

Physical activity environment and obesity risk – new research

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Dr Matthew Hobbs' research could help policymakers consider the impact environmental interventions have on preventing obesity. Credit: University of Canterbury

A new study from the University of Canterbury (UC) shows a link

between recreational physical activity spaces in a neighbourhood and obesity risk in adults.

Dr. Matthew Hobbs, a researcher at the University of Canterbury's GeoHealth Laboratory, has published one of the first longitudinal studies (research about an individual or group gathered over a long period of time), which suggests age may be a determining factor when analysing the relationship between an individual's recreational physical activity environment and [obesity](#). A recreational physical activity environment included parks, gyms, swimming pools, even ice rinks.

The study was conducted in Yorkshire, United Kingdom, and tracked 8,864 people over three years. At its conclusion, it illustrated that if a young adult's recreational physical activity environment provided opportunities to be physically active, risk of obesity was lower, however this relationship did not exist for older adults.

"It is difficult to envisage a future where obesity prevalence decreases in environments that actively promote it," Dr. Hobbs says.

"Our study showed that the recreational physical activity environments was related to [obesity risk](#), but only in younger adults. An individual's mobility varies with age and older [adults](#) are generally less mobile. While many factors affect mobility, it is plausible that the immediate residential neighbourhood environment may play a more important role in an individual's daily life who remains closer to home."

According to Dr. Hobbs, age has not previously been identified as a determining factor in this type of research.

"The research is especially important for policymakers, as it offers tentative evidence that supports previous research which suggests that the [environment](#) may matter more for certain populations. This suggests

that policymakers in Public Health and Planning need to consider the impact that environmental interventions have across the life course," he says.

"Obesity is associated with a range of diseases, such as type 2 diabetes, [cardiovascular disease](#), arthritis and some cancers, so finding ways to stop people becoming obese is important for [public health](#) and for the public purse."

More information: M. Hobbs et al. Examining longitudinal associations between the recreational physical activity environment, change in body mass index, and obesity by age in 8864 Yorkshire Health Study participants, *Social Science & Medicine* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.06.027](#)

Provided by University of Canterbury

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