In its second national assessment of what the 50 states are doing to combat the nation’s worsening rate of obesity, the scholars behind the University of Baltimore Obesity Initiative have found that some states are beginning to take legislative and public-policy steps to ensure that the problem does not become irrevocable. Other states, however—particularly those in a band running east to west across the middle of the country—are just beginning to recognize that obesity is affecting their economic well-being, or are continuing to do nothing about it.

The report card, “State Efforts to Control Obesity,” finds that only California earned a grade of “A” this year, for its legislative package targeted at the nutrition and diets of schoolchildren at risk of becoming obese. For its efforts aimed at all Californians, its grade was a “B.” Maryland received a “B” for its work in controlling childhood obesity, and a
"C" for its overall efforts.

Report card co-authors Zoltan Acs, professor of economics and entrepreneurship, Kenneth Stanton, professor of finance (both in UB’s Robert G. Merrick School of Business), and Ann Cotten, director of the UB Schaefer Center for Public Policy, said there is reason to be encouraged by this year’s report card results, though some of the states with the most serious obesity prevalence continue to lag behind in taking corrective steps. Mississippi, West Virginia and Michigan, respectively, have the nation’s highest rates of obesity, and none have taken comprehensive steps—although Mississippi has passed legislation specifying requirements for recess and physical education and established a commission on obesity. West Virginia and Michigan have proposed legislation, but neither has successfully enacted any laws to stem obesity rates.

“We’re beginning to see action in some states, and that is an important step,” Acs says. “But the efforts are too often piecemeal, or they are slow to have an impact. As it stands now, it’s costing the U.S. nearly $120 billion a year in medical care alone to deal with obesity. It is imperative for the states to act now, before the problem is completely out of hand.

The Obesity Initiative researchers said they see similarities to the nation’s enormous issue concerning tobacco, which despite decades of warnings continues to plague certain populations.

“Compared to the struggle against tobacco, we’re far from having a significant impact against unhealthy weight gains,” Acs said. “The good news is that many of the lessons learned from the tobacco wars are
applicable here. In the end, it likely will be a mix of legislative efforts, private-sector influence, litigation and common sense. But the logical place for it to start is in statehouses across the country.”

“State Efforts to Control Obesity,” including a narrative and methodology, is available on the Obesity Initiative’s Web site at www.ubalt.edu/experts/obesity.

The University of Baltimore is an upper-division, graduate and professional university. UB—the state’s career-minded university—is a member of the University System of Maryland and comprises the School of Law, the Yale Gordon College of Liberal Arts and the Robert G. Merrick School of Business.