

PRESS RELEASE

Does Blaming Parents for Childhood Obesity Interfere with Policies to Address the Problem?

New York, New York, March 5, 2015—The American public holds parents highly responsible and largely to blame for childhood obesity, according to a new study published in the March 2015 issue of *The Milbank Quarterly*. How do these publicly held views influence efforts to reverse obesity rates?

While much of the literature suggests that negative public attitudes towards obese individuals could have a detrimental effect on efforts to reduce obesity, this study found that even among those believing that parents were mostly to blame for childhood obesity, there was support for broad policy actions, particularly school-based obesity prevention policies. The study, “The Role of Parents in Public Views of Strategies to Address Childhood Obesity in the United States,” fills a gap in the research by focusing on how public attitudes toward the role of *parents* in the obesity epidemic might influence support for a range of obesity reduction strategies. The authors are Julia A. Wolfson, MPP, and Colleen L. Barry, PhD, MPP (Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health), Sarah E. Gollust, PhD (University of Minnesota), and Jeff Niederdeppe, PhD (Cornell University).

Using two national surveys of American adults, the researchers analyzed data to determine attributions of blame and responsibility for childhood obesity, both among the general public and parents themselves. They found high attributions of blame and responsibility among both men and women and those with and without children. The researchers also looked at the relation between views of parents and support for obesity prevention policies.

“We were encouraged to find that high levels of blame and responsibility directed at parents were not inconsistent with support for school-based policies to reduce childhood obesity rates,” says Wolfson.

Key findings include:

- School-based obesity prevention policies were strongly supported, even among those believing that parents were mostly to blame.
- Americans who viewed groups outside the family (the food and beverage industry, schools, and the government) as responsible for addressing the problem were more willing to support a wider range of population-based obesity prevention policies.

“Because a focus on childhood obesity, rather than obesity more generally, does seem to activate feelings of blame and responsibility towards parents, the public health community should be careful about the way in which obesity policies are framed and how the problem is described,” says Barry. “In addition, the findings from this study indicate that placing a greater

emphasis on addressing childhood obesity as a joint responsibility of both parents and external actors (schools, government and the food industry) may hold more promise for building stronger public support for population-based policies to reduce obesity."

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Continuously published since 1923, *The Milbank Quarterly* features peer-reviewed original research, policy review, and analysis from academics, clinicians, and policymakers. The *Quarterly's* multidisciplinary approach and commitment to applying the best empirical research to practical policymaking offer in-depth assessments of the social, economic, historical, legal, and ethical dimensions of health and health care policy. *The Milbank Quarterly* is published in March, June, September, and December on behalf of the Milbank Memorial Fund by John Wiley & Sons. www.milbank.org/the-milbank-quarterly

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