

Parks and recreation programs declining as obesity, health concerns rise

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One way to help address the epidemic of obesity in the United States is improved access to pleasant hiking trails and an ambitious parks and recreation program, a recent study suggests, but programs such as this are increasingly being reduced in many states due to budget shortfalls.

The analysis, done by researchers in Oregon, found that some of the health issues that plague overweight and obese people can be aided by a stronger commitment to recreational opportunities. Cutting such programs to save money may be counterproductive to community health, scientists said.

"Research is now showing there's a close correlation between public health and recreational opportunities, both close to home and in state parks," said Randy Rosenberger, an associate professor in the Department of Forest Ecosystems and Society at Oregon State University. "And it's not just about [losing weight](#). It's been found that active [obese individuals](#) have lower [morbidity](#) and [mortality](#) than normal weight individuals who are sedentary."

What's badly needed, the researchers said, are more recreation facilities and non-motorized trails, with information about them made readily available to the public, and more education about the value of physical activity. But even as more findings about these issues are being made, parks and recreation budgets are often under attack.

"The health aspects of outdoor recreational opportunities are poorly

appreciated, and often these programs end up getting funded only if there's money left over after they take care of everything else," Rosenberger said. "However, Oregon is fairing better than their neighbors due to the allocation of lottery funds to state parks and conservation, renewable in 2014.

"Washington has cut 49 percent of its state parks budget and may close 40 parks," Rosenberger said. "California was facing a 21 percent cut in its parks budget. Even here in Oregon we have a \$39 million backlog in state parks maintenance."

Of some interest, the researchers said, is that the recreational problem is not necessarily a rural-urban divide. Living in a city doesn't necessarily predict less physical activity.

Oregon's larger metropolitan areas sometimes have recreational opportunities and levels of public physical activity that exceed those of people living in more rural, less populated or coastal counties. The recent study identified 11 of Oregon's 36 counties as having inadequate levels of current and projected physical activities - Baker, Columbia, Crook, Douglas, Harney, Hood River, Josephine, Morrow, Tillamook, Umatilla, and Wallowa County. These areas are considered "at risk" in terms of recreational options and could most benefit from increased opportunities, the scientists said.

"The results suggest that park and recreation providers in Oregon can play a significant role in the health and well-being of Oregon's residents by providing outdoor recreation infrastructure such as trails and sports facilities," the researchers wrote in their report.

Rosenberger said he's seen the effects that more opportunities can have when he was doing research in West Virginia, a state with the unenviable reputation for having some of the nation's highest levels of obesity and

sedentary citizens.

"In one town in West Virginia, there were very few sidewalks, no biking or hiking trails, no convenient way for people to exercise locally," he said. "So they converted an abandoned rail line into a new hiking trail; and research found that 25 percent of the people who used it were previously sedentary - the people who really needed it the most."

Even moderate levels of activity can have a significant impact on health and longevity, even if it doesn't result in weight loss, research is showing. It can affect everything from cardiovascular health, diabetes and cancer to reduced levels of depression, increased energy and vigor, and increases in self-esteem. Informational programs should focus more on health and less on weight loss, the scientists said, and even physicians need to be more conscious of this in their recommendations to patients.

It's necessary for state and local policy makers who are dealing with competing budgetary demands to become more informed about the health benefits of outdoor recreational opportunities and consider them in their allocations of scarce resources, the researchers said in their study, which was published last fall in the *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*.

The study was conducted by scientists from OSU, the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department and the Pacific Northwest Research Station of the USDA Forest Service. It was one part of the 2008-12 Oregon Statewide Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan.

"Getting sedentary people physically active will lead to health benefits for them and reduction in the health care burden on society," the scientists wrote in their conclusion. "Gaps in recreation supply are not simply the lack of facilities, although this is important, but also their location, accessibility and diversity of opportunities."

Provided by Oregon State University

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