Historical Overview

Major changes in lifestyle and in the built environment (the physical character of a place such as buildings, roads, malls or parks) have contributed to dramatic declines in physical activity levels of American adults over the last few decades. Historically, physical activity was woven into the fabric of life. Most jobs required physical exertion; a typical job today requires little physical exertion. Land use patterns associated with increased suburbanization and urban sprawl have changed the way we get around and how we live our lives. Transportation infrastructure has been built largely for automobiles rather than pedestrians. Consequently, travel by foot or bicycle has given way to driving. As a result, people have become much less physically active, and sedentary lifestyles have become a pressing public health problem.1,2

“The automobile has given improved mobility primarily to the middle class, middle-aged. But these owner-drivers have not merely gained new mobility through the car; they have also rearranged the physical location patterns of society to suit their own private needs, and unwittingly in the process destroyed and severely limited the mobility and access of all others.”

—K.H. Schaeffer and Elliott Sclar
What Research Tells Us

So Many Reasons to Exercise; Too Few of Us Do

More than half of U.S. adults are not physically active on a regular basis. Just over 1 in 4 reports no leisure-time activity at all. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends 30 minutes of moderate physical activity on at least 5 days of the week—referred to as regular leisure time activity—to maintain health and wellness. Physical activity can be recreational or utilitarian. Recreational activities are those done during a person’s leisure time and could include jogging, hiking, weight lifting, etc. Utilitarian activities are those a person engages in for another purpose, e.g., active transport—walking or biking to get to work. Activities that have a lower exertion threshold, require less equipment, do not take much time from other activities, and have some practical purpose (e.g. active transport) can be adopted and adhered to more easily than other types.

Physical activity has many health benefits. It promotes weight loss while preserving and increasing lean mass. It also maintains muscle strength, bone mass, proper joint function, and may foster and maintain mental health. People may have a more positive self evaluation of physical and mental health status if they are more active. The benefits of physical activity are greatest for the elderly because it delays onset of disability, chronic disease, functional limitations, and subsequent loss of independence.

Physical inactivity is linked with increased risk of coronary heart disease, colon cancer, and diabetes. Modest increases in physical activity levels are associated with substantial reduction in mortality from these conditions. Physical activity is protective against cognitive decline in the elderly, depression, osteoporosis, and a range of other common health conditions. Physical inactivity is a risk factor for being overweight, which puts people at greater risk for type 2 diabetes, stroke, and other chronic diseases.

Neighborhood Hurdles Sometimes Too High

Physical inactivity is higher among members of people of color, the poor, and women. The poor face a more formidable combination of personal and environmental barriers to being physically active than people with higher incomes. They may face greater personal barriers because they have less leisure time available to them or have little by way of discretionary income that allows them to engage in some types of physical activity, e.g. exercising in a gym. They may also not have access to information about the amounts and type of physical activity necessary to maintain good health.

Studies have identified a variety of neighborhood conditions that make physical activity extremely difficult, especially for poor people. Consequently, there has been increasing emphasis on public health policies aimed at reducing barriers to physical activity in the built environment in order to enable, rather than simply motivate, change in individual behavior. For example, poorer neighborhoods are likely to contain fewer amenities such as sports fields than affluent neighborhoods. Research has shown that limited access to parks, playgrounds, and lack of space to exercise—all of which limit people from being physically active—are often distinctive characteristics of low-income urban neighborhoods.

Perception of availability and access to places for physical activity in a neighborhood is an important predictor of physical activity level in communities. People are more likely to get out and be active in places that are attractive and aesthetically appealing or where others are doing the same. These features are often lacking in poorer neighborhoods. Crime and fear of crime are a reality in many low-income communities. Crime erodes community trust and marginalizes residents. Fear of crime is likely to keep people indoors, particularly the old and the young, and discourage physical activity. Environments perceived as low in crime promote physical activity. People are most comfortable being physically active when they can do so in places
they perceive to be safe. Physical inactivity increases with decreasing neighborhood safety.²

The characteristics of the built environment that contribute to sedentary lifestyles are low density, low land-use mix, low connectivity and dependence on automobiles. Neighborhoods with accessible nearby places and less sprawling quality are places where people are more active.²

Neighborhoods designed with stores, theaters, and other destinations within walking distance of home and work have the potential to promote physical activity. Neighborhoods that have facilities for active recreation such as nearby parks, multiuse trails, and appealing sidewalks or public spaces for walks may also promote recreational activity.² Physical environments designed to facilitate commuting by foot, bicycle, or public transit help promote physical activity by incorporating walking or biking into people’s daily routine.¹²

A Look at Alameda County

In Alameda County, income is associated with physical activity level (Figure 48). One-third of adults from low-income households are physically inactive (33.5%)—about 3 times the percentage of high-income households (11.3%).

Whites have the lowest rate of physical inactivity of all racial/ethnic groups. Adults with less than a high school education were much more likely to be physically inactive than those at higher education levels (data not shown).

Neighborhood conditions also strongly influence opportunities for physical activity among county residents. In Alameda County, adults from low-income households are less likely to have a place to walk or exercise near their home than those from high-income households. Availability of a space³ for physical activity in the neighborhood increases with higher income (Figure 49).

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a. The federal poverty threshold is used to define income groups in terms of poverty level, a measure of material deprivation. A household between 0 and 99% of the federal poverty level is considered low-income; households at or above 300% of the federal poverty level are considered high-income.

b. Availability of space was measured by adult respondents’ reports of perceived availability of space to walk or exercise, and not actual location of space near the respondent’s address.
In the county, adults from high-income households are more likely to describe their neighborhood as being safe to walk or exercise outdoors than those from low-income households (Figure 50).

**Figure 50: Safe to Exercise Outdoors in Neighborhood By Income, Alameda County**

![Bar chart showing percentages of adults safe to exercise outdoors by income level.](chart)

Source: California Health Interview Survey 2003.

Availability of space to walk or exercise in the neighborhood and safety are strongly associated with physical activity level among adults in the county. Adults with no access to a place near home to walk or exercise are over twice as likely to be physically inactive than those with access to a space for physical activity (data not shown). Adults who perceive their neighborhood as unsafe to walk or exercise are 60% more likely to be physically inactive than those who feel their neighborhood is safe for physical activity.

**Data to Action: Policy Implications**

In Alameda County, adults from low-income households are less physically active compared to adults from high-income households. The poor have fewer opportunities for physical activity. Residents in low-income households are much less likely to have a place to walk or exercise near their home, or to feel that their neighborhood is safe for outdoor physical activity than those from high-income households. Poorer availability of space and lack of neighborhood safety strongly contribute to lower physical activity levels in low-income communities. The following policy goals and policies are suggested to address this situation.

- Develop and promote local strategies to increase availability of venues for active recreation, i.e., parks, playgrounds and school facilities, especially in low-income communities.
- Establish joint-use agreements between schools and communities, especially in low-income neighborhoods, to allow off-hour use of school courts, fields and playgrounds.
- Improve safety of parks and other recreational facilities in high crime and low-income communities by engaging policy makers, law enforcement agencies, residents, and community organizations in the development and implementation of zoning laws and general plans.
- Promote walking and biking to work, entertainment, shops, and schools, through specific proposals for city general plans, zoning requirements, use of redevelopment funds to increase land use mix in urban and suburban areas,
- Assist in the development of local planning policies that increase public transport access and improve walking and biking routes to schools, e.g. locating schools in town centers.
- Support planning and urban design strategies for streets and sidewalks that are safer for walking and biking.
- Support state legislation and local policies to promote regular physical activity in schools such as physical education programs, e.g. increase funding

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c. Perceived safety was measured by adult respondents’ reports of whether it was safe to exercise outdoors in their neighborhood.
for teachers and equipment especially in low-income communities.
References


Data Sources