

Children in public housing play outdoors more

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Young children living in urban public housing spend more time playing outdoors than other urban children, according to researchers at Rice University, Columbia University and Princeton University.

Contrary to the expectations of the researchers, who hypothesized that [children](#) living in poorer circumstances would be playing outside less, the study found that 5-year-olds living in public housing played outside 13 percent more per day, on average, than did other urban 5-year-olds. Children living in places of high physical disorder -- areas with visible graffiti, trash, and abandoned homes -- also played outside more per day.

The researchers also concluded that the ratio of outdoor play to television watching is a significant predictor of body mass indexes (BMIs). The study, "Young Children in Urban Areas: Links Among Neighborhood Characteristics, Weight Status, Outdoor Play and Television-Watching," showed that for each additional hour the children played outside over the amount of time spent [watching television](#), children scored 1.5 percentile points lower on BMI. BMI is a measure of body fat based on height and weight. The higher a person's BMI, the higher their risk for heart disease, [high blood pressure](#), [type 2 diabetes](#) and other health problems.

"A key to solving obesity problems among poor, urban children is to create safe and open spaces where these kids can play, because now we know that they are outside playing," said Rachel Kimbro, assistant professor of sociology at Rice University and lead author of the new

study. "It's possible that children living in public housing have access to community playgrounds and courtyards for children to play outdoors, which could be why we see more outside play time for them."

Kimbrow and her co-authors -- Jeanne Brooks-Gunn of Columbia University and Sara McLanahan of Princeton University -- also found that a mother's perception of her neighborhood's physical and social environment was a key predictor of how much her children would play outdoors. They measured mothers' perceptions of collective efficacy by asking them questions that gauged how likely the mother thought that neighbors would intervene in certain situations (such as if a child were skipping school and hanging out on the street) and whether mothers thought their neighborhoods were cohesive (such as people's willingness to help their neighbors).

Children of mothers who perceived higher levels of collective efficacy in their neighborhoods played outside for longer periods each day, watched less television and visited the park or playground more often each week.

The researchers tested whether subjective and objective neighborhood measures -- socioeconomic status, type of dwelling, perceived collective efficacy and interviewer-assessed physical disorder of the immediate environment outside the home -- were associated with children's activities.

"Maternal perceptions of neighborhood environments, both positive and negative, truly override objective measures, such as neighborhood poverty status, when considering children's activities," Kimbrow said. "Given the importance of maternal perception, it becomes critical to create community-based programs that seek to facilitate trust and neighborhood social networks in these low-income, urban areas."

The data, collected through the Fragile Families and Child Well-being Study, represent more than 1,800 5-year-olds in 2003-2004 in urban areas of the U.S. Overall, 19 percent of the sample was overweight (between the 85th and 95th percentiles) and 16 percent was obese (above the 95th percentile).

More information: "Young Children in Urban Areas: Links Among Neighborhood Characteristics, Weight Status, Outdoor Play and Television-Watching" will be published in an upcoming issue of Social Science & Medicine and is available online at bit.ly/gXQGja

Provided by Rice University

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