

Study highlights health epidemic: More than one in four US adults is obese

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Adult obesity rates for 2016 hit over 30 percent in 25 US states, with nearly one in three Americans now obese, according to a recent study. In five states, the average rates topped 35 percent, the highest rates of obesity in the world. These figures are unprecedented in human history and signal a health crisis of global proportions.

These astonishing statistics come from a report by the Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which analyzed public health data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The top five states for obesity rates include Louisiana at 35.5 percent, Alabama at 35.7 percent, Arkansas at 35.7 percent, Mississippi at 37.3 percent, and West Virginia at 37.7 percent. The mostly Southern states are also some of the poorest, with the most deplorable living conditions for the working class—both rural and urban.

An additional 41 states have rates greater than 25 percent. Only three states—Hawaii, Massachusetts and Colorado—and the District of Columbia have obesity rates below 25 percent. Despite its relative success, Colorado is poised to have the highest growth of obesity in the nation.

The data analysis accounts for rates of obesity, defined as people with a Body Mass Index (BMI) ratio of 30 or greater. BMI values represent a calculation based on a person's height and weight. Overweight people, or those with BMI ratios between 25 and 30, are not central to the study. Though it should be noted that they make up an additional 30 percent of the total US population, with minimal increases over four decades. Taken as a whole, nearly 70 percent of the US population is either overweight or obese and at risk for a variety of weight-related health issues.

Excessive body fat contributes to a variety of health complications, such as type II diabetes, high blood pressure, heart disease, osteoarthritis, cancer, sleep apnea, and depression. People with genetic predispositions for these ailments, or those with preexisting conditions, face much higher risk factors once they become overweight or obese. The Trust for America's Health report places emphasis on the rising rates of type II diabetes, affecting about one-tenth of the US population and 15 percent of people in the South. The rising frequency and severity of these health issues makes obesity not only a social epidemic, but one of the top preventable causes of death.

Obesity rates have been climbing steadily for the past 40 years. Prior to 1980, the rates of Americans considered overweight or obese remained constant and reflected biological factors more than social inequities. Between 1980 and 2005, the average rate of obesity more than doubled. Within this same period, the percentage of overweight or obese children nearly tripled.

In 2004, a WHO report revealed the central role played by food corporations in advertising, monopolizing, and advocating foods high in fats, refined sugars and sodium. The United States was the only nation to reject the ensuing United Nations resolution for healthier foods, after representatives of corporations such as Birds Eye, Coca-Cola, Del Monte and Heinz successfully pressured the government to back their pseudo-science and claims of individual "choice" and slovenliness as the key causes of obesity.

According to OpenSecrets.org, agribusiness spent \$127,492,310 to lobby the US Congress in 2016, including \$26,503,856 to lobby on behalf of food processing and sales. Alongside the corporate dominance within the food and agricultural industries,

general economic and social inequality has dramatically increased.

As many obesity reports indicate, obesity disproportionately affects poor and working class communities. These populations typically lack access to nutritious food, recreational areas for exercise, youth programs in public schools, free time, and quality health care—which are among the top factors contributing to obesity. The poorest members of society, who face greater risks of obesity and health issues, are simultaneously restricted from receiving quality health care and public services, exacerbating the inequalities even further.

Though obesity rates are highest in the United States, the problem is increasingly global. One report, published in June by the *New England Journal of Medicine*, estimates that one-third of the world's population is either overweight or obese. Just like in the United States, the burden falls to members of the poor and working classes of more advanced countries, who lack access to nutritious food, recreation, and preventive health care.

It is accepted by growing numbers of medical professionals that high rates of obesity cannot simply be reduced to a lack of self-control. As with many other epidemics, this is a social issue. As the political system gives free rein to private interests and increases the financialization of the economy, it seeks to violently suppress the working class by carrying out a counterrevolution against democratic rights and living standards. Obesity and its contributing factors are bound up with these capitalist processes.

With every new study on the health of American people, health research groups and scholars offer solutions to both help those with obesity and prevent others from getting to that point. The authors of this study suggest greater investment in public health and education sectors, hoping to pressure government and corporate leaders as “the obesity crisis costs our nation more than \$150 billion in health care costs annually and billions of dollars more in lost productivity.” They also point to the impact on state forces, noting that obesity is the number one reason for disqualification from military service.

Such recommendations will fall on deaf ears. In the past six months alone, the US government has shown its lack of desire and ability to address public health

issues. In the health care “debate” in Washington, key targets are the widely popular Medicare and Medicaid programs, which have played a key role over the last half-century in improving the health and life expectancy of Americans. These processes are now being reversed.

At the same time, public schools face continual budget cuts that greatly diminish the resources for health and recreation programs. Between 2007 and 2009, local school districts witnessed more than \$2 billion in cuts to after-school programs. The most recent budget proposal by the Trump administration includes \$1.5 billion in cuts to after-school and summer programs, \$100 billion to public schools overall, and \$2.5 billion to food stamps.

The obesity epidemic is one of the many social crises facing the working class in twenty-first century America. The demands for a healthy environment, accessible and nutritious food, quality education and health care come into conflict with the private interests of food corporations, giant agricultural industries, and their representatives in the US government. The obesity crisis can only be confronted through the defense of health care, access to healthy foods, recreational opportunities and education as social rights, addressed by a workers' government that places the health interests of the vast majority over the financial interests of the wealthy elite.



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