

Active living in diverse and disadvantaged communities

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About 25 million US children and adolescents are overweight or obese. As obesity continues to increase while physical activity continues to decline in the United States, the disparity between the general population and low-income and minority populations continues to grow larger. These issues are addressed in a special issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (April 2008), Active Living in Diverse and Disadvantaged Communities.

The papers in this special issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* are an outgrowth of the fourth Active Living Research Annual Conference sponsored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Active Living Research Program. They focus on numerous policy and environmental barriers faced by populations with low rates of physical activity. Many of these barriers to active living reflect broader social and environmental justice issues. The papers identify specific explanations for racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic disparities in active living and obesity while pointing towards policy and environmental solutions.

It is widely known that moderate and vigorous physical activity protects against a variety of chronic diseases. Yet, studies show that 56% of Hispanic and 54% of African-American adults reported no leisure-time physical activity, in contrast to 35% percent of non-Hispanic whites. Other trend data show that little progress has been made to eliminate disparities in physical activity participation. Prevalence of overweight and obesity is also greater in low-income and minority communities.

It has been 12 years since the publication of the Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health provided ample evidence that physical activity is a critical, and cost-effective, component of public health. Physical activity practitioners continue to face challenges on how to implement evidence-based, population-level interventions that are tailored for and effective in diverse communities.

This special issue is driven by the recognition that the strategies that have been studied and successfully implemented in general populations may not take into account the unique circumstances and special environments that support or deter active living in underserved, and routinely understudied, communities. One cross-cutting theme throughout the issue is safety concerns related to crime.

Writing in an introductory article, "Active Living Research in Diverse and Disadvantaged Communities," the Guest Editors of the issue state that "...the articles included in this special issue support a conclusion that we need to reclaim our open areas, streets, and parks for play, active recreation, and active transportation. The research reported here provides some initial direction for creating community environments and policies that will support and encourage diverse populations, even those from disadvantaged communities, to live active and healthy lives."

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Active Living Research Program focuses on the prevention of childhood obesity in low-income and high-risk racial/ethnic communities by supporting research to examine how environments and policies influence active living for children and their families. This agenda has advanced transdisciplinary research among researchers from exercise science, public health, transportation, urban planning, architecture, recreation and leisure studies, landscape architecture, geography, economics, policy studies, and education to inform environmental and policy changes that promote active living among Americans.

In “Keeping Our Promise to America’s Youth,” Kathy J. Spangler of America’s Promise Alliance writes, “The emerging work of the Active Living Research Program is likely to contribute to addressing the broader social and environmental justice issues affecting children and families in low-income and high-risk racial/ethnic communities. As the opportunities and threats of a technologically advanced, culturally diverse, and increasingly global economy influence social and environmental policy, we must be mindful that children are our future. The work of America’s Promise Alliance is to see that all children are supported with the comprehensive services that they need to succeed in life, which should include being physically active and avoiding obesity. Working together, this should be our promise to America’s young people.”

Source: Elsevier

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