

# A closer look at how environment influences physical activity

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Regular physical activity is one of the most effective ways to promote health and well-being and reduce chronic disease risk. However, many Americans fall short of the amount of regular physical activity needed to

reap these benefits. Many studies have investigated the ways that the built environment and social factors influence physical activity, but a greater understanding of how physical and social factors interact and affect physical activity levels is crucial for addressing this activity shortfall, especially as communities recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and have relaxed physical distancing measures.

A new [study](#) published in the *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* reviews existing literature on the influences the built [environment](#) and social factors have on physical activity to find patterns between studies and avenues for future research. Tyler Prochnow, Ph.D., assistant professor at the Texas A&M University School of Public Health, and colleagues from the School of Public Health, conducted a systematic review of literature on physical activity to see how influences of the social and built environments have been studied together, the ways the social and built environments affect each other to impact physical activity and which factors affect physical activity levels.

"The overlap between the social and physical environments are so critical for health behaviors like physical activity," said Prochnow. "We need to do a better job of jointly measuring these environments and promoting policy, system, and environment changes to optimize these influences."

The researchers searched several scientific literature databases using search terms related to physical activity, the built environment, social factors and social network analysis and interaction. To be included in the review, articles needed to include measurements of physical activity, data on the built environment and information on [social factors](#). Articles also had to do some sort of analysis on interactions between the built and social environments and physical activity. The researchers initially identified more than 4,000 articles and narrowed down the selection to 87 articles that met their criteria.

The built and social environments have been shown to influence physical activity. The built environment covers physical aspects of communities such as walkability, perceived safety and access to parks and recreation facilities. The social environment includes relationships, interpersonal connections, peer group interactions, social norms, and other behavioral influences.

The articles in the review used many different methods for measuring social and built environments and physical activity levels. These differences may make comparing studies challenging. In addition, some of the studies the researchers analyzed used methods that have not been fully validated, which could introduce bias. The studies also mostly covered a single point in time, limiting their ability to fully show causal relationships between environmental factors and physical activity over time. Only a handful of studies were experimental or longitudinal, that is, studies that followed a population over a longer period. In addition, the researchers noted that more frequent or even real-time measurements are needed to clarify how the social and built environments and physical activity interact.

The researchers also identified a gap in research that compares the effects of different factors across communities and how the social and built environment may influence health disparities between different demographic groups. Having a greater understanding of these interactions is crucial for reducing [health](#) disparities.

The results of this review highlight a need for more studies using experimental or longitudinal designs. They also identified the importance of real-time measurements and validated measures of social and built environment factors. Additionally, an understanding of how social and built environment factors influence each other and physical activity levels across communities is vital. This is especially the case as communities recover from the COVID-19 pandemic because physical

distancing measures could have influenced social and environmental interactions.

Understanding how the built environment and social interactions affect physical activity levels is a key part of helping people get the recommended amount of [physical activity](#). Reducing obstacles to activity can make it easier for more people to get and stay active and lead healthier lives.

**More information:** Tyler Prochnow et al, Bridging the Built and Social Environments: A Systematic Review of Studies Investigating Influences on Physical Activity, *Journal of Physical Activity and Health* (2023). [DOI: 10.1123/jpah.2022-0403](https://doi.org/10.1123/jpah.2022-0403)

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