

Oklahoma's childhood obesity rate is the sixth-highest in the nation, according to a newly released data report, and the figure hasn't changed much from recent years. Eighteen percent of 10-to-17-year-olds in the state are obese, which is about 72,500 teens. Although the rate hasn't necessarily improved, state officials view the steady figure as progress. "It's quite remarkable that the rate has stayed the same," said Julie Bisbee, executive director of the Tobacco Settlement Endowment Trust (TSET), which launched Shape Your Future OK in 2011. "Not increasing is also progress." The study, released Thursday by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, put five states' rates ahead of Oklahoma: Mississippi, West Virginia, Kentucky, Louisiana and Michigan. It also pointed out racial and ethnic disparities in data from the National Survey of Children's Health: The obesity rate of black and Hispanic youth, 22.2%, was almost double that of white youth and more than three times that of Asian youth. Income level also presented a grand disparity: Almost 22% of youth in households making less than the federal poverty level were obese, compared with 9.4% of youth in households making at least 400% of the federal poverty level. Bisbee said those numbers are reflected in many health facets beyond obesity, such as smoking rates, causing life expectancy to vary greatly from neighborhood to neighborhood based on environmental factors. "People don't make choices in isolation," Bisbee said. "We have to support the behavior that we're wanting to see." Bisbee said this can be done through improving different quality of life factors, such as ensuring all neighborhoods have access to fresh groceries and kids have safe places to exercise and play outdoors. She also stressed nutritional education for youths and adults. Children don't fully control their environments or the foods brought into their home, she said. TSET recommends communities hoping for change take advantage of its Healthy Living Program, which offers grants intended to lessen the burden of unhealthy behaviors before they take root. Schools are encouraged to provide healthier lunch options and ensure children get the recommended daily amount of physical activity, and TSET recommends businesses allow flexible work and lunch schedules and offer healthy snacks and beverages

in vending machines. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, which bills itself as the country's largest philanthropy focused solely on health, included national policy change recommendations in its report. Among them are:

- The U.S. Department of Agriculture should rescind proposed changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or food stamps, that would cause millions of participants to lose their benefits.
- State policymakers should allow cities and counties the flexibility to regulate, tax or otherwise enact strong legislation related to children's health and healthy communities.

Dr. Richard Besser, the organization's president and CEO, said officials know improvements won't come quickly with policy changes required at every level of government, but they're working toward change. "These differences by race, ethnicity, and geography did not happen by chance," Besser said in the release. "They are a result of discriminatory policies and systems that have been in place for decades. However, we have the power to change these outcomes and make our nation a more equitable society. The more we understand the barriers to good health, the more we can do to address them."

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