

Salud America!

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

RESEARCH BRIEF

December 2011

Crime, Physical Activity and Outdoor Recreation Among Latino Adolescents

Introduction

Crime may prevent children and adolescents from being physically active, and thus contribute to childhood obesity. According to one study, middle and high school students who were exposed to higher levels of crime were less likely to be frequently involved in physical activity such as cycling or other sports.¹ Another study found that “increasing the safety of neighborhoods in which to play was associated with an increase of 49 minutes per week of physical activity and decreasing social disorder at this level was associated with an increase of 29 minutes per week.”² While these and other studies have shown some connection between crime and physical activity, additional research is needed to examine how exposure to crime, fear of crime and perceived level of disorder in the community (e.g., the presence of graffiti or litter)³ affect physical activity and outdoor recreation, especially among Latino children.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH RESULTS

Our Salud America! pilot research study, “Crime, Physical Activity and Outdoor Recreation Among Latino Adolescents,” aims to provide more information on the relationship between crime and physical activity among Latino youths. We hope our results will be useful to policymakers and practitioners as they devise culturally-appropriate, practical approaches to increase physical activity among Latino youths, and thus help reduce obesity. We are evaluating physical activity and outdoor recreation among Latino youths ages 11-14 in grades 6-8, and ages 15-18 in grades 9-12. We are assessing their behavior in three environments: school yards and grounds; community parks; and neighborhood streets, sidewalks, alleys and yards in Chicago’s Little Village, also known as South Lawndale. Many factors that may moderate the effects of crime are being examined, including gender and to what

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PEER REVIEW

Peer review for this research brief was conducted by *Salud America!* National Advisory Committee Member Laura Brennan, Ph.D., president and CEO of Transtria, LLC.

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¹ Gordon-Larsen P, McMurray RG, & Popkin BM. “Determinants of adolescent physical activity and inactivity patterns.” *Pediatrics*, 105: 1-8, 2000.

² Molnar BE, Gortmaker SL, Bull FC, Buka SL. “Unsafe to play? Neighborhood disorder and lack of safety predict reduced physical activity among urban children and adolescents.” *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 18: 378-386, 2004.

³ Miles R. “Neighborhood disorder, perceived safety, and readiness to encourage use of local playgrounds.” *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 34: 275-281, 2008.

extent the youths have adopted U.S. cultural practices. In 2010, we collected 390 surveys and conducted 24 interviews with Latino middle school and high school students. Our preliminary results show that:

- **Latino children witness many acts of violence in their neighborhoods.** The majority of children said that crime was a serious community problem and recalled many instances of being exposed to or having witnessed crime. They had witnessed people being assaulted and killed, gang shootings/activity, fights, carjackings, and drug use in the area. Their family members and friends had been also victims of violent crime. Children recounted being shot at while playing soccer in front of their school, being beaten by gang members while walking to school, and being fearful of gang members wanting to join their basketball and soccer games.

- **Latino children are greatly concerned about their safety and fear of crime affects their participation in physical activities in different recreation environments.** More than half of the children (58 percent in high school and 52.7 percent in middle school) said they were worried about being hurt by gang members in their neighborhood. Among high-school and middle-school students, 36.7 percent and 26.3 percent, respectively, said they were worried about going to and from school because they might be hurt or threatened while doing so. In fact, 12.6 percent and 7.9 percent, respectively, said they sometimes even skipped school because they felt unsafe there or on their way. Children were particularly concerned about being outdoors in the evening. For instance, 40.7 percent of high-school students and 36.8 percent of middle-school students said that they worried about going to or playing in the park in the evenings and about a third of all students worried about playing close to their home. Interviews showed that fear of crime prevented children from visiting parks or locations that would make them cross gang boundaries (i.e., parks, pools, and clubs), and restricted their participation in after-dark activities (i.e., sport practices and after-school programs). Some children admitted they did not participate in any physical activity outside the home because of their concerns for safety. Among younger children, games that could be played close to home and easily moved to safer locations (i.e., tag) were considered safer than the ones that were more difficult to relocate (i.e., softball). Older children believed that indoor activities that were supervised by coaches, parents, and teacher, and daytime outdoor activities were safest. In addition, fear of crime seemed to constrain physical activity among older children who were more aware of the extent of the community's crime problem and more likely to be victims of serious crime. Fear of sexual assault was particularly prevalent among high school girls.

- **Latino parents were deeply concerned about their children's safety and put many restrictions on their leisure behavior.** Latino parents took a wide variety

of steps to make sure their children were safe. For instance, they strictly monitored their children's activities, imposed curfews, dropped them off at and picked them up from games, did not allow them to venture out into the neighborhood unaccompanied by siblings or other family members, restricted where children could spend their free time, frequently phoned to check on their safety, reminded them to stay out of trouble, and asked school personnel to watch after their kids.

- **Children devised strategies to stay away from crime and increase safety when participating in physical activities.** The Latino children we interviewed came up with ways to stay safe on their own. They stayed in groups, participated in out-of-home activities only during the day, were vigilantly aware of their surroundings, kept their phones nearby, avoided eye contact with gang members, were careful not to resemble gang members in their dress and haircuts, tried not to draw attention to themselves with flashy clothes or jewelry, knew the gang boundaries in the community and made sure to stay within their “hood,” and prayed to God for protection.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Our preliminary results suggest that providing supervised indoor physical activities through schools or community organizations such as Boys & Girls Clubs, and increasing police presence in outdoor recreation environments such as parks and school grounds particularly in the evening hours, may help increase physical activity levels among Latino children. We are meeting with our project stakeholders—the City of Chicago (the office of Alderman of Ward 12), four local schools, Chicago Public Schools, Chicago Park District, and the Chicago Police Department—to review these findings and develop other recommendations and potential ways to address the effects of crime on physical activity and outdoor recreation among Latino children. In coordination with the community stakeholders, we aim to craft feasible recommendations that can be put into practice in high-crime areas across the country.