

Sport fields: Catalysts for physical activity in the neighborhood?

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If you're a woman, older adult, or have higher levels of education, you're less likely to be sufficiently physically active. Those are some of the findings of a new University of Alberta study examining people's actual and perceived access to sport fields as catalysts for physical activity.

"We know there are many studies indicating that the actual or perceived access to facilities is associated with [physical activity](#), but it is not clear whether the perceived environment or objective environment exert stronger influences on physical activity," says study author Nicoleta Cutumisu, a post-doctoral fellow in behavioural medicine.

Using Capital Health's 2002 Population Health Survey conducted by the Population Health Laboratory, Cutumisu examined the data from 2879 [households](#) (identified only by postal code) in 195 neighbourhoods in Edmonton. In the survey, respondents were asked questions about their socio-demographics, [health status](#), self-efficacy (or degree of confidence to be physically active), levels of physical activity, as well as their perceptions of the built environment in relation to physical activity. Neighbourhoods were defined as areas around respondents' homes that they could walk in 10 – 15 minutes.

Cutumisu also had data on 362 sports complexes in the city. Working with this information and the survey data, she built a geographic information database and set about mapping the location of each respondent based on their postal code. "This meant we could pinpoint where they lived in relation to the recreation centres so we could

determine the objective versus subjective assessment of built environment for each individual."

While perceptions of crime prevalence or of high traffic volumes are seen as affecting people's participation in physical activity, Cutumisu found that "in the context of Edmonton, perceptions of crime or of high traffic volume were not so important, but a higher rate of actual traffic-related incidents in the neighbourhood was associated with undertaking sufficient levels of physical activity. This may be because areas with more traffic-related incidents are more likely to be located in the inner city, which is likely more conducive to physical activity than suburban areas.

"We classified respondents based on their levels of physical activity into sufficiently or insufficiently active and then we looked at the association between their level of physical activity and those factors. Actual access was significant, whereas perceived access was not significant. This indicates that the awareness of respondents may have played a role, because you can live in an area where you have access to many facilities, but if you are not aware of them you likely will not use them," says Cutumisu. "We still need to do more about increasing awareness. People are still not aware of the potential in their neighbourhood," she says.

There is evidence to suggest that creating environments conducive to walking and affording access to sport and recreation facilities can encourage increased physical activity, Cutumisu says. "If people have access to fitness and recreation facilities, they will use them. Physical activity is such a visible undertaking, so people might walk in their [neighbourhoods](#) if they see others being active there, too.

"Facilities for sport and recreation might have a multiplicative effect on physical activity in an area – both at the site and in the area. From a public health perspective this is what we want to do: create the most

supportive environments for all kinds of physical activity for all kinds of populations."

One possible way to achieve this is by focusing on many under-used fitness, recreation and other types of facilities that exist in Edmonton and are in need of renovation.

"A growing trend in research is looking at interventions that renovate facilities and/ or rejuvenate areas. There is huge potential in renovating existing structures, not only sport structures, but other structures (such as obsolete shopping malls) that are located strategically in a neighbourhood and are not being used."

And as for getting those identified as being more sedentary off the couch? "We need to target certain populations with awareness campaigns: women, for example, because they are less likely to undertake appropriate levels of physical compared to men and those with sedentary professions. We also need to instill interest in physical activity at a younger age because we see decreasing levels of physical activity across the lifespan."

Cutumisu says more research is needed to provide incontrovertible proof before creating interventions. "Our research confirms that access is important for individuals and that individuals who live in environments that are more supportive of physical activity are more likely to participate in physical activity. However, we still need more research looking at the relationship between the built environment and physical activity to better inform interventions that can increase physical activity at the recreational sites and in the neighbourhood."

Provided by University of Alberta

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