Built Environment Policy for Physical Activity in Mexican-American Children

Introduction

Childhood obesity is highly prevalent among U.S. Latinos. National data indicate that more than 38 percent of Hispanic children ages 2 to 19 are overweight or obese, compared with less than 32 percent of all children those ages. A low rates of physical activity are a central contributor to childhood obesity, and Mexican-American children in particular are significantly less likely to be physically active than are children from other ethnic groups. Research shows that the built environment—man-made structures such as sidewalks, community recreation centers, schools, grocery stores and parks—plays an important role in helping children lead active, healthy lives. Factors such as access to recreational facilities, beautiful neighborhoods, sidewalk conditions, neighborhood safety and school location are associated with physical activity. In order to create and promote environments that support physical activity, especially among children at high risk of obesity, public leaders must pursue a variety of strategies, including effective policy changes.

PRELIMINARY RESEARCH RESULTS

Our Salud America! pilot research project, “Assessing the Built Environment in Colonias to Influence Policy Promoting Physical Activity in Mexican-American Children and Families,” aims to produce policy recommendations for improving the

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built environment to support physical activity (PA) among low-income Mexican-American children and their families in 14 colonias in Hidalgo County, Texas. Colonias are unincorporated settlements along the U.S.-Mexico border where many people live in impoverished conditions and lack basic services such as running water. As part of the study, we are: Investigating the perceptions children ages 8-13 have about environmental factors that influence their PA; documenting the environmental characteristics of colonias; and reaching out to local stakeholders and policymakers regarding PA among children and families in colonias. We have completed the first two steps and are currently scheduling meetings with local stakeholders and policymakers to present preliminary data and obtain their input on policy recommendations.

We collected data from a variety of sources, including focus groups with 97 children and parents, an environmental audit of 125 colonia streets and 1,000 lots that combined several built environmental assessments and survey questionnaires with 101 children. Preliminary findings include:

- **Mexican-American children in colonias do not meet physical activity requirements, are very sedentary and are likely to be overweight or obese.** Our survey of colonia children found that more than half are not active for at least one hour each day, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; nearly half do not play after-school sports or games in which they are very active at least four times a week; the average child watches almost three hours of television on school days; 59 percent spend up to two hours playing video or computer games or using the computer for tasks unrelated to school work; and 59 percent were overweight or obese.

- **The built environment influences physical activity among children in colonias.** During our focus group discussions, colonia children indicated they would be more physically active if they had a new park, sports and recreational areas such as a basketball court or swings, a walking area, lighted streets, and police watch. Children also highlighted several environmental barriers to physical activity: trash on the streets, gangs, bad outdoor odors, speeding cars, muddy streets, unleashed dogs and dirty playgrounds with rusty equipment.

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Nearly all colonias lack sidewalks, pedestrian signage and parks. Our environmental audit indicated that nearly all colonia streets (more than 91 percent) did not have sidewalks on both sides of the street and were filled with garbage, litter or broken glass. There was a single crosswalk sign and no streets had any pedestrian signs. Only one park was found in the audited area, and unleashed dogs were found roaming 37 percent of the audited streets.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The built environment has a well-documented effect on physical activity among both children and adults. Our preliminary results suggest that children living in predominantly Latino colonias in South Texas are likely to be both sedentary and obese. These colonias tend not to have a built environment conducive to physical activity, resulting in a lack of activity and high rates of sedentary behavior and obesity among Mexican-American children and their families.

We shared preliminary and end-of-study data with local stakeholders regarding how policy changes can help create a built environment that best supports physical activity in colonias. We held eight meetings with local representatives from decision-making groups and received comments form 74 individuals. A majority of stakeholders in these meetings recommended the following: 1) Seek increased funding for nutrition and physical activity programs; 2) support community organizations for outreach activities; 3) distribute infrastructure funds more

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effectively; and 4) address transportation issues that prevent colonia residents from accessing recreational facilities.