

Salud America!

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

ISSUE BRIEF

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How to Achieve Active Spaces for Latino Kids

Introduction

Latino kids in underserved communities have limited spaces to be physically active, which is part of the reason they are more likely to be overweight or obese than their peers.

How can physical activity be part of their daily experience?

The best ways to improve access to and safe use of “active spaces”— gyms, athletic fields, parks, and playgrounds—include: adopting shared use agreements; improving neighborhood characteristics, such as repairing sidewalks, installing street lights, and improving park maintenance; creating safer routes to schools, active spaces and other family destinations; and using marketing and technology to change Latino kids’ physical activity patterns.

This can build a culture of health where everyone is empowered to live the healthiest lives they can.

The Evidence

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

- 81% of Latino neighborhoods did not have a recreational facility, compared with 38% of White neighborhoods, a study found.
- Fewer Latino (70%) than White (82.5%) respondents to a national survey described their neighborhoods as having safe places for kids to play.

Unpleasant neighborhood characteristics and safety concerns may prevent Latino kids from using available active spaces.

- Fear of crime negatively impacts Latino kids’ levels of physical activity.
- A study of a Latino-majority region found that unpleasant neighborhood conditions, such as trashed streets, gangs, odors, dilapidated playgrounds, unleashed dogs, and speeding cars, prohibited kids from being active.

Shared use agreements—formal contracts between a school and a city, county, or sports league, that outline terms and conditions for sharing existing physical activity facilities—have helped increase access to active spaces in some Latino communities.



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 <http://bit.ly/SaludSpaces>.

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- A shared use agreement in Los Angeles' Boyle Heights neighborhood (94% Latino) opened school facilities to the public to provide fields for soccer, dance rooms for Zumba classes, and open space for walking clubs.
- A shared use agreement in San Diego has schools pay for facility maintenance costs while facility users pay operational costs of their programming and provide their own staffing, supervision, and security.
- In a study of shared use agreements at Los Angeles schools, Latinos represented the largest group participating in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity at the newly opened shared-use sites.

Legal statutes and governmental rules can help overcome liability concerns that often prevent school administrators from sharing facilities.

- Public schools in all states are protected by some form of sovereign or governmental immunity, recreational use statutes, or limits on tort damages, according to one study.
- Arizona and Ohio enacted state legislation for share use agreements to clarify liability issues.

Improved park maintenance and safety increases Latinos' use of active spaces.

- A Chula Vista, Calif., program engaged kids and residents to identify barriers to park use (broken fences, poor lighting, etc.), leading to repairs and improvements that boosted intentions to use the park for exercise.
- A Los Angeles program improved park safety by scheduling park programs later in the evening, keeping parks and people occupied with positive activities.

Safer routes and streets improve young Latinos' access to active spaces.

- An "Open streets" event in a Latino-majority part of Chicago restricted vehicles for an afternoon to promote walking, running, and biking and allow residents to play in the street.
- The Safe Routes to School National Partnership provides information and resources for schools and communities to increase the safety of neighborhood streets to facilitate walking and biking.

Marketing and technology are promising strategies to promote physical activity for Latino kids.

- The VERB social marketing campaign used bilingual, culturally relevant radio and TV ads and other elements, which led to improved physical activity levels in kids ages 9-13.
- New mobile apps geo-locate wellness activities in Austin, Texas (35.1% Latino) and make a game of active living and healthy eating for kids in San Antonio, Texas (63.2% Latino).

Conclusions and Policy Implications

Conclusions

- 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 legal rules and governmental regulations, can help overcome liability, cost, and staffing issues.
- Improving neighborhood characteristics—better sidewalks, lighting, safer routes, etc.—can ease safety and perception concerns, potentially increasing physical activity among Latino kids.
- Marketing and technology hold promise in improving Latino kids' physical activity behaviors.

Policy Implications

- State and local governments should work with schools, cities, counties and sports leagues in Latino communities to adopt shared use agreements with clear language to describe the terms, conditions, and covered activities, and that address liability and other concerns, to increase public access to school facilities after hours.
- Local policymakers should establish Complete Streets policies for new transportation projects near schools, active spaces and other family destinations to make it easier for residents to walk or bike to those sites.
- Local governments should include sustainable funding for park maintenance and safety repairs and improvements.
- State and local agencies should examine innovative park maintenance and funding, such as “workreation,” where kids work at a park in exchange for use of park facilities, and the National Recreation and Park Association’s Fund Your Park crowdfunding platform.