

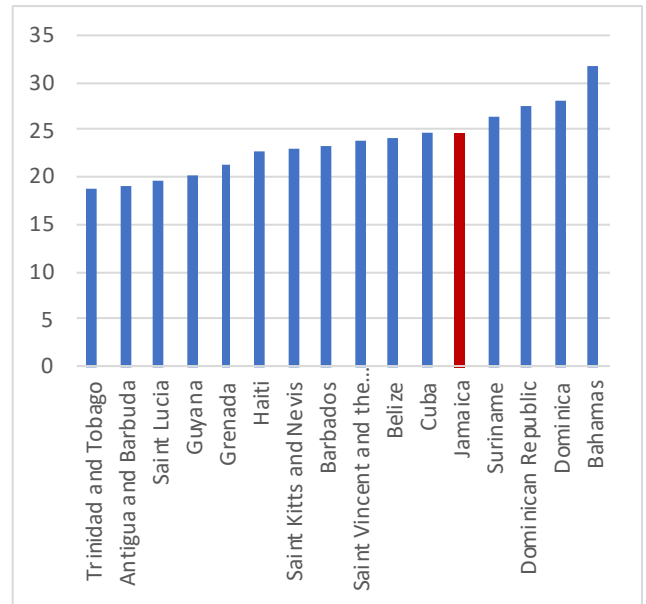
## Addressing Jamaica’s Looming Obesity Crisis

In 2016, more than 1.9 billion adults worldwide were considered overweight. According to World Health Organization (WHO), of those, around 650 million were classified as obese (defined as a Body Mass Index (BMI) exceeding 30). This statistic implies that 13 per cent of adults are obese, which is associated with a plethora of diseases, including cardiovascular ones, diabetes and musculoskeletal disorders. During the COVID-19 pandemic, obesity was also one of the strongest co-morbidities associated with severe illness.

According to the WHO, the highest obesity rates are found in small islands in the Pacific, which make up the ten countries with the highest rates of obesity. Of those, Nauru has the highest obesity rate at 61 per cent (63.3 per cent of women and 58.7 per cent of men). Another region with high obesity rates is the Middle East, which contributes nine out of the ten countries ranked 11-20 in the highest morbidity rate, while the United States is the other.

In the Caribbean, the Bahamas has the highest obesity rate, with 31.6 per cent of the population falling in that category (38.1 per cent of women and 24.4 per cent of men). Jamaica is ranked fifth amongst those countries in the Caribbean with available data. 24.7 per cent of Jamaicans were estimated to be obese (33.4 per cent of women and 15.3 per cent of men) in 2016.

The Government of Jamaica is fully aware of this problem and has initiated [several initiatives](#) to combat the obesity pandemic, but rates continue to rise. In 2018, the Minister of Health and Wellness, Dr. the Hon. Christopher Tufton, [stated](#) that the increasing obesity rates “can retard and erode health and economic advances”. Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs), which are closely related to obesity, are increasing. According to the [Heart Foundation \(2020\)](#), 4 out of 5 deaths in Jamaica are attributable to NCDs, and the cost of caring for patients with NCDs reached USD 170 million yearly.



## Role of Government Policy in Combatting Obesity

Some would argue that obesity results from individual lifestyle choices and should thus be kept out of the public domain. However, the JEP panellists were wholly unified in agreeing that obesity is a topic worth addressing through public policy. After all, not only do high rates of obesity affect the workings of the public healthcare system, it may also affect Jamaicans ability to live their lives to the fullest. **Abdullahi Abdulkadri**, Coordinator of the Statistics and Social Development Unit at ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean, puts it as follows:

“ Policy interventions that follow a ‘Whole-of-Government and Whole-of-Society approach’ are more effective in addressing obesity and non-communicable diseases for which obesity serves as a risk factor. This necessitates that policy instruments that are geared to achieve positive health outcomes also consider the socio-economic and environmental implications as well. The issue of high prevalence of obesity in Jamaica, although primarily a health concern, has multidimensional impacts beyond health and this fact needs to be factored in designing public policy to address obesity.

– **Abdullahi Abdulkadri**

Coordinator of the Statistics and Social Development Unit at ECLAC subregional headquarters for the Caribbean

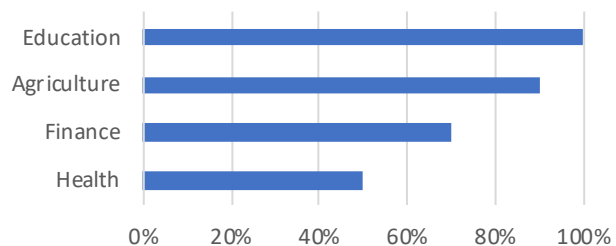
When asked about the most critical areas of potential government intervention, the respondents identified several potential areas. The one that received uniform support was education, which all respondents identify as pivotal to start the generational change required to address the obesity challenge in the long run. Similarly, changes in agricultural policy, for example, through the strengthening of relevant agricultural value chains, and finance, for example, by increasing taxes on unhealthy foodstuffs, receive majority support.

**Keenan Falconer**, Research Economist at UWI Mona, sees synergies between the different areas but also sees potential to pursue overall socioeconomic development for the country:

“ There are many linkages to be derived between healthcare and nutrition, which starts with systems of food production and agricultural practices. The Government budgets over JMD 4 billion annually for its school feeding programmes. It would provide a boon to the nation’s economy and our children’s health if this expenditure were re-directed to utilising more local farm products, perhaps even exclusively where adequate substitutes exist, in the preparation of school meals.

– **Keenan Falconer**  
Research Economist, UWI, Mona

Key areas for government intervention on obesity (several answers possible)



## Specific Policy Options

Looking at financial incentives, [Mexico implemented a tax on sugary drinks](#) in 2014 aiming to reduce consumption by shifting demand to untaxed drinks instead. Evidence from that experiment showed a substantial impact of the tax on the consumption of sugary drinks. However, the impact on obesity is the subject of longer-term studies. The great majority of JEP panellists would support a tax policy to address the challenge of obesity in Jamaica. Of those who agree that such a policy may be helpful, more than 70 per cent of respondents qualify their answer that the revenues of such a tax ought to be directed towards strengthening the healthcare system. This idea is significant under the current circumstances, where the COVID-19 pandemic has strongly impacted the public care system, and an increase of financial resources could make a substantial difference.

**Dr. Christine Clarke**, Lecturer, Department of Economics at UWI, qualifies some of the support for using tax policy by arguing that it must be part of an all-of-government approach:

// This is an intersectoral area of policy and it is important to have all handles activated otherwise the gaps will reduce the effectiveness of policy as is seen in other SIDS.

– Dr. Christine Clarke  
Research Economist, UWI, Mona

Finally, based on [this article](#) that explores methods to address obesity challenges, the panellists were provided with several other policy options to consider. Of course, it should be noted that several of the provided options are already currently used by the government, so the question focused on expanding existing programmes where necessary.

There is also substantial support for several of the proposed strategies. Specifically, there is an agreement regarding the accessibility of healthy food options. This strategy relates to the availability of healthy food options in general, which requires improving the local food environment and the minimalization of areas where it may be hard to access healthy options. Similarly, schools continue to be a key instrument for health education and a space where school procurement policy can provide children with healthy options. In Norway, [free school fruit provision](#) led to a lasting increase in fruit consumption beyond when the fruit was provided.

**Dennis Chung**, Chartered accountant, adds a further point that could otherwise be overlooked, which is to consider consumption habits and the way that the consumed energy gets expended. He suggests the expansion of green spaces available for physical activity:

// We see the impact Emancipation Park and the Palisadoes board walk has had on people exercising. There are too many areas with no green space, especially in informal settlements.

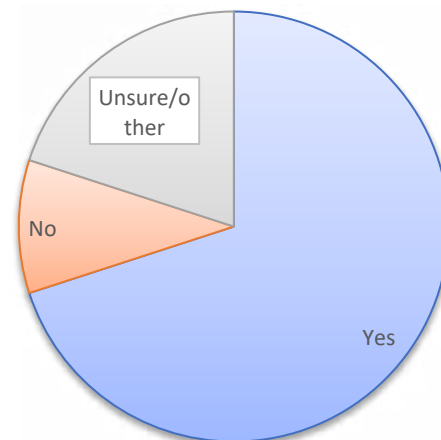
– Dennis Chung  
Chartered Accountant

## Conclusion

Obesity is a major global challenge that must be addressed through comprehensive policy in all contexts. The panellists agree that addressing obesity through public policy is a worthwhile endeavour, and tax policy is generally one of the most convenient go-tos for affecting people's behaviours. Increasing taxation to reduce the consumption of a particular product is a relatively efficient way to address a public policy challenge and generate financial resources to address the negative impacts of obesity by improving funding to the public healthcare system.

However, the other side of the coin is that a tax on unhealthy behaviours is likely to be highly regressive and will thus affect the poorest quintile more than the wealthiest quintile. Other potential policies that can address obesity do not suffer from this downside. For example, using public funds to provide a more balanced (and locally sourced) diet in schools can affect behavioural change without the negative impact of regressive taxation. In any case, the decision to expand programmes that address obesity should be based on evidence and use the generous body of literature already in existence.

Agreeing with the introduction of a tax on unhealthy foods



Other policies to help combat obesity

