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**Study finds 41% of Greenville County youth are overweight or obese  
Study possibly most comprehensive of its kind conducted in South Carolina**

*Greenville, South Carolina, February 12, 2009* — 41% of youth in Greenville County, South Carolina are overweight or obese, according to a study released today by the Piedmont Health Care Foundation. Young people of color are more likely to be affected: 49% of African American youth and 44% of Hispanic and other racial and ethnic minorities are overweight or obese.

The study evaluated Body Mass Indices of 1,600 students in third, fifth, seventh, and ninth grades in Greenville County Schools. Body Mass Index, or BMI, is a number calculated from a child's weight, height and age, and is a reliable indicator of body fatness.

"We now have solid evidence of the obesity epidemic in Greenville County," said Katy Pugh Smith, Executive Director of the Piedmont Health Care Foundation. "Prior to this study, our community was able to believe that Greenville County was less affected by childhood obesity than South Carolina and the United States. But now we know that not only are our children affected, but that they may be more obese or overweight than other children in our state and nation."

The rate of childhood obesity and overweight in the United States according to the Centers for Disease Control is 28.8%, and the rate in South Carolina is 31.5%. These rates are gathered from survey data, however, rather than actual measures of a child's weight and height to age and gender as was done in the Greenville study.

The study was conducted by faculty and students from Furman University's Department of Health and Exercise Science during the Fall of 2008. Researchers gathered BMI data from a representative stratified random sample of students in Greenville County Schools. The study was funded by the Piedmont Health Care Foundation.

Childhood obesity can lead to heart disease, type 2 diabetes, asthma, sleep apnea, high blood pressure, and some forms of cancer. It has also been connected with higher rates of school absenteeism and lower academic performance.

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## **41% of Greenville County children are overweight or obese**

“While the data indicate a high prevalence of overweight and obesity in all children evaluated, the significantly higher rates in African Americans and children of other minority groups is particularly disturbing,” said Dr. Bill Pierce, Professor and Department Chair of Health and Exercise Science at Furman. “As other studies have shown, it may indicate that these rates are likely related to resources – whether children’s neighborhoods include safe places to play and the availability of fresh and affordable healthy food.”

“Our community cannot ignore this call to action,” said Dr. Kerry Sease, Director of Pediatric Residency Programs at Greenville Hospital System. “Our rates of obesity and overweight are the result of more than poor individual choices: they result from an environment that supports inactivity and a culture that makes nutritionally empty food more available and more desirable than healthy food.”

The Greenville Obesity Coalition, a group of nonprofit and governmental organizations formed to study and address childhood obesity in Greenville County, will work to identify ways to create more opportunities for safe playing, biking and walking; increase accessibility to and affordability of fresh foods; and reduce children’s exposure to unhealthy foods. The Piedmont Health Care Foundation pledged \$75,000 to support these efforts.

“We urge all adults to consider ways to make children’s lives healthier,” said Smith. “When serving snacks at Sunday School or child care centers, deciding whether to walk or drive to school, or choosing to reward a child with candy or a fun activity, adults should opt for the food or activity that will make a child healthier rather than more at risk for obesity.”

Parents and caregivers can visit [www.activategreenville.org](http://www.activategreenville.org) for suggestions and links on creating healthy environments for children. The results of the study are also available at [www.piedmonthealthcarefdn.org](http://www.piedmonthealthcarefdn.org).

The Piedmont Health Care Foundation is a nonprofit, philanthropic foundation established in 1985. Its mission is to improve health in Greenville County, South Carolina by Identifying critical issues, catalyzing community action, and supporting organizations' health-related programs. Since 1986, it has awarded over \$3.2 million in grants to local organizations.

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