Childhood Overweight and Obesity in California

What It Is
On kidsdata.org, indicators of childhood overweight and obesity include the percentage of public school students in grades 5, 7, and 9 with body composition falling above the “Healthy Fitness Zone” of the FitnessGram assessment, by grade level (e.g., in 2018, 40.5% of California 5th graders were overweight or obese).

Why This Topic Is Important
More than one-third (35%) of U.S. children ages 2-19 are overweight or obese, according to a 2015-2016 survey from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (A Body Mass Index (BMI) at or above the 95th percentile on CDC growth charts is considered obese; overweight refers to BMI between the 85th and 95th percentiles.) The childhood obesity rate has more than tripled over the past four decades, though rates have leveled off in recent years. While some progress has been made, data show that significant racial/ethnic and socioeconomic disparities persist in obesity prevalence.

Compared with children at healthy weight, those who are overweight or obese are at higher risk for a range of health problems, including asthma, heart disease, and some types of cancer; they also are more likely to become overweight or obese adults. Some obese children are diagnosed with illnesses previously considered “adult” conditions, such as high blood pressure and type 2 diabetes. In addition, children with obesity are at increased risk for joint and bone problems, sleep apnea, and social and emotional difficulties, such as stigmatization and low self-esteem. Obesity’s impact also extends beyond the individual. U.S. medical care costs related to adult obesity are estimated between $147 billion and 210 billion annually; in California, a 5% reduction in average adult BMI could save more than $80 billion in obesity-related health care costs by 2030.

Many factors contribute to childhood obesity and overweight. The rise has been attributed to changes in food environments that make non-nutritious “Junk” food and beverages more available, affordable, and appealing, as well as social and environmental changes that have reduced physical activity among children—e.g., increased sedentary screen time, less physical education, neighborhoods that do not promote walking or riding bikes, and decreased safe places for children to play.
**How Children Are Faring**

In 2018, 41% of 5th graders, 39% of 7th graders, and 37% of 9th graders in California were overweight or obese. These figures have remained relatively stable since 2011. Statewide, the percentage of boys who were overweight or obese in 2018 was higher than the percentage for girls in each grade level.

Across regions and racial/ethnic groups there are wide variations in the percentage of students who are overweight or obese. For example, the percentage of 5th graders who were overweight or obese ranged from 19% to 52% among counties with data in 2018, and from 0% to 70% across school districts. Statewide, 54% of Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander and 49% of Hispanic/Latino 5th graders were overweight or obese in 2018, compared with less than 30% of their Asian American and white peers.

**View references for this text and additional research on this topic:**
https://www.kidsdata.org/topic/61/weight/summary

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**Data Source:** California Dept. of Education, Physical Fitness Testing Research Files (Dec. 2018).

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**Students Who Are Overweight or Obese, by Gender and Grade Level:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
<th>Grade 7</th>
<th>Grade 9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>36.8%</td>
<td>37.0%</td>
<td>36.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44.0%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Definition:** Percentage of public school students in grades 5, 7, and 9 with body composition falling above the "Healthy Fitness Zone" of the FitnessGram assessment, by gender and grade level (e.g., in 2018, 36.8% of female 5th graders in California were overweight or obese).

**Data Source:** California Dept. of Education, Physical Fitness Testing Research Files (Dec. 2018).