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Combating the Childhood Obesity Epidemic

Trust for America's Health

To: Interested Parties
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The following analysis is based on a national research project funded by the Trust for America's Health and conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research and Public Opinion Strategies. The project included 8 focus groups conducted in May 2008 among various audiences in four locations, as well as a national survey of 1,026 registered voters conducted June 1 – 8, 2008. The margin of error is +/- 3.1 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

The recent increase in focus on obesity and childhood obesity in the mainstream media confirms that this issue is no longer an ancillary concern for people. It touches most everyone in some way, and the linkage between obesity and immediate and long-term physical and economic costs is clear. The obesity epidemic is not a static problem, but one that is affecting an increasing number of people and costing America a growing amount of money every day.

At the same time, the obesity issue is viewed as a problem that can be remedied, and even reversed. Just as evident, however, is a widespread rejection by the general public of having healthy behavior forced upon them. Rather, people are looking for a balance, where government provides the tools and opportunity to combat obesity while the individual retains the right to make his or her own decisions about habits and health.

The best way to start to solve the problem is by focusing efforts to keep America's children healthy. An immediate investment will pay big dividends now and in the future, creating a healthier, more productive American workforce and reducing health care costs for everyone in the long run.

Key Findings

- **Obesity is a significant issue that is becoming increasingly important.** In fact, obesity is the only health or safety issue to have grown in importance since 2006.
 - As the table below demonstrates, 63 percent now say that “diseases related to obesity” is a very important issue for government to focus on (“very important” means they

rated it between 8 and 10 on a scale from 0 to 10, where 10 means the issue is extremely important for government to focus on). This represents a 9-point increase from 2006, when 54 percent rated such diseases as a very important issue on this scale.

- The perceived importance of all other health and safety issues has decreased over the last two years. For instance, 70 percent of people rated bioterrorism attacks a very important issue in 2006, compared to just 52 percent now. Similarly, the percent rating developing vaccines for pandemics as very important dropped from 66 percent in 2006 to 55 percent now.

■ **Table 1:** Importance of issue as a government priority; percent responding 8 - 10

Focus on Obesity Grows While Other Issues Become Lower Priorities

	2006	2008	Net Change
Decreasing diseases related to obesity like diabetes and heart disease	54	63	+9
Preparing for a biological terrorist attack, like anthrax or small pox	70	52	-18
Developing vaccines to prevent a worldwide flu pandemic, like bird flu	66	55	-11
Stopping the spread of infectious diseases, like HIV/AIDS	70	62	-8
Chemical terrorism, like dangerous chemicals being released into drinking water	74	70	-4
Preventing smoking among kids and protecting people from secondhand smoke	52	49	-3

Now, I am going to read you a number of health and safety issues facing our country today. For each, please tell me, on a scale of 0 to 10, how important to you that issue is for government to focus on, with 0 meaning it is not at all an important issue for government to focus on and 10 meaning it is an extremely important issue for government to focus on. You can use any number between 0 and 10.

- **Obesity and childhood obesity issues raise big concerns about the health of the country.** Nearly half the country (49 percent) says that the fact that 23 million kids in the U.S. are overweight and that childhood obesity rates have tripled causes them to feel very concerned about the health of the country (81 percent say it makes them at least somewhat concerned). Similarly, the fact that 2/3 of Americans are obese or overweight, which is a factor in more than 20 diseases, makes 43 percent of the country very concerned, and 78 percent at least somewhat concerned.
 - In a focus group exercise, when asked to circle the health concern that is of greatest concern to them, nearly half of participants (48 percent) chose obesity, diseases related to obesity, lack of physical activity, or poor nutrition, significantly outpacing infectious diseases, aging, and smoking concerns.
 - The focus group discussion on obesity centered largely on children and the increasing lack of exercise and poor nutrition among American kids. As one man in Georgia put it, "Obesity is a problem because look at the kids today. Instead of going out and play like we did, in my generation, they are in front of the TV or game things or watching more soap operas, MTV and VH1."

- **The public is most receptive to school-based solutions to the obesity crisis that center on kids.** Two specific proposals to fight the obesity epidemic stand out above others. Sixty-nine percent of respondents believe that removing junk food from schools and providing healthier school lunches is a very useful way to combat obesity, while 62 percent feel that expanding physical exercise in schools is a very useful idea. Giving people incentives to stay fit is the next-highest rated proposal, but falls a full 18 percentage points behind on this scale, at 44 percent very useful.