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Government campaigns to fight obesity can work

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To all the cries of “big brother” and “nanny state” that come here whenever I touch on preventable causes of death and campaigns to fight back I have one word.

Oregon.

A study published in *Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine* this week describes a childhood obesity epidemic that has gotten noticeably worse since 2003.

Nearly one-third of all school-age children in 2007 were overweight, the study says, and nearly 22% of Mississippi kids were clinically obese, headed for a short life of heart attacks and diabetes.

The exception? Oregon, where the obesity rate was below 10%.

“Individual, household, and neighborhood social and built environmental characteristics accounted for 45% and 42% of the state variance in childhood obesity and overweight, respectively,” the study said.

Walkable neighborhoods, households built around activity, and individual decisions to get out there account for half the difference in obesity rates.

Where does the other half come from? Government.

Oregon officials were upset to find their adult obesity rate of 22% was the highest west of the Rockies, and began developing a plan early in the last decade to fight back. The statewide program was launched in 2007, with coordination from universities, state government and local government.

Under the banner of the Nutrition Council of Oregon, located in the state's Department of Human Services, a campaign was launched against junk food ads last year. The campaign, dubbed Toomanyads, has its own Facebook page. (The illustration comes from that page.)

For poor neighborhoods the Oregon State Extension Service launched a program called Food Hero, which uses social networking to create home dinner "makeovers" built around healthier ingredients.

All this dovetails nicely with the Let's Move campaign launched early this year by First Lady Michelle Obama. Oregon is the model proving this can work.

To those who argue obesity is a choice, government-funded programs in Oregon offer a better choice. To those who call it inevitable, the experience of Oregon shows it is not.

To those who hate government so much they would rather watch their neighbors' kids die from obesity rather than admit a coordinated effort can do some good, there is not a lot I can say, except the Oregon program costs a lot less than giving kids insulin.