

Looming Large

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By Hilary Parker, TIMEOFF 03/09/2006

It is estimated that a child views more than 40,000 TV ads per year. A child watching Saturday morning television may see one food commercial every five minutes. An exhibit looks at the implications of childhood obesity.

Shelves filled with junk food, beguiling Trix commercials and empty playgrounds are so common nowadays that few people notice them, let alone photograph them. This is precisely the reason that photographers Joan Liftin and Craig Terry captured the images on film for the photo exhibit on view at the Bernstein Gallery of Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs through March 31.

The photography exhibit is on display in conjunction with the upcoming release of the latest edition of "The Future of Children" — a joint project between Princeton University and the Brookings Institution. The project oversees the research and publication of journals that delve into a particular issue as it applies to children's policy, and the March 14 edition takes on childhood obesity.

"We wanted to take what the volume is saying and give a visual to it," says Elisabeth Donahue, an associate editor of "The Future of Children: Childhood Obesity." "There are a lot of environmental factors that have aided the problem in childhood obesity." While Ms. Donahue emphasizes the difficulty in drawing causal relationships between environmental factors and the childhood obesity epidemic, the photographs do capture many trends she says might be responsible.

"In some ways, what we're doing is trying to pull images we see all the time and make a link," Ms. Donahue says, describing a powerful photograph of a deserted playground. Upon closer inspection, a drug bust, taking place in front of the playground, becomes apparent. "Many of us might drive by this beautiful playground and blame the parents... Maybe there's other things going on. The policy implication might be that we need to create safe zones for kids to go out and play in."

Curator Kate Somers quickly discovered that putting together an exhibit on childhood obesity, like understanding the problem it addresses, is a challenging proposition. The topic demands that the artists make the information interesting visually, while at the same time remaining sensitive to the needs and feelings of the children and communities portrayed in their photographs. With the exception of one photograph in the exhibit, all of the pieces were spontaneously shot, making the message all the more potent.

After working with Ms. Liftin a few years ago on an exhibit about hospice care, Ms. Somers was confident that Ms. Liftin would address childhood obesity in a similarly sensitive manner. Having begun her career as UNICEF's chief photographer and photo editor, Ms. Liftin is an accomplished photojournalist familiar with documenting problems

and solutions to a variety of social problems. "I also needed a photographer who knew our area well because we needed several shots in Trenton to convey how urban, lower income families face another set of environmental challenges," Ms. Somers says, which led to Mr. Terry's involvement in the show. Relying on more than 30 years of experience, Mr. Terry captured images throughout Trenton to document even more factors that contribute to the childhood obesity problem, going beyond the usual scapegoats of candy and soda to deeper, and more insidious, social ills.

Text hangs alongside the photographs, offering a narrative explanation of the environmental factors thought to contribute to childhood obesity. In keeping with The Future of Children project's goal of disseminating information in as many ways as possible, the journal and photography exhibit work together to make current research and policy accessible and interesting to lay people, researchers and policy-makers alike.

The photograph of two children munching on a giant bag of junk food waiting to play in a Little League game, like the other photographs in the exhibit, is the perfect backdrop to a series of events that will take place at the Woodrow Wilson School in conjunction with the release of the journal. On March 13, Kelly Brownell, director of the Yale University Center for Eating and Weight Disorders, and Dr. Roger Platt, the director of school health for New York City, will speak on "Diet in Decline: Can America's Over-nutrition Crisis Be Reversed?" Later in the month, a closed conference for school administrators will be held at the school and, as of March 14, all articles contained within the journal will be available to the public on the Web site, free of charge.

"Our ultimate goal is to take this one body of information and shake it down in a lot of different formats," Ms. Donahue says.

The Future of Children: Childhood Obesity is on display at the Bernstein Gallery, Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University, through March 31. Hours: Mon.-Fri. 9 a.m.-5 p.m.