

Johnston, F. and Harkavy, I. (2009). *The Obesity Culture: Strategies for Change—Public Health and University-Community Partnerships*. Cambridgeshire, UK: Smith-Gordon and Company.

### Review by Marilyn Corbin

**T**he *Obesity Culture* examines the obesity epidemic with its effect on individual health, and its implications for schools, communities, society, and the health care system. Johnston and Harkavy stress that the problem is extremely complex, involving many factors from multiple contexts. They argue for a multidiscipline, multi-institutional, and multidimensional approach to address the obesity issue through community-based research and engagement. The authors recognize the importance of involving the entire community in helping to address the problem, as the food system, the environment, the culture, and personal choice all contribute to its prevalence.

As a major scholar, practitioner, and contributor to community engagement, Ira Harkavy has worked to create significant partnerships to address community-based problems, especially in limited-resource communities such as West Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He has stimulated, with his coauthor, Francis Johnston, the belief that applied participatory research involving community members is of paramount importance in addressing such complex problems as childhood and adult obesity. These researchers keenly recognize that the severe problems of overweight and obesity are signals of broader societal problems that must be addressed through collaborative, problem-solving partnerships. The ecological model of predictors of childhood overweight shows the various contexts for childhood obesity and can be used to support the authors' framework of the obesity culture (*Davison & Birch, 2001*).

In universities across the country, obesity is being addressed through research, teaching, and community engagement. Multi-institutional research projects are focused on obesity precursors, conditions, and factors. Students are involved in a wide variety of programs and courses such as nutritional sciences, child development and family studies, prevention, kinesiology, restaurant management, nursing, public health, education, landscape architecture, intervention research, research methodology, and statistics. Students are also engaged in hands-on community service activities and internships where they can apply knowledge; furthermore, Cooperative Extension and other university public

service and outreach units are partnering with communities across America to work with state coalitions of schools, community and youth organizations, professional organizations, business, industry, health care providers, and parents to address childhood obesity.

These university-community partnerships are exactly what Johnston and Harkavy are promoting and supporting in their book. It is gratifying to have researchers promote participatory research as an essential approach for addressing obesity as well as other societal issues. The authors provide a strong case for how to significantly stimulate public health strategies in the community that will create ownership among overweight and obese schoolchildren, their teachers, and local organizations (e.g., faith-based community or youth development organizations).

Excellent documentation is provided in *The Obesity Culture* to describe the challenges, the intriguing demographics of the problem, and health disparities related to income, poverty, and education. Johnston and Harkavy have included an interesting, thought-provoking commentary on research findings from numerous well-regarded researchers. Other references in the book provide examples of community-university health partnerships that have been established to focus on educating students and the community, service-learning opportunities, community-based research, and collaborative problem-solving.

Johnston and Harkavy provide an insightful description and theory of the political economy of obesity, which includes food consumption, residential patterns, physical activity, and leisure time. They also acknowledge the role of politics and social factors (e.g., employment, family, housing situation, neighborhood type) that are contributing to the obesity epidemic. While some books focus on the medical and social aspects of addressing the causes of, and solutions for, obesity, this book provides a community context approach that values the building of sound partnerships to address the issue.

Several striking chapters in the book include the case study descriptions of the Sayre High School Initiative, and the Agatston Urban Nutrition Initiative. Both are focused on the promotion of health and well-being in their communities' youth. The Sayre High School initiative is a comprehensive effort centered on a specific school and community neighborhood. It was planned by individuals with a vision to mobilize resources for an innovative approach to community health. University of Pennsylvania students along with community members and the school principal and staff

worked together to integrate health promotion and service delivery activities with the core subjects of science, math, and language arts. The program became an exemplary model of a coordinated school health program.

The Agatston Urban Nutrition Initiative in the University City High School in West Philadelphia, now a national model, is a university-community partnership in which hands-on learning activities center on school nutrition education. The initiative emphasizes access to healthy foods, increases in physical activity, the creation of school gardens, and youth peer education.

These two comprehensive university-community initiatives have been recognized by health organizations for their outcomes related to improving health and nutrition among children. Both initiatives have stimulated activities to engage youth in hands-on experiential learning.

In this book, Johnston and Harkavy also address considerations for how best to address obesity. Through reflection, they realized that the book needed to be more than a description of obesity burdens (e.g., individual patient conditions, financial stress). Rather, the book should present information about effective university-community partnerships that use holistic approaches to address childhood obesity.

To address the complex causes of obesity, individuals and groups must be motivated and committed to change their lifestyles and their schools. The university-community partnership approach that Johnston and Harkavy present in this volume is compelling in its potential for making a profound difference in the lives of millions of people affected by the life-threatening health conditions of overweight and obesity.

## References

Davison, K. K., & Birch, L. L. (2001). Childhood overweight: A contextual model and recommendations for future research. *Obesity Reviews*, 2(3), 159–171.

## About the Reviewer

**Marilyn Corbin** is an associate director, state program leader for children, youth, and families, and professor with Penn State Cooperative Extension at the Pennsylvania State University. She provides statewide leadership for the development, implementation, and evaluation of Extension programs addressing issues related to individuals and families. Corbin earned her bachelor's degree at Southwestern College, and her master's and Ph.D. at Kansas State University.

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