Denver Child Health Fact Sheet

The vision of the Office of Children’s Affairs is to deliver a world class City where all children, youth, and their families have the opportunity to succeed. Access to healthy foods, physical activity and adequate medical and dental care are essential to the providing Denver’s children with the best opportunity to live a healthy, productive life.

Overweight and Obesity
One of the biggest challenges currently facing Denver is the number of children who are at an unhealthy weight. Childhood obesity is the result of consuming too many calories and not getting enough physical activity. Overweight children are those whose body mass index (BMI) is categorized 85-94 percent of normal weight for height. Obese children are those whose BMI is 95 percent of normal weight for height or higher. All of these children are at risk for developing serious, long-term health problems such as diabetes and heart disease.

Denver Public Schools together with Denver Health collects BMI data for Denver Public School students between the ages of three and 15. According to this source, 31 percent of Denver children were measured as overweight or obese (16 percent obese and 15 percent overweight).

Typically, Colorado communities with high rates of obesity face limited access to healthy and affordable foods, recreational facilities, safe neighborhoods and preventive health care. Children living in poverty or in low-income families are more likely to be overweight or obese than their more affluent peers.

The graph below describes the percentage of overweight and obese students for each school year. The percentage of students at an unhealthy weight status remained flat for the last four school years. However, due to the annual growth of Denver Public School enrollment, the number of children at an unhealthy weight is most likely increasing.

DPS Students at an Unhealthy Weight


Food Insecurity
Children in food-insecure households, or households that struggle to afford food for their families, are at an increased risk for numerous health problems that can affect a child’s ability to thrive. Also measuring food insecurity, the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) uses the phrase “food hardship” and surveys Americans annually to determine within the last 12 months the rate at which people didn’t have enough money to buy food that they or their families needed. In 2011-2012, the Denver-Aurora region had a food hardship rate of 15.4 percent. The national food hardship rate has been increasing since 2008 to 18.6 in 2011.\(^3\) Federal and local programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, are available to assist families in providing food to their children.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly the Federal Food Stamp Program, helps mitigate the negative impacts of food insecurity on children and their families. It is a federally funded program that provides eligible households with coupons or cards that can be used to purchase food. In Denver, the program is administered by Denver Human Services. There are 54,911 children (39 percent) who will receive SNAP benefits in 2013.\(^4\)

Food Deserts
Limited access to supermarkets, grocery stores, and other sources of healthy and affordable food may make it harder for some Denver residents to eat a balanced diet. The USDA created a Food Access Research Atlas that provides a spatial overview of food access indicators. The darker shaded areas in the map indicate the highest proportion of children who live in a food desert (defined as low-income and more than one mile from a neighborhood supermarket) by census tract.\(^5\)

---


\(^4\) Department of Human Services. (April 1 2009-2013). *Number of Children on active Food Assistance cases (SNAP).* City and County of Denver.

Health Insurance

Uninsured Children
The ability for all children to see a health care provider for routine exams, screenings, immunizations, and care when sick is essential for healthy growth and development. Unfortunately, too many children live in families without health insurance due to high costs, limited access to providers, or enrollment barriers. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, nine percent of children in both Colorado and Denver were without health insurance in 2012. The good news is that the number of uninsured children in 2012 has dropped dramatically since 2008.6

Uninsured Children

![Uninsured Children chart](chart.png)

Medicaid
Family Medicaid is a public health insurance program available for children age 17 and younger in families earning 133 percent of the federal poverty level or less. Forty-seven percent (65,813) children were enrolled in Medicaid in Denver in 2011.7

Child Health Plan Plus (CHP+)
The Child Health Plan Plus is a low-cost, public health insurance program for children in families earning between 133 percent of the federal poverty level and below 250 percent of the federal poverty level. Almost 12 percent, or 16,386, children age 18 and younger participated in CHP+ in Denver in 2011.8

---

Eligible But Not Enrolled in Public Health Insurance

Children living in families with income below the poverty level are eligible for public insurance programs. However, many of these eligible children were not enrolled in 2011. In Denver 13 percent, or 9,000 children who qualify for Medicaid or CHP+ were not enrolled. Denver had a lower rate than the state average of 19 percent of children who were eligible but not enrolled.  

Children Eligible but not Enrolled in CHP+ or Medicaid

![Graph showing percentage of eligible children not enrolled in CHP+ or Medicaid from 2007 to 2011.]

Risky Behaviors

More than 16,800 Denver Public School students participated in the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey during the 2011-2012 school year. Some of the key findings of the report measure the percentage of students in grades 6-12 that reported participating in risky behaviors in the past 30 days.

- Twenty-eight percent of students drank alcohol;
- Nineteen percent of students smoked marijuana;
- Ten percent smoked cigarettes; and
- Eleven percent reported taking prescription drugs without a doctor’s prescription.  

For more information about the Office of Children’s Affairs go to: www.denvergov.org/childrensaffairs

---


November 2013