

# Healthy Eating and Active Living

For Children in the City of Buffalo

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# Healthy Eating and Active Living For Children in the City of Buffalo

Children and youth are the future of our community and the nation. Children and youth living in Buffalo face a number of challenges that threaten their well-being and quality of life. **A key among these challenges is children's limited access to environments that facilitate healthy eating and active living behavior.** Healthy Kids Healthy Communities-Buffalo (HKHC-Buffalo)<sup>2</sup>, a collaborative effort to promote healthy eating and active living among Buffalo's children, is pleased to present this policy and planning brief as the first in a series highlighting the context, trends, key challenges and opportunities, and potential policy and **planning solutions for creating healthy environments in the City of Buffalo.** HKHC-Buffalo intends to bring evidence-based information to inform the work of policy makers, community members, professionals, and advocates who are working tirelessly to improve the well-being of children and youth in our community. *This brief provides an overview of the demographic and economic context within which children live in Buffalo, and highlights key food and physical activity related challenges in the city.*<sup>3</sup>

# Children and Youth in the City of Buffalo

## Population and Gender

The City of Buffalo is home to 62,252 children and youth below the age of 18.<sup>4</sup> These young residents comprise about a quarter of the city's population of 259,143 residents. The proportion of children and youth in the City of Buffalo is marginally higher than that in Erie County (22%) and New York State (23%). Within the city, the number of male children (32,234) slightly outnumbers the female (30,018).<sup>5</sup>

## Educational Enrollment and Attainment

During the 2009-2010 school year 34,636 children were enrolled in a total of 59 public schools in the City of Buffalo. Seventy percent (24,297) of these children were enrolled in Pre-K through 8th grade while the remaining thirty percent (10,339) were enrolled in 9th through 12th grades (see Figure 1).<sup>6</sup>

High school graduation rates in Buffalo's public schools pose a challenge. Only 53.1 percent of students who entered public high schools in the fall of 2005 graduated by June of 2009, meeting the standard four-year schedule for high school completion. This graduation rate is significantly lower than the statewide rate of 71.8 percent.<sup>7</sup>

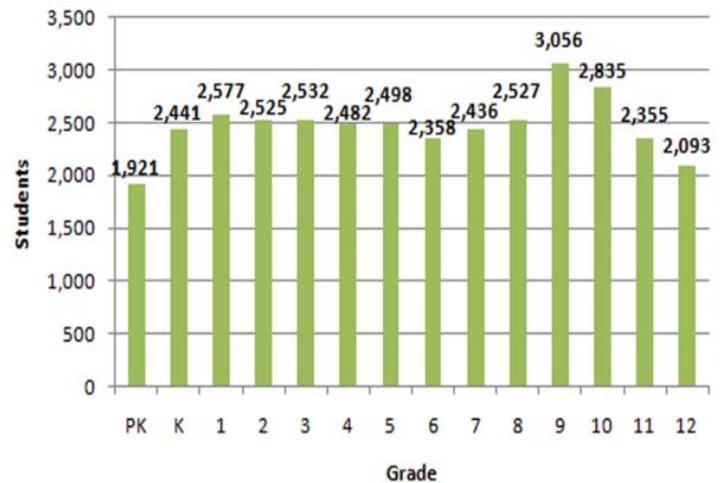
Overall, city residents' educational attainment rates are low as well. About 19 percent of city residents did not graduate from high school. This non-graduation rate is higher than in Erie County (12%) and New York State (16%). Furthermore, only 26 percent of city residents have some form of college degree, lagging about 10 percentage points behind both the surrounding county (36%) and the state (37%).<sup>8</sup>

## Income and Poverty Rates

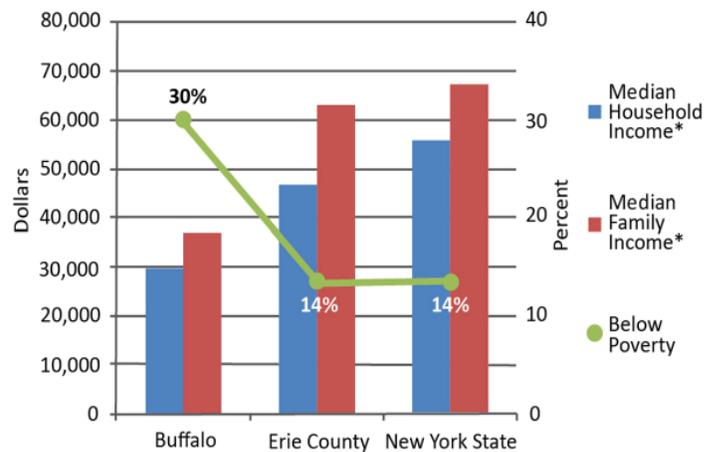
Children and their families in Buffalo face considerable economic challenges. The median family income in Buffalo is \$37,068.<sup>9</sup> Nearly 30 percent of city residents live below the federally-specified poverty line, a proportion much higher than that in Erie County and New York State (14% each) (see Figure 2).

Although only a quarter of Buffalo's population is below the age of 18, 34.73 percent (25,775) of Buffalo's poor are children. In other words, children disproportionately experience poverty in the City of Buffalo.<sup>10</sup>

**Figure 1. Public School Enrollment**



**Figure 2. Income and Poverty**



## Housing Conditions

The city of Buffalo has 140,199 housing units. Seventy-nine percent of these are occupied while a shocking 21 percent are vacant. For comparison, both Erie County and New York State have vacancy rates below 10.5 percent. A majority (57%) of the occupied housing units in Buffalo are home to renters, while 43 percent are owner-occupied. The city has a much lower home ownership rate than both Erie County and New York State.

Thirty percent (32,927) of all occupied housing units are home to children under the age of 18. Of these, about 63% are renter-occupied, while the remaining 37% are owner-occupied. In other words, a majority of Buffalo's children live in renter-occupied housing.

The median housing value in the city is \$63,000, significantly lower than the county at large (\$113,600) and the state (\$311,700). The median rent in the city is \$444. Although the rent appears to be more affordable than that in Erie County (\$503) and New York State (\$824), there are significant concerns about the quality of rental housing available in the city.<sup>11</sup>

### Households with Children

A significant majority (99%) of children under the age of 18 live in family households. Over 34,000 (55%) of all children under the age of 18 are raised by a single mother while only 37 percent are raised by a married couple (see Figure 3). Most children live with either one or both of their parents. A small proportion lives with their grandparent(s) or some other relative (10.6%).<sup>12</sup>

### Access to Automobiles

In the city, 29.76 percent of households do not have access to a vehicle. This rate is much higher than that in the county where only 13.28 percent of households lack access to an automobile. Automobile ownership is more limited among renters than home owners in the City of Buffalo. Of those households who lack access to automobiles, about 85 percent are renters, while only 15 percent own homes.

Limited access to automobiles constrains residents' access to healthful foods, especially when there are few supermarkets and farmers markets within their neighborhoods.

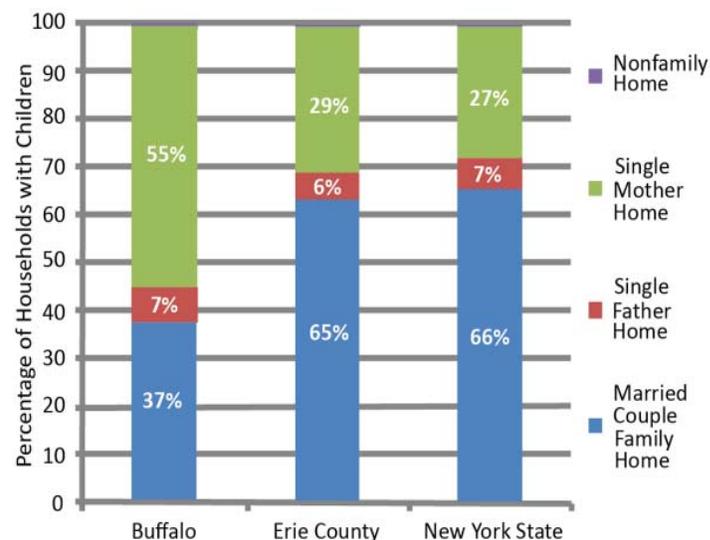
Limited access to vehicle access is, however, associated with higher rates of active commuting to work in an adult population. For example, about seven percent of Buffalo residents currently walk/bike to work, which is higher than that in the surrounding county (3.4%) where household automobile ownership is also higher (87%).<sup>13</sup>

### Racial Diversity

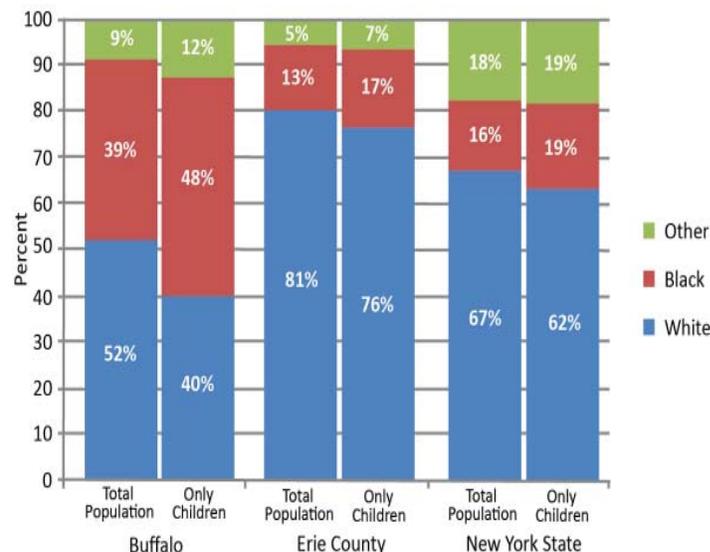
A significant proportion of children and youth in the City of Buffalo are African American (48%) while an additional 40 percent are white.<sup>14</sup> These proportions vary slightly from those in the overall population wherein a majority of Buffalonians report themselves to be white (52.23%), while 39.09 percent report themselves to be African American (see Figure 4).

The city has a small foreign born population. Of all children between 5 and 17 years old, 1,714 (3.7%) are foreign born. Overall, 13,400 (5.2%) city residents are foreign born.<sup>15</sup>

**Figure 3. Children and Household Structure**



**Figure 4. Racial Diversity**



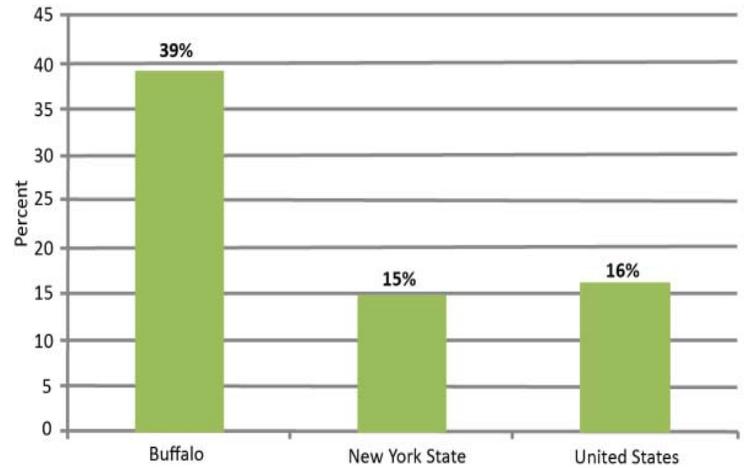
# Healthy Eating and Active Living Trends in the Buffalo Area

## Persistent Food Insecurity

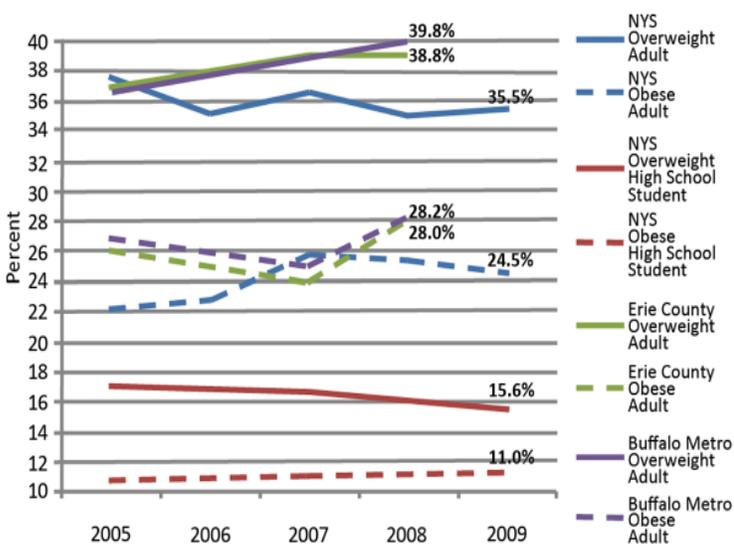
A significant proportion of households with children under the age of 18 experience food insecurity. Of the 32,927 households with children in the City of Buffalo, 39 percent (12,842) receive food assistance. Households with children appear to supplement their food needs with federal food assistance<sup>16</sup> at a higher rate than the general population - only 24 percent of all households in the city rely on food assistance. Children's emergency food needs in Buffalo are met by the Western New York food bank. In fact, thirty-eight percent of those served by the Western New York Food Bank are children and youth under the age of 18.<sup>17</sup>

Data suggests that Buffalo households with children are less food secure compared to the state and the nation. Only 14.8 percent of New York State households with children, and 16.2 percent of US households with children, were reported to be food insecure (see Figure 5).<sup>18</sup>

**Figure 5. Food Insecurity among Households with Children**



**Figure 6. Overweight and Obesity Rates among Adults and High School Children**



## High Rates of Overweight and Obesity

Along with food insecurity, children and youth in our community are at risk of obesity. In 2009, 26.6 percent of New York State high school students were either overweight (15.6%) or obese (11.0%) based on their Body Mass Index (BMI) scores. The prevalence of overweight and obesity among students has increased since 1999 (see Figure 6).<sup>19</sup>

In 2008, an astounding 68 percent of adult residents in the City of Buffalo were either overweight or obese. About 40 percent were overweight while 28 percent were obese based on their Body Mass Index (BMI) scores. The prevalence rates of overweight and obesity in Buffalo are similar to those in Erie County but higher than those in New York State (67% and 60%, respectively) (see Figure 6).

Obesity can lead to many serious health problems such as high cholesterol, high blood pressure, heart attack, heart disease, stroke, asthma, and diabetes. The Buffalo-Cheektowaga-Tonawanda metro region has higher percentages than New York State in all of these diseases except for asthma. For example, in 2008, 9.3 percent of adult Buffalo metro residents had diabetes compared to 8.4 percent of adult New York State residents.<sup>20</sup>

## Low Consumption of Fruits and Vegetables

Few children in our community eat well. The consumption of fruits and vegetables among high school students is especially low. In 2005, only 21.7 percent of New York State high school students ate the required five servings of fruits and vegetables per day. This rate has been steadily decreasing since 1999.<sup>21</sup>

Fruit and vegetable consumption among adults is reported to be slightly higher: 27 percent of adults in New York State and 28.8 percent of adults in the city of Buffalo eat five servings of fruits and vegetables per day (see Figure 7).<sup>22</sup>

## Low Levels of Physical Activity

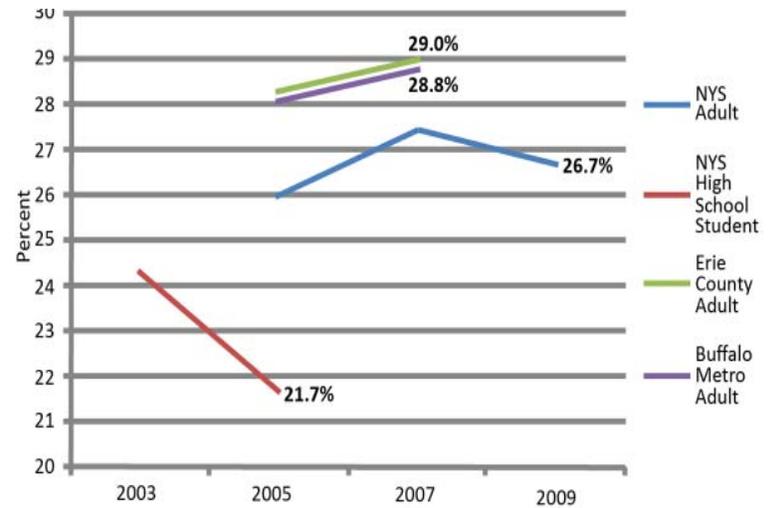
Children and youth in our community are also engaging in limited physical activity. For example, in 2009, 57.7 percent of high school students in New York state failed to meet the minimum recommended physical activity requirements of 60+ minutes of moderate physical activity five or more days per week. Seventeen percent of New York State high school students were completely physically inactive (see Figure 8). Although these rates appear dire, they are an improvement over past trends. In 2005, for example, 70.4 percent high school students in New York state did not meet minimum physical activity requirements and 27.4 percent students were completely inactive.<sup>23</sup>

Adult Buffalo metro area residents' physical activity behaviors are also better than that of youth. In 2007, a majority (52.5%) of metro residents failed to meet the minimum recommended physical activity requirements of 30+ minutes of moderate physical activity five or more days per week or 20+ minutes of vigorous physical activity three or more days per week. The failure to meet minimum recommended requirements for physical activity mirrors the rates in the county (52.8%) and the state (51.1%) (see Figure 8).<sup>24</sup>

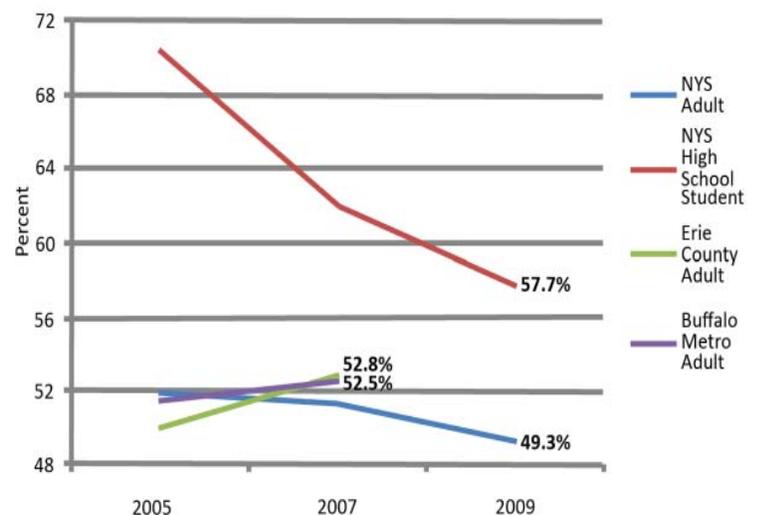
## Next Steps

Although many challenges exist in Buffalo, a number of dedicated organizations, agencies, and individuals in the City of Buffalo are working to increase healthy eating and active living opportunities for children living in the City of Buffalo. Community groups supporting active living and healthy eating are being established. Community gardens are springing up. Bicycle racks are being installed. Urban farming is becoming popular. To support these and many other grassroots efforts, future policy and planning briefs from HKHC-Buffalo will bring information, ideas, and best practices to bear upon the community's collective effort to create systemic and sustainable city-wide change to support healthy eating and active living for Buffalo's children.

**Figure 7. Percentage of Population Consuming Adequate Fruits and Vegetables**



**Figure 8. Percentage of Population Failing to Meet Physical Activity Guidelines**



1. Photograph provided by the Massachusetts Avenue Project, Buffalo, New York. Photograph taken January 01, 2004.
2. Healthy Kids Healthy Communities-Buffalo is a collaborative partnership of multiple public and non-profit sector organizations. The partnership, which is funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is led by the Buffalo Niagara Medical Campus, Inc., and includes the Buffalo Public Schools, City of Buffalo, Erie County Health Department, Green Options Buffalo, the Massachusetts Avenue Project, the Wellness Institute, and the University at Buffalo (UB). The policy briefs for HKHC-Buffalo are produced by the Healthy Eating and Active Living Environments Project in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at UB.
3. There is limited demographic and economic data available for children in the city of Buffalo. The finest scale health data for children is on the state level.
4. For the purpose of this policy brief, residents under the age of 18 are classified as children and young adults; the policy brief refers to this population interchangeably as children and/or youth.
5. 2006-2008 American Community Survey, US Census Bureau.
6. Buffalo City School District BEDS Data 2009-2010. Office of Shared Accountability.
7. New York State Education Department. "Graduation Rates." Retrieved July 21, 2010 from <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/irts/cohort/2010/GradRateSlidesFINAL.ppt>.
8. 2006-2008 American Community Survey, US Census Bureau.
9. All dollar amounts are in 2008 inflation-adjusted dollars.
10. 2006-2008 American Community Survey, US Census Bureau.
11. 2006-2008 American Community Survey, US Census Bureau.
12. 2006-2008 American Community Survey, US Census Bureau.
13. 2006-2008 American Community Survey, US Census Bureau.
14. 2000 Decennial Census, US Census Bureau.
15. 2006-2008 American Community Survey, US Census Bureau.
16. 2006-2008 American Community Survey, US Census Bureau.
17. Food Bank of Western New York.
18. US Department of Agriculture. Food Environment Atlas Documentation. Retrieved July 26, 2010 from <http://ers.usda.gov/foodatlas/documentation.htm#hh2008>.
19. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System. Centers for Disease Control. Retrieved July 26, 2010 from <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/yrbs/index.htm>.
20. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. Centers for Disease Control. Retrieved June 3, 2010 from <http://www.cdc.gov/brfss/smart/index.htm>.
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22. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. Centers for Disease Control. Retrieved June 3, 2010 from <http://www.cdc.gov/brfss/smart/index.htm>.
23. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System. Centers for Disease Control. Retrieved July 26, 2010 from <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/yrbs/index.htm>.
24. Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. Centers for Disease Control. Retrieved June 3, 2010 from <http://www.cdc.gov/brfss/smart/index.htm>.

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