

# Profiles of Missouri: Obesity Rate in Missouri<sup>1</sup>

Lauren Spath<sup>2</sup>

According to a recent report from the Trust for America's Health (TFAH), obesity rates in all but one of our fifty U.S. states rose last year at an alarming rate (the exception is Oregon, where the rate remained the same as the previous year, and data are not available for Hawaii). In this report, *F as in Fat: How Obesity Policies are Failing in America, 2005*, TFAH outlines the nation's growing problem. Approximately 119 million Americans, or 64.5 percent, are either overweight or obese, and the number of obese American adults rose, according to TFAH, from 23.7 percent in 2003 to 24.5 percent in 2004. Although the national goal is 15 percent or less of the population being obese, in 10 states more than 25 percent of adults are obese, and the national average of obese adults is 16 percent. This includes about 16 percent of active duty U.S. military personnel.

## Missouri

Fortunately, Missouri is not one of the 10 states with an adult population that is more than 25 percent obese. This does not mean, however, that the state is much better off. Missouri is, along with North Carolina and North Dakota, ranked 16<sup>th</sup> in the U.S. in the highest rate of adult obesity at 23.9 percent. In the highest rate of overweight and obese adults combined, Missouri ranked 17<sup>th</sup>, with 60.5 percent. In schools, where nutrition habits are often formed, Missouri is among the majority of states that does not have nutritional guidelines for or limit availability of "competitive foods", foods that are not part of the federally sponsored school lunch program such as those sold in vending machines, snack shops, and at bake sales.

## Policies

With these new data come new concerns. In its report, TFAH criticizes government policies. Parris Glendening, former Governor of Maryland (1995-2003) and co-author of the report, says that

a combination of individual responsibility and government policy (at both the state and federal level) and is needed to fight the battle with obesity. TFAH recommends policy actions such as bolstering preventative care provided by employers (including the government) which would offer obesity-risk screening, obesity-related disease management, and subsidizing and encouraging fitness programs; providing (on the federal, state, and local levels) more useful information and support by offering accessible and uniform information to the public and by providing and funding community-based obesity-reduction programs; and improving school nutrition and physical education programs by taking the position that the minimum standards are not good enough for school lunch programs and focusing on maximum nutrition as a priority in the re-evaluation of current programs. Physical education should be given greater priority in the schools' curriculum. TFAH also recommends smarter community design, which communities and governments must stress. They can do this, TFAH says, by requiring the evaluation of the health impact of new buildings, updating existing developments, and encouraging design that promotes and provides space for physical activity such as recreational space, sidewalks, public transportation, and safe staircases.

## References

<sup>1</sup> Information drawn from the articles *Obesity in America Continues to Expand* (<http://articles.health.msn.com/id/100109249>) and *Report Finds Missouri Has 16th Highest Rate of Adult Obesity in U.S.; National Policy Paralysis Threatens to Make Problem Worse* (<http://healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2005/release.php?StateID=MO>).

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Spath is a graduate research assistant in the Institute of Public Policy at the Truman School of Public Affairs, University of Missouri-Columbia.

