

Increased access to nature trails, forest lands—not nature preserves—could decrease youth obesity rates, study finds

September 11 2014

As youth obesity levels in America remain at record high levels, health professionals and policymakers continue to search for solutions to this national health issue. Now, researchers at the University of Missouri and the University of Minnesota have found that local governments can help reduce youth obesity levels by increasing the amount and type of public lands available for recreation. Sonja Wilhelm Stanis, an associate professor of parks, recreation and tourism in the MU College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources, found that counties with more non-motorized nature trails and forest lands have higher levels of youth activity and lower youth obesity, while counties with more nature preserves have lower activity levels.

"More non-motorized nature trails available for use by youth in a particular county lead to an increase in the [physical activity](#) rates as well as lower youth [obesity rates](#)," Wilhelm Stanis said. "This was in contrast to counties with more nature preserves, which showed decreased levels of physical activity among youth, and parklands, which did not show any relationship with obesity levels and physical activity of youth. Overall, this research shows how local policymakers can impact the health of their youth through land-use decisions."

Wilhelm Stanis, along with her co-authors Andrew Oftedal and Ingrid Schneider from the University of Minnesota, studied data from every county in the state of Minnesota, comparing youth activity rates and

youth obesity rates to amount of public non-motorized nature trails, motorized nature trails, nature preserves, parklands and forest land. The researchers determined that increased access to non-motorized nature trails is associated with increased youth physical activity and lower levels of youth obesity, while increased access to nature preserves was associated with lower levels of physical activity. Public forest land was also associated with higher activity rates; the researchers did not find any relationship among parklands and activity or obesity rates.

"The finding that nature preserves tend to be linked with lower levels of physical activity isn't surprising," Wilhelm Stanis said. "Typically, patrons of preserves visit them to observe and appreciate nature, not necessarily to exercise, while non-motorized trails are used specifically to walk, run or bike. Nature preserves are a valuable resources for communities; however, this research shows the importance of diversifying the types of public lands available to community residents, especially in communities that struggle with high obesity rates among their youth."

Wilhelm Stanis says it is important for local policymakers to evaluate their existing outdoor recreation resources to determine if they are maximizing the ability of community members to remain active. Wilhelm Stanis says her future research will examine specific qualities of outdoor recreation areas to determine which features, such as playgrounds, lakes or sports fields, lead to higher levels of physical activity.

This study was published in *Preventative Medicine*.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

Citation: Increased access to nature trails, forest lands—not nature preserves—could decrease youth obesity rates, study finds (2014, September 11) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-09-access-nature-trails-forest-landsnot.html>

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