

July 10, 2003 Contact: Celia Hagert, [hagert@cphp.org](mailto:hagert@cphp.org)

## **TEXAS, U.S. FACE PARADOXICAL NUTRITION PROBLEMS**

In the richest nation on earth, 13 million children do not always get enough to eat. At the same time, in an alarming, paradoxical trend, childhood obesity has joined childhood hunger on the list of serious threats to kids' nutritional health. Nationally, 20% to 30% of children are overweight or at risk of becoming overweight—a rate that has doubled in the last two decades—prompting the Centers for Disease Control to label childhood obesity an epidemic.

Like hunger, obesity can also be a symptom of poverty. This may explain why, in Texas—a state with one of the highest child poverty rates—the obesity epidemic is growing even faster. More than 28% of low-income children in Texas between the ages of 2 and 5 are obese, and approximately 39% of fourth-graders, 37% of eighth graders, and 29% of eleventh-graders are either overweight or obese.

Texas also has one of the highest rates of hunger in the country, and the second-highest percentage of “food insecure” households—families at risk for hunger due to limited resources. Over 3.6 million people in Texas cannot always afford an adequate and nutritious diet, including 912,000 Texans who are experiencing outright hunger.

The rise in childhood obesity has led some critics to dismiss the problem of hunger and even go so far as to claim that the federal food programs aimed at preventing hunger are actually making the poor fat. In fact, the percentage of children who are obese is about the same for poor kids as non-poor kids, and there is no established link between federal food programs and obesity.

Some of the poorest kids, however, are also overweight. When a family is living on a tight budget, junk food or fast food is usually easier and cheaper to buy than nutritious food. Children who face chronic food shortages often fill up on high-fat foods and sugary sodas as a means to cope with this stress. Low-income children also are more likely to live in unsafe neighborhoods, lack adequate supervision, or face health problems like asthma that make outdoor play—critical to maintaining a healthy weight—difficult. Poor families are also less likely to receive nutrition education that can help them to make smart food choices.

Because they are the flip sides of one coin, hunger and obesity offer the opportunity for co-existing solutions.

For example, a stronger nutrition safety net with a more comprehensive nutrition education component would reduce both hunger and obesity by giving families the resources they need to make better food choices.

Brownsville Senator Eddie Lucio offered one idea to curb the threat of childhood hunger and obesity by filing a bold bill during the last Texas legislative session to expand access to the National School Breakfast Program and ban “competitive” food sales—essentially vending machine snacks and drinks—entirely in elementary schools while restricting them at higher grades. S.B. 474 stalled due to lobbying from the snack and soda industries and—sadly enough—the schools themselves, because they rely on the revenues from junk food sales. The bill finally limped out of the legislature as an interim study to evaluate nutrition and health in public schools.

National anti-hunger organizations like Share Our Strength (SOS) and MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger fund local advocacy to improve kids’ nutritional health. For example, Share Our Strength (SOS), in partnership with PARADE Magazine has launched The Great American Bake Sale—a community campaign to end childhood hunger in this country. Through July 22, you can host a bake sale in your community, or buy food from a local Great American Bake Sale event, and all proceeds will be donated to Share Our Strength’s (go to [www.greatamericanbakesale.org](http://www.greatamericanbakesale.org) for more information).

Hunger and obesity are grave problems with severe, lasting consequences for our children and our state.

Hunger affects kids’ mental and physical development for the rest of their lives, while obesity increases their risk for life-threatening diseases such as Type II Diabetes and heart disease. Both maladies result inevitably in lost productivity and increased health care costs for Texas.

It’ll be a great day in Texas when childhood hunger is a scourge of the past, our schools don’t need to rely on the revenues from junk food contracts, and bake sales are reserved for things like funding a school trip. To get there Texas needs to make children’s nutritional health a priority.

Celia Hagert is a senior policy analyst at the Center for Public Policy Priorities, an Austin-based think-tank that conducts research on issues that affect low-income Texans.