

# Low-income, rural mothers express need for family time outdoors

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Kimberly Greder says families in small, rural communities do not necessarily have usable outdoor space that is convenient or appropriate, such as parks or safe walking trails. (Larger image) Credit: Ryan Riley

Low-income mothers in rural communities say participating in outdoor

activities as a family is a primary need for their physical and emotional well-being. But a new paper co-authored by Iowa State University's Kimberly Greder and published in the Journal of Leisure Research demonstrates many of these families aren't getting time together.

"There is a general sentiment that people who live in [rural communities](#) are close to nature and have access to green space," Greder said.

"However, we found that in the small, rural communities where we conducted the interviews, the families did not necessarily have usable outdoor space that was convenient or appropriate for their families, such as parks with age-appropriate equipment or safe walking trails."

Greder, an associate professor in human development and [family](#) studies and extension specialist in Human Sciences Extension and Outreach at Iowa State, led the study in Iowa aimed at finding ways that low-income, rural mothers worked to keep themselves and their families healthy and identify resources available in their communities to support health.

Greder and co-authors from the University of Illinois in Urbana (lead author Dina Izenstark, Ramona F. Oswald, Elizabeth G. Holman and Shawn N. Mendez) found that when the mothers had ample access to usable outdoor space, they experienced a boost in more than their physical well-being. They also felt an emotional boost. The importance of family-based nature activities was a common thread in conversations with 85 mothers who participated in the study.

"When a mother walked, and saw her children look at the grass and start to laugh, and pushed her children on the swings—those were the kinds of things that brought happiness to the mothers," Greder said. "The thought that mothers were able to offer their children something close by and see the enjoyment on their children's faces helped them feel a little bit relaxed. It was very gratifying to the mothers, and they felt that they were doing something good for their children."

The results suggest that low-income, rural families want outdoor spaces that they can enjoy together, and activities to do outside that are pleasant and affordable. The mothers—who had incomes at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level, lived in selected rural counties, and had at least one child under the age of 13—cited a number of motivators for participating in [outdoor activities](#) with their children: the importance of being a good role model, limiting television exposure, and promoting healthy physical development.

"Place makes a difference," Greder said. "Rural communities can either promote health or make it difficult to be healthy. Families need communities with built environments that promote health: safe walking routes to school, walking trails, parks with age-appropriate equipment, or affordable swimming pools, along with reliable transportation."

The study spanned 11 states: California, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, Tennessee, Texas and Washington. Greder and her localized team continue annual interviews with Iowa mothers from the study, and are expanding their research to additional small rural communities in Iowa.

"These mothers already desire to spend time with their children," she said. "It isn't about education. It is about the importance of paying attention to the built environment and service delivery system of small rural communities."

Though the findings show a strong emphasis on family-based nature activities, the study, "[Rural Families Speak about Health](#)," did not directly focus on the topic. Low-income mothers from rural communities were asked how their families stay healthy, as well as what resources are available in their communities to support health.

"The study—especially the qualitative data—was designed around asking

open-ended questions about the [mothers'](#) community and about their health and what they wanted for their families," Greder said. "We never specifically asked about nature-based activity at all—it came out from the data."

Provided by Iowa State University

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