Physical Activity in Latino Communities

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Latino health is increasingly synonymous with the future of U.S. health, yet the nation’s largest and still-growing minority group continues to live in communities with reduced access to health-promoting resources and safe, pedestrian-friendly built environments. Latinos’ higher rates of childhood and adult overweight/obesity relative to whites and Blacks is often attributed to cultural influences, attitudes, and beliefs; however, community-level attributes are increasingly being associated with higher prevalence of obesity in Latino-predominant communities.

Latino communities across the country tend to have fewer parks, less access to recreational facilities, and unsafe and outdated street-scale infrastructure. Furthermore, Latinos tend to live in communities where crime rates are higher and perceived crime keeps Latinos and their children indoors. Studies also have shown that Latino youth often attend schools with few recreational resources, have few opportunities for active play at and after school, and are less likely to participate in organized sports. Even with state active play policies, many schools struggle with implementation due to competing priorities and lack of resources or policy knowledge.

In the face of these barriers, researchers, policy makers, health officials, and the public have identified families, communities, and schools as key areas to focus on to address Latino obesity. Through the work of programs such as Salud America! The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Research Network to Prevent Obesity Among Latino Children—which works to showcase examples of grassroots-level healthy changes in Latino communities—culturally relevant evidence-based strategies and program have successfully improved built environments and increased activity opportunities in Latino communities.

From a built environment perspective, shared-used agreements have been helpful at increasing accessibility to safe and free public places in Latino communities across the country. For example, large communities in California and rural cities, like Alice, TX, have successfully implemented shared use agreements to improve access to schools and playgrounds with the support of passionate parents and community members.

In schools, culturally relevant structured school programs have demonstrated success in increasing physical activity among Latino children and their families. The Míranos! program in Head Start centers in San Antonio, TX, improved parent, teacher, and children’s knowledge of the benefits of healthy eating and physical activity. Utah researchers incorporated active video games in physical education (PE) classes and increased Latino youth activity. Providing Latina teens with the tools needed to advocate for change, city pools in New Britain, CT, were reopened and an out-of-school PE credit recovery program was implemented through the local YWCA.

As strategies for improving physical activity become more innovative, it is critical...
to make them culturally relevant for Latinos. Despite the many physical activity barriers for Latinos, strategies showing promise for increasing physical activity in Latino communities tend to include community-level systems changes and active programming, but there are areas that can be better understood. As policy makers and public health experts develop strategies to improve the built environment and promote activity, doing so in Latino communities should begin with understanding the intended and desired use for public spaces and physical-activity oriented programs; that way, these efforts may be most effective for helping Latinos be and remain more active.

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References