

Neighborhoods play key role in how much people exercise, study says

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The neighborhoods people live in can help inspire – or discourage – their residents to exercise and keep physically active, new research suggests. Residents of neighborhoods with higher levels of poverty, lower education, and more female-headed families are less likely than others to exercise, according to the study.

It's not simply that poorer people are less likely to exercise, researchers say. In fact, the study, which was done in Chicago, found that a person's individual income wasn't as important as the neighborhood he or she lived in for determining exercise levels.

“We can't encourage people to exercise more without looking at the neighborhood environment in which they live,” said Christopher Browning, co-author of the study and associate professor of sociology at Ohio State University.

“Some people may have the personal resources and desire to exercise, but don't live in a neighborhood in which they feel comfortable to go outside for activities.”

The study found that neighborhood context was more important for women than for men in determining how much they exercised.

The findings also showed that levels of trust among neighbors, perceived violence in the community, and beliefs that neighbors help each other, all contributed to how much people exercised in a specific community.

Taken together, the results show that a wide variety of social and economic factors outside of any individual's control can impact physical activity, Browning said.

Browning conducted the study with Ming Wen, assistant professor of sociology at the University of Utah, and Kathleen Cagney, associate professor of health studies at the University of Chicago. Their study appeared in a recent issue of the journal *Urban Studies*.

The study looked at levels of exercise among 8,782 residents of 373 neighborhoods in Chicago. The study combined statistics from three data sources from the 1990s: the Metropolitan Chicago Information Center Metro Survey, the 1990 U.S. Census, and the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods Survey.

Results showed that the social and economic characteristics of a community – including the level of poverty – were the most important factors in determining levels of physical activity.

Browning said it was somewhat surprising and noteworthy that neighborhood characteristics were more important than an individual's income in determining how much he or she exercises.

“The result is surprising enough that it needs to be confirmed by other studies,” he said. “But if the finding is substantiated, it would show just how important neighborhoods are, and would have important implications for any new initiatives aimed at enhancing health and well-being.”

Another important finding was that women's exercise habits were affected by the neighborhood more than men.

“This could help us understand why African American women have

much higher obesity rates than other groups,” Browning said.

Contrary to other research, this study found that once neighborhood factors were taken into account, African Americans in general exercised as much as white residents did. Browning said this finding suggests African Americans will exercise more if they live in neighborhoods where they feel comfortable doing so.

While social and economic factors played the largest role in exercise, the findings also showed residents were affected by neighborhood safety, their levels of trust with neighbors, and the degree to which they said residents helped each other in their community.

“Neighborhoods where people do not trust each other or help each other and where violent crimes are prevalent may tend to push better-off people away – a process that leaves more people in poverty and deteriorating neighborhood conditions,” Browning said. “All of this leaves an environment that is not amenable to getting outside to exercise.”

Other studies have found that exercise levels can be increased by improving the physical components of a neighborhood – such as creating high-quality parks, sidewalks and recreation centers. But Browning said this study shows that the social environment in a neighborhood needs to be considered along with the physical environment.

“We don’t know the relative role of the physical and social environments of a neighborhood,” Browning said. “However, it seems likely that they are constantly reinforcing and reacting to one another. When there is high poverty and low levels of trust in a community, it is harder to mobilize people to achieve neighborhood goals, such as improving parks and cleaning up streets.”

Source: Ohio State University

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