Approximately one out of three adults in Southeastern Pennsylvania is obese

Obesity is a public health crisis in the United States. There has been a sharp increase in obesity rates over the past decade, with nearly 40% of all adults over the age of 20 currently obese.¹ Adults with obesity are at increased risk for severe chronic health conditions, including Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke and certain types of cancer.² In this Household Health Survey Data Spotlight, we report on obesity rates for the five-county Southeastern Pennsylvania (SEPA) region (Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Philadelphia, and Montgomery Counties) based on data collected as part of the 2018-2019 Household Health Survey.

Obesity rates in the five-county SEPA region

The Healthy People 2020 benchmark for obesity in the United States calls for obesity rates to be no more than 30.5% in the adult population.³ In the SEPA region, 29.2% of adults are obese, representing a steady rise in the rate of obesity over the past 18 years since the HHS began tracking obesity data in 2002 (29.0% increase, or 22.7% age-adjusted).⁴
Age-adjusted obesity rates are highest in Delaware and Philadelphia counties, exceeding the Healthy People 2020 benchmark of 30.5%.

- Delaware County: 35.2%
- Philadelphia County: 31.3%
- Montgomery County: 29.2%
- Bucks County: 28.3%
- Chester County: 23.3%

The link between obesity and race, age, and poverty status

We assessed differences in the prevalence of obesity among adults in SEPA by race and ethnicity, age, and poverty in 2018-2019. We found that:

- The prevalence of obesity was slightly higher among females than males, at 31.9% and 29.2% respectively ($p=.015$).
- The prevalence of obesity was highest among Black, non-Latino adults at 40.5%, followed by Latinos (35%) and white, non-Latino adults (26.8%) ($p<.001$).
- Adults aged 45-64 years were more likely to be obese (34.9%) than adults 65 and older (29.3%) or adults under 44 (25.2%) ($p<.01$).
- Adults living in or just above poverty were more likely to be obese (35.6%) than adults who were not poor (28.6%) ($p<.01$).
The impact of poverty on obesity differs for Black and white adults, depending on age.

- While Black adults are more likely to experience obesity, there is some evidence that the effects of poverty on obesity do not take hold for Black adults until middle age, as only 21.4% between ages 18-44 living in poverty were obese compared to 30.2% of white adults \(p=0.056\). Older Black adults (65+) living in or near poverty are much more likely to be obese than older whites (43.4% versus 23.1%, \(p<0.001\)).
- Among adults who are living above poverty the obesity rate among Black adults 18-44 years is double that of white adults (42.2% versus 21.1%, \(p < 0.001\)) and nearly double (46% versus 27.4%, \(p < 0.001\)) among adults 45-64 years.

Obesity is a national health emergency in the United States, and the prevalence of obesity is on the rise throughout the SEPA region. As is true across the United States, persons who live in or near poverty are at increased risk for obesity, regardless of race or ethnicity. Older Black adults living in poverty have the greatest risk for obesity. While many factors are linked with an increased risk for obesity including medical conditions, genetic factors and lifestyle choices, among the poor risk for obesity can also include lack of safe space to exercise, food deserts where grocery stores that carry fresh fruits and vegetables are not available, and lack of transportation to access healthy food options.7

4. The age-adjustment of HHS data differs slightly from the age-adjustment methodology used in HP 2020. The HHS age-adjustment includes 18 years and older respondents while HP 2020 includes ages 20 years and older. This difference in methodology has only a minuscule impact given that 18-19 years old respondents are very few in number, comprising approximately 1% of the HHS sample.
5. These findings are non-age adjusted data. Chi square analyses were conducted on non-age adjusted data.

6. Poverty: For this analysis, adults living in or just above poverty are those at or below 150% of the poverty line and above poverty are those adults at or above 150% of poverty line. The poverty line was defined using the poverty guidelines set by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which used for administrative purposes (e.g., determine financial eligibility for federal programs). The guidelines, which are updated annually, are based on the family size living in the same household. For example, using the 2018 Federal Poverty Guidelines a household/family of 5 people are considered living below 100% of the poverty line if the household/family income is below $29,420. A household/family of 5 people is considered to be at 100-150% of the poverty line if their combined income is between $29,420 and $44,130. For additional information about poverty guidelines see: https://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty-guidelines


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The Southeastern Pennsylvania (SEPA) Household Health Survey (HHS), conducted continuously since 1983 by Public Health Management Corporation (PHMC), is a comprehensive health survey of 7,500 households in Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery, and Philadelphia counties. The survey collects information from residents about their health status, use of health services, access to care, and many other timely health issues. Findings from the survey are used to better understand how social determinants of health, economic, and environmental factors can impact individuals and communities.

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