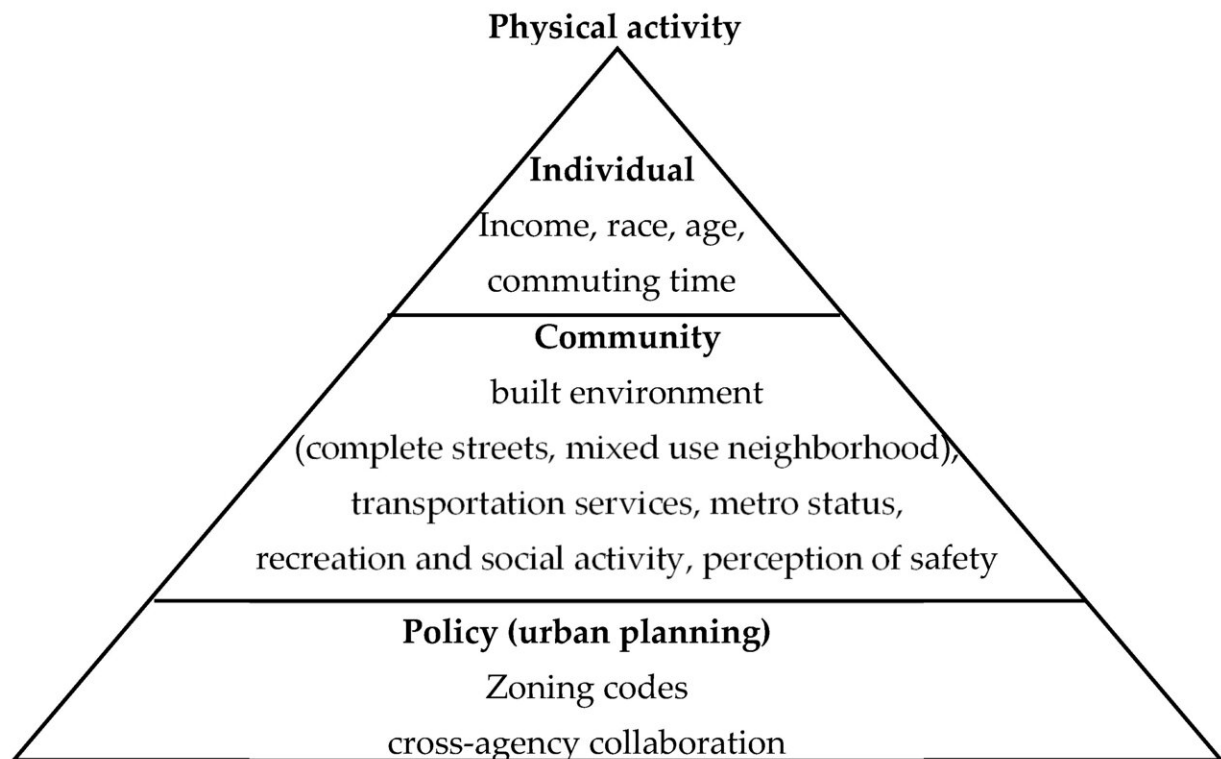


# Study: To promote exercise, planners must look beyond cities

February 27 2023, by James Dean

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Theoretical framework. Data source: Author analysis. Credit: *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2023). DOI: 10.3390/ijerph20042944

To encourage more active lifestyles, public health agencies recommend mixed-use neighborhoods and "complete" streets that are friendlier to

walkers and bikers, but new Cornell University research finds that while those strategies increase physical activity, an urban bias limits their applicability in many parts of the country.

Planners in suburban and [rural communities](#) should focus more on promoting recreational programs, expanding transportation options and creating safer environments to help an [aging population](#) get more exercise, according to the researchers' analysis of more than 1,300 U.S. counties and cities.

"These are things we can think about doing in any community," said Mildred Warner, professor of global development and of city and [regional planning](#). "If your community is investing in recreation and [social activity](#), they're more likely to address obesity and other problems linked to physical inactivity."

Warner and Xue Zhang, a postdoctoral scholar at Syracuse University, are co-authors of "Linking Urban Planning, Community Environment and Physical Activity: A Socio-ecological Approach," published in the *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*.

The scholars' recommendations emerged from models they developed to identify the most important factors—individual, community and policy—influencing physical activity.

Demographic factors mattered most, the models showed. For example, communities with higher minority populations exercised less, likely due to lower incomes and longer commutes, Zhang said. Rural communities, whose populations on average are older and less affluent, similarly report less [physical activity](#).

To better support rural and under-resourced communities, the researchers said, planners should work to broaden transportation options

and promote recreation services, emphasizing the importance of collaboration across public health, planning, transportation and parks and recreation agencies. They should also give more attention to concerns about [traffic safety](#) and crime, in addition to policies promoting complete streets or mixed-use neighborhoods.

"Our models show safety is as important as transportation and more important than the built environment," the scholars wrote.

Examples of planning and policy changes that Warner and Zhang have explored in related research could include lowering the speed limit on [rural roads](#) to make them safer for walking or biking. Partnerships enabling schools, libraries and fire departments to share facilities for recreation programs, transportation or [food distribution](#) could also help overcome limitations in the built environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic, Warner said, demonstrated many local governments' ability to pivot overnight to alternative ways of doing business, and that spirit of collaboration and creativity will be needed as the U.S. population grays.

"As more of us get older, we've got to start designing our communities for everybody," Warner said. "We can't just have urban-based recommendations; we also need to think about what you would do in other places."

**More information:** Xue Zhang et al, Linking Urban Planning, Community Environment, and Physical Activity: A Socio-Ecological Approach, *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.3390/ijerph20042944](https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20042944)

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