufts Health plan joined in this collaboration.

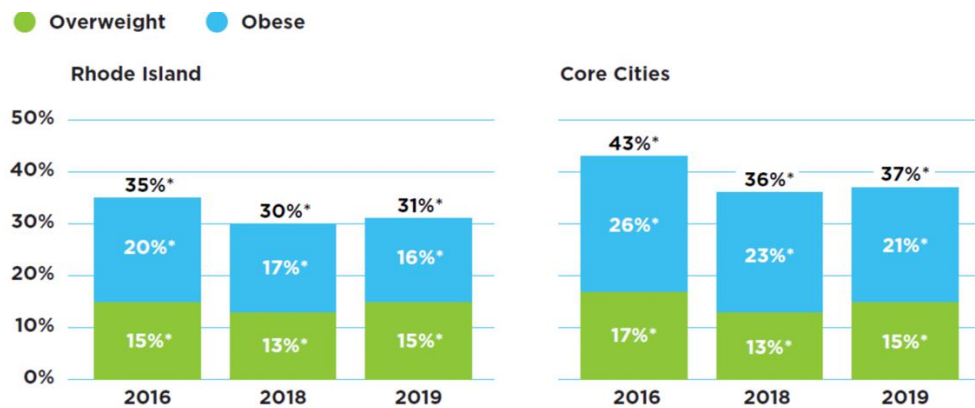
The result of this unique collaboration is the first clinical/claims-based statewide data set of childhood overweight and obesity in Rhode Island. The data is updated on an annual basis and trends can now be analyzed since this is the third year of data collection.

- The first Policy Brief -- *Updated Data for Rhode Island* -- presents updated data from 2019, the most recent year of data available.
- The second Policy Brief -- *Trends in Rhode Island* -- presents data from 2016-2019 and examines trends.

Childhood Overweight and Obesity Declining; Rates Analyzed by Gender, Age, Insurance Status, and Race/Ethnicity

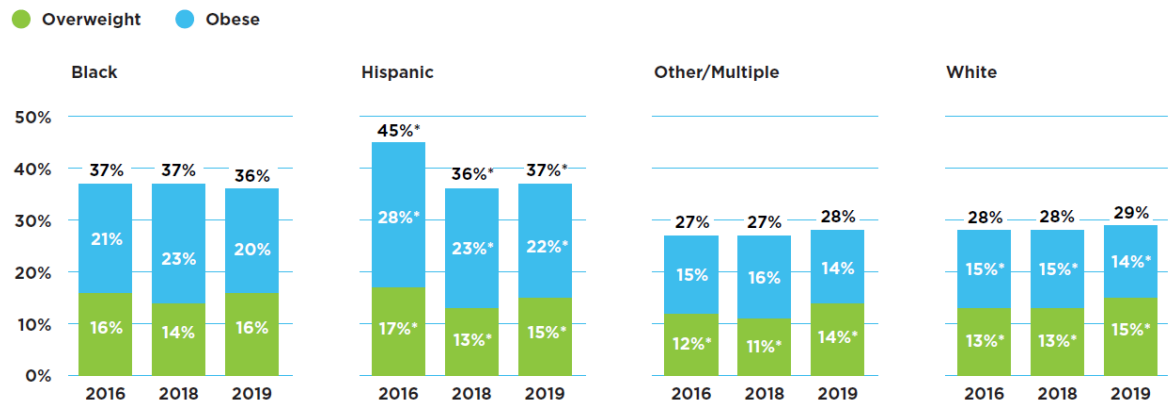
The data show that in Rhode Island:

- From 2016-2019, there was a statistically significant decrease in the percentage of children who were overweight or obese in all age groups, from 35% of children ages 2 to 17 overweight or obese in 2016 to 31% in 2019.



- In 2019, 15% of Rhode Island children ages 2 to 17 were overweight, and 16% were obese.
- Twenty-four percent of Rhode Island children with no health insurance are obese, compared to 19% of children covered by public insurance and 14% of children with private health insurance.
- From 2016-2019, Rhode Island boys had higher rates of obesity than Rhode Island girls.
 - This is consistent among all races and ethnicities except for non- Hispanic Black girls who have slightly higher rates of obesity than non- Hispanic Black boys.

- There are notable racial and ethnic disparities: Black and Hispanic children had higher rates of overweight and obesity from 2016-2019:



* Statistically significant trend, $p < 0.5$

“Childhood obesity and overweight is a serious health issue both nationally and in Rhode Island. While we are pleased to see an overall decline in the percentage of overweight and obesity among Rhode Island children, with the largest decline among Hispanic children, there is more work needed to further decrease childhood overweight/obesity. We’re also concerned about the racial and ethnic disparities that persist. This is unacceptable, and it’s doubly concerning that the impact of COVID-19 may exacerbate these inequities,” said Elizabeth Burke Bryant, Executive Director of Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. “We are committed to informing policy, practice and prevention efforts through this important data tracking work with our partners.”

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Childhood Obesity

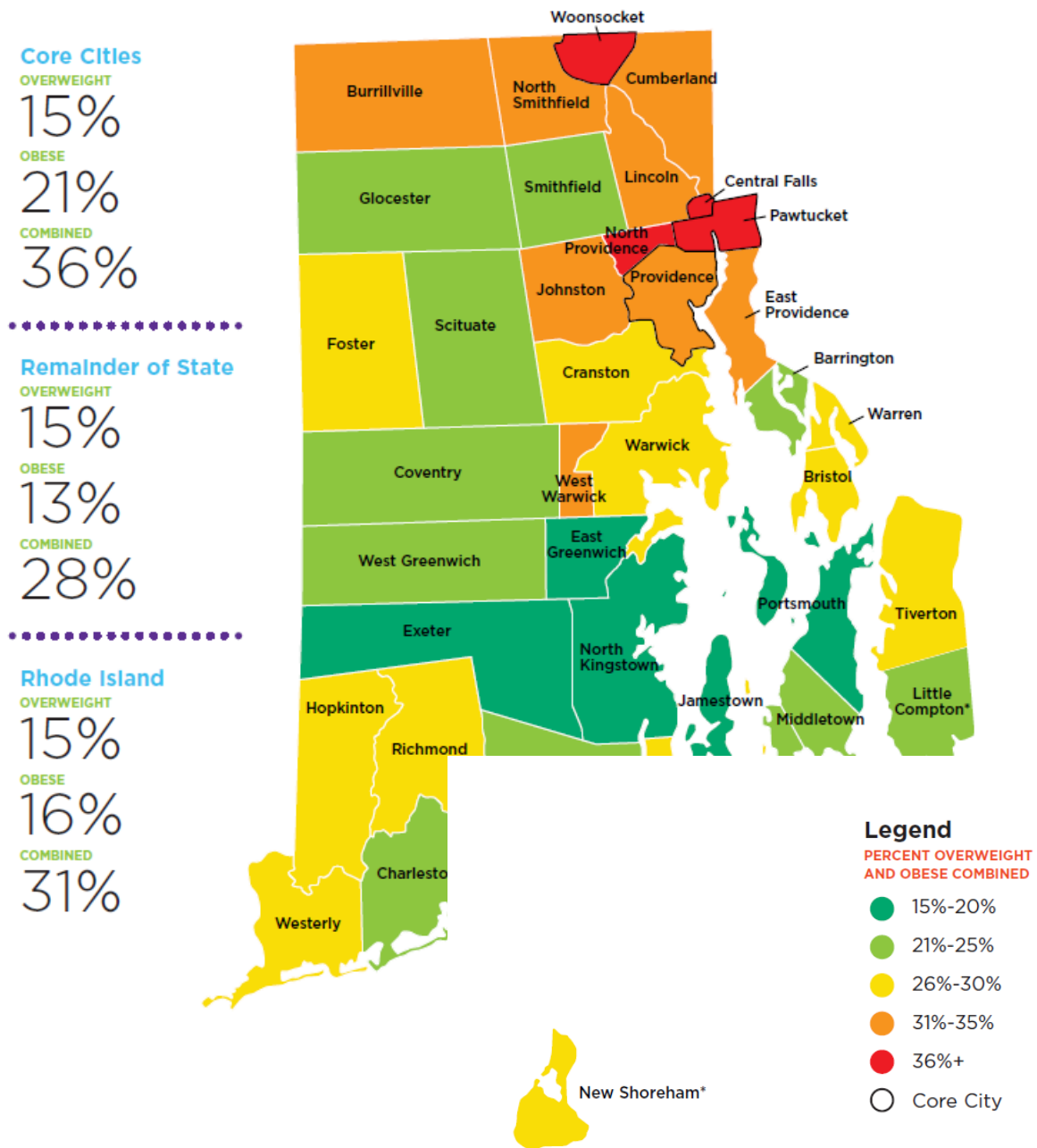
The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to result in an increase in childhood overweight and obesity. Key reasons for this include:

- School closures due to the pandemic often meant children did not always have access to regular meals provided by the Federal School Breakfast and Lunch Programs.
- Many students, particularly remote and hybrid learners, did not have as many opportunities for physical activity. Most before and after school programs offering physical activity were suspended for much of the year and even recess was often less active. Schools participating in the Recess Rocks in RI program, sponsored by Blue Cross & Blue Shield of RI in collaboration with Playworks New England and the RI Health Schools Coalition, were supported with a Game Guide, which provided COVID-safe strategies for scheduling, playground space, and games.
- School-organized sports were suspended and now are taking place in a limited fashion.

“Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island has a longstanding commitment to achieving comprehensive health and well-being for all Rhode Islanders and for years, the company has invested in community-based programs and interventions to enable a healthy weight for the next generation,” said Michele Lederberg, Executive Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer, BCBSRI. “Additionally, we’re grateful to Rhode Island KIDS COUNT for our partnership in this work to realize a clinical/claims-based statewide data set of childhood overweight and obesity. Data like this is foundational to monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of health

interventions and critically important to identifying and addressing racial disparities, like the ones we continue to see in Rhode Island. BCBSRI is determined to address the factors that drive these inequities. We want all Rhode Island kids, no matter where they live or the color of their skin, to have the opportunity to grow up healthy.”

Prevalence of overweight and obesity in Rhode Island children ages 2 to 17, 2019



Recommendations

The publications provide key recommendations to support collection and analysis of children's BMI data:

- The BMI data collection project should continue on an annual basis to collect, analyze, and distribute the data from KIDSNET, Current Care, and contributing health plans in place of a more permanent solution to track BMI data by state, city, town, race, ethnicity, age, gender, and insurance status.
- The General Assembly should consider legislative options that would provide an opt-out rather than an opt-in consent model for collecting children's health data to be used on a de-identified, population-based scale in CurrentCare.
- Health care providers and insurers should continue to regularly collect children's height, weight, and BMI data and provide guidance and referrals at annual well-child visits.
- The State should provide the authority and capacity for the Department of Health to work with providers, insurers, and electronic health record vendors on a solution to systematically report BMI data to KIDSNET and/or CurrentCare.
- The Rhode Island Department of Health should continue to ask questions about nutrition and physical activity in youth surveys, including the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* and the Department of Education should reinstate these questions in *SurveyWorks!*
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is expected to result in an increase in child overweight and obesity. State agencies, health care providers, hospitals, insurers, schools, and community agencies should monitor trends in clinical, claims, and self-reported data on overweight and obesity among children to identify opportunities for intervention, programs, and policies to support children's' healthy weight.

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Rhode Island KIDS COUNT is a statewide children's policy organization that works to improve the health, economic well-being, safety, education, and development of Rhode Island children.