

Salud America!

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children

ISSUE BRIEF

July 2013

Active Spaces and Latino Kids

Introduction

Physical activity is important for maintaining a healthy weight, yet Latino children often have limited access to safe places where they can be active.

Shared use of “active spaces”—including gyms, athletic fields, and playgrounds—can help increase access to school facilities and other public sites for physical activity among Latino youths. Street-level improvements, such as repairing sidewalks and installing street lights and bike lanes, can help Latino families and children walk and bike more safely to active spaces.

Latinos are projected to comprise 35 percent of the U.S. youth population by 2050. Improving access to active spaces in underserved communities may help young Latinos become more physically active and maintain a healthy weight.

The Evidence

Latino youth in underserved communities have limited access to active spaces.

- Studies show that Latino neighborhoods have fewer recreation facilities and parks than White neighborhoods. In one study, 81 percent of Latino neighborhoods did not have a recreational facility, compared with 38 percent of White neighborhoods.
- In a national survey, fewer Latino (70%) than White (82.5%) respondents described their neighborhoods as having safe places for children to play.

Limited progress has been made to share schools’ active spaces.

- Fewer schools provided access to their physical activity facilities in 2006 (29%) than did in 2000 (35%), federal data shows.

Shared use agreements—formal contracts between entities that outline terms and conditions for sharing public spaces for physical activity—have helped increase access to active spaces in some Latino communities.

- Several Latino communities in California have successfully implemented shared use agreements to improve access to schools, parks, playgrounds, and more.
- For example, an agreement in the Boyle Heights (94% Latino) and Pico-Union (92% Latino) neighborhoods in Los Angeles brought together community stakeholders and public agencies to increase access to public active spaces.

Concerns about liability, funding, and staffing often prevent administrators from opening active spaces at schools outside school hours. Liability protections and shared use agreements can overcome these barriers.

- In a survey of public school administrators in underserved communities, 82 percent of respondents said they were somewhat to very concerned about liability associated with injuries on school property outside school hours.



ABOUT THIS ISSUE BRIEF

This issue brief is based on a research review prepared by Jennifer Swanson, M.E., JS Medical Communications, LLC, and Amelie G. Ramirez, Dr.P.H., and Kipling J. Gallion, M.A., University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. The full research review, which includes citations, is available at www.salud-america.org.

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- Governmental rules and shared use agreements can help open school spaces to the public by protecting against liability and promoting shared costs and staffing.

Characteristics of neighborhoods, sidewalks, streets, and buildings may affect how frequently residents walk or bike to recreation and physical activity sites.

- A study of a Latino-majority region found that unpleasant neighborhood conditions, such as trashed, muddy streets, gangs, bad outdoor odors, dilapidated playgrounds, unleashed dogs, and speeding cars prohibited kids from being active.
- More people walk or bike to recreation sites when those sites are closer to home and safer to travel to.

Safe, active travel to active spaces may boost young Latinos' physical activity.

- Several Latino communities are adopting “Complete Streets” policies to make neighborhood streets safer for pedestrians and bicyclists.
- The Safe Routes to School National Partnership provides resources for increasing the safety of neighborhood streets to facilitate walking and bicycling.
- A program in a Latino-majority urban area of Chicago created safe, inviting places for residents to be active through an “open streets model,” which closed streets to motorized vehicles and allowed 10,000-plus residents to walk, run, and bike.
- Combining data from qualitative surveys and multidimensional instruments, such as the Physical Activity Resource Assessment (PARA), can help to evaluate the characteristics of active spaces and identify issues that impact use of these spaces.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Conclusions

- Many Latino youth in underserved communities have few options for and inadequate access to active spaces.
- Several Latino communities have successfully implemented shared use agreements to increase public access to active spaces. These agreements, along with governmental protections, can help overcome liability, costs, and staffing issues.
- Street-level improvements have the potential to increase access to active spaces and physical activity levels among Latino youths. Evaluating the characteristics of active spaces can ensure those spaces (and new ones) meet Latinos' cultural needs.

Policy Implications

- State and local governments should work with school administrators to address liability and other concerns that prevent access to active spaces at schools outside of school hours in Latino communities. This includes encouraging awareness of current statutes among school administrators and adopting shared use agreements with clear language used to describe the terms, conditions, and covered activities.
- Local policymakers should get community feedback to strengthen the development of new recreation sites and implementation of street-level improvements.
- Local policymakers should create Complete Streets policies for new transportation projects near school recreation facilities and other active spaces to make it easier for residents to walk or bike to those sites.