

More than one-third of California teens do not participate in school physical education

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Despite a state requirement that public middle and high school students get 400 minutes of physical education every 10 days, approximately 1.3 million — more than a third (38 percent) of all adolescents enrolled in California public schools — do not participate in any school-based physical education classes, according to a new policy brief from the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.

Research has shown that a lack of [physical activity](#) is associated with obesity, diabetes and other chronic conditions, while regular physical activity is associated with increased mental alertness and higher academic achievement.

Cuts to [physical education](#) (PE) programs, as well as exemptions that allow [high school students](#) to skip up to two years of PE, have contributed to declining participation in these school-based programs, the brief's authors noted. The study found, for example, that the proportion of teens participating in PE drops precipitously with age, from 95 percent at age 12 to just 23 percent at age 17.

Using data from the 2007 California Health Interview Survey (CHIS), the authors found that only 42 percent of California teens report participating in PE on a daily basis. And more than 80 percent of all teens fail to meet the current federal recommendations for physical activity.

"California teens don't get enough exercise," said Dr. Allison Diamant, a

faculty associate with the center and a UCLA associate adjunct professor of general internal medicine and health services, who co-authored the policy brief, "Adolescent Physical Education and Physical Activity in California."

"Physical activity doesn't just keep the body healthy and prevent diabetes and obesity," Diamant said, "it also feeds the mind. Exercise is an education tool."

Diamant noted that PE classes are especially important to urban teens who may lack access to parks or other safe recreational spaces.

"Kids need to move more, and PE class is often one of the few safe places to do so," she said.

Among the study's findings:

Boys exercise more than girls

Participation in PE is higher among boys than girls (66 percent vs. 59 percent). Yet just 25 percent of boys and 13 percent of girls meet the current federal recommendations for physical activity.

School PE linked to higher rates of physical activity

For California adolescents, participating in PE is associated with an additional 18 minutes of physical activity each week, the authors found.

PE participation varies by county

The average number of days that adolescents participate in PE each week varies considerably from county to county, ranging from 1.8 days

in Santa Cruz County to 3.8 days in Madera County. The average number of days that [teens](#) engage in at least 60 minutes of physical activity per week ranges from 3.1 days in San Mateo County to 4.7 days in Lake County.

The authors recommend maintenance of existing PE classes and increased funding to ensure that all schools meet statewide PE standards. And although they commend recently implemented legislation that requires students to pass five of the six standards of the California Physical Fitness Test before receiving an exemption from PE, they note that it is important for students to maintain physical activity, even if they do meet these standards.

"Physical fitness is an intrinsic part of the educational process, not something to be sidelined or avoided," said Dr. Robert K. Ross, M.D., president and CEO of the California Endowment, which funded the study. "Our educators need to understand that physical education is just as essential to a student's academic success as reading, writing and arithmetic."

Provided by University of California - Los Angeles

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