Active Living Research

Using Evidence to Prevent Childhood Obesity and Create Active Communities

FACT SHEET
May 2012

Do All Children Have Places to be Active?

Childhood obesity is one of the country's most significant health problems. Many efforts to prevent childhood obesity aim to make it easier for children to be active in their communities. Neighborhoods that have well-maintained sidewalks, bicycle lanes, and parks and recreation resources, and that are clean and safe from crime and traffic, generally promote more physical activity. Yet many communities of color and lower-income communities lack such features and amenities.

This fact sheet highlights research showing that racial and ethnic minorities and lower-income people live in environments that make being active more difficult and less appealing. These disparities contribute to the low rates of physical activity and higher rates of obesity among children of color and lower-income children.

Lower-income communities and communities with more residents of color generally lack clean and well-maintained sidewalks, trees, appealing architecture and nice scenery—factors that promote walking and other forms of physical activity.

- Across the nation, 81 percent of American Indian-Alaskan Native women and 54 percent of African-American women reported that their neighborhoods lack sidewalks, compared with 47 percent of White women.[1]
- A 2001 study found that enjoyable scenery was the most important factor in promoting physical activity among lower-income adults, yet they were nearly 16 percent less likely than higher-income adults to have attractive scenery in their neighborhoods.[2]
- In North Carolina, American Indians were significantly less likely to live in communities with sidewalks and streetlights than Whites. They were also significantly less likely to be active.[3]

FAST FACTS

- Racial and ethnic minority and lower income children are more likely to be overweight or obese.[23]
- Lower-income and African-American communities have significantly less parks and green spaces than White and wealthier communities.[24]
- African-American and Latino adolescents are more likely to live in high-crime areas than are White teens.[25]

This fact sheet highlights findings from the research synthesis, *Do All Children Have Places to Be Active? Disparities in Access to Physical Activity Environments in Racial and Ethnic Minority and Lower-Income Communities*.

Full research synthesis is available at: http://www.activelivingresearch.org/disparities

For more information on Active Living Research, visit: www.activelivingresearch.org/

A national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, with direction and technical assistance provided by the University of California, San Diego.

Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

Lower-income people and racial and ethnic minorities who do not have enough access to parks and recreational facilities are less likely to be active.

- A national, two-year assessment found that communities with higher poverty rates and those that were predominantly African-American were significantly less likely to have parks and green spaces than communities that are more affluent and White.[4]
- In 2006, adolescents in mostly lower-income and racial and ethnic minority areas were half as likely as those in mostly White and more affluent areas to live close to at least one public or private recreational facility.[5]
- A large national study showed that youth living in areas with less recreational facilities were less likely to be active and more likely to be obese than youth in neighborhoods with more recreational facilities.[6]

Lower-income people and racial and ethnic minorities are more likely to live in areas with higher crime rates and more physical and social disorder. These conditions make it difficult for residents to be active.

- People with lower incomes, and racial and ethnic minorities, are more likely than Whites and more affluent people to live in areas with high crime rates,[7, 8, 9,10] and to perceive their neighborhoods as less safe.[11,12,13,14,15]
- They also are more likely than Whites and more affluent people to experience physical and social disorder in their neighborhoods, such as broken windows, litter, graffiti, loitering and public drinking.[16,17,18, 19, 20]
- A 2009 study showed that African-American and Latino adolescents are more likely to live in high-crime areas than are White teens. This study also found that neighborhoods with more serious crime generally had residents who were less active overall.[21]
- In Chicago, youth living in neighborhoods with more social disorder were less physically active.[22]

Summary

Research shows that lower-income and racial and ethnic minority people tend to live in neighborhoods with fewer and poorer quality sidewalks, fewer parks and open spaces, and more crime, social disorder and traffic. These environmental and social factors are partially responsible for the low rates of physical activity and higher rates of obesity among lower-income communities and communities of color. Policy-makers, advocates and practitioners must pursue strategies that improve walkability; increase access to parks, green space and recreational facilities; and improve neighborhood safety.

---

[1] King AC, Castro C, Eyler AA, et al. "Personal and Environmental Factors Associated with Physical Inactivity among Different Racial-Ethnic Groups of US Middle-Aged and Older-Aged Women." Health Psychology, 19(4): 354–364, 2000.

[2] Brownson RC, Baker EA, Housemann RA, et al. "Environmental and Policy Determinants of Physical Activity in the United States." American Journal of Public Health, 91(12): 1995–2003, 2001.

[3] Huston SL, Evenson KR, Bors P, et al. "Neighborhood Environment, Access to Places for Activity, and Leisure-Time Physical Activity in a Diverse North Carolina Population." American Journal of Health Promotion, 18(1): 58-69, 2003, http://www.activelivingresearch.org/files/AJHP_9_Huston.pdf (accessed December 2009).

[4] Powell L, Slater S, Chaloupka F. "The Relationship between Community Physical Activity Settings and Race, Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Status." Evidence-Based Preventive Medicine, 1(2): 135–144, 2004.

[5] Gordon-Larsen P, Nelson MC, Page P, Popkin BM. "Inequality in the Built Environment Underlies Key Health Disparities in Physical Activity and Obesity." Pediatrics, 117(2): 417–424, 2006.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Gordon-Larsen P, McMurray RG , Popkin BM. "Determinants of Adolescent Physical Activity and Inactivity Patterns." Pediatrics, 105:e83, 2000. DOI:10.1542/peds.105.6.e83, http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/105/6/e83.full (accessed December 2009).

[8] Neckerman KM, Lovasi GS, Davies S, et al."Disparities in Urban Neighborhood Conditions: Evidence from GIS Measures and Field Observation in New York City." Journal of Public Health Policy, 30(S1): S264–S285, 2009.

[9] Zhu X and Lee C. "Walkability and Safety Around Elementary Schools: Economic and Ethnic Disparities." American Journal of Preventive Medicine, 34(4): 282–290, 2008.

[10] Cutts BB, Darby KJ, Boone CG, et al. "City Structure, Obesity, and Environmental Justice: An Integrated Analysis of Physical and Social Barriers to Walkable Streets and Park Access." Social Science & Medicine, 69(9): 1314–1322, 2009.

[11] Brownson RC, Baker EA, Housemann RA, et al. "Environmental and Policy Determinants of Physical Activity in the United States." American Journal of Public Health, 91(12): 1995–2003, 2001.

[12] Weir LA, Etelson D, Brand DA. "Parents' Perceptions of Neighborhood Safety and Children's Physical Activity." Preventive Medicine, 43(3): 212–217, 2006.

[13] Boslaugh SE, Luke DA, Brownson RC, et al. "Perceptions of Neighborhood Environment for Physical Activity: Is It 'Who You Are' Or 'Where You Live' "? Journal of Urban Health, 81(4): 671–81, 2004.

[14] Gielen AC, DeFrancesco S, Bishai D, et al. "Child Pedestrians: The Role of Parental Beliefs and Practices in Promoting Safe Walking in Urban Neighborhoods." Journal of Urban Health, 81(4): 545–55, 2004.

[15] Wilcox S, Bopp M, Oberrecht L, et al. "Psychosocial and Perceived Environmental Correlates of Physical Activity in Rural and Older African American and White Women." Journal of Gerontology B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences, 58(6): P329–P337, 2003.

[16] Franzini L, Taylor W, Elliot MN, et al. "Neighborhood Characteristics Favorable to Outdoor Physical Activity: Disparities by Socioeconomic and Racial/Ethnic Composition." Health and Place, 16: 267–274, 2010.

[17] Sampson RJ and Raudenbush SW. "Seeing Disorder: Neighborhood Stigma and the Social Construction of 'Broken Windows.'" Social Psychology Quarterly, 67: 319–342, 2004.

[18] Wilson DK, Kirtland KA, Ainsworth BE, et al. "Socioeconomic Status and Perceptions of Access and Safety for Physical Activity." Annals of Behavioral Medicine, 28(1): 20–28, 2004.

[19] Balfour JL and Kaplan GA. "Neighborhood Environment and Loss of Physical Function in Older Adults: Evidence from the Alameda County Study." American Journal of Epidemiology, 155(6): 507–515, 2002.

[20] Brownson RC, Baker EA, Housemann RA, et al. "Environmental and Policy Determinants of Physical Activity in the United States." American Journal of Public Health, 91(12): 1995–2003, 2001.

[21] Gordon-Larsen P, et al., "Determinants of Adolescent Physical Activity and Inactivity Patterns."

[22] Molnar BE, Gortmaker SL, Bull FC, et al. "Unsafe to Play? Neighborhood Disorder and Lack of Safety Predict Reduced Physical Activity among Urban Children and Adolescents." American Journal of Health Promotion, 18(5): 378–386, 2004.

[23] Selected Health Risk Behaviors and Health Outcomes by Race/Ethnicity—National YRBS: 2009.

[24] Powell L, et al., "The Relationship between Community Physical Activity Settings and Race, Ethnicity and Socioeconomic Status."

[25] Gordon-Larsen P, et al., "Determinants of Adolescent Physical Activity and Inactivity Patterns."