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New Study Examines How Neighborhoods Impact Physical Activity and Obesity Among Teens

Chicago, May 28, 2010 – A new study released today by the *Journal of Adolescent Health* identifies community features that influence physical activity, obesity and body mass index among U.S. teens, who are struggling with their weight more than ever before.

According to the study, teens who live in walkable neighborhoods—those with connected streets and easy access to services and amenities—are significantly less likely to be obese. Using a national sample of 8th and 10th grade students, researchers analyzed data collected directly from neighborhoods to determine individual factors that had the greatest impact on physical activity and obesity.

Researchers found:

- Environmental factors—such as urban sprawl, neighborhood physical disorder (e.g., dilapidated buildings, vandalism) and outdoor settings—had a greater impact on obesity than did individual characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender and parental education.
- Among all of the outdoor settings examined, bike paths were singled out as the strongest predictor of lower obesity rates and BMI levels.
- Higher levels of physical disorder were linked with higher obesity rates, higher BMI levels and significantly less participation in sports. Some of this association was attributed to the greater presence of such conditions in lower-income neighborhoods.
- Teens who reported feeling safe on way to and from school were more physically active, and this was especially true among girls.
- The presence of neighborhood parks, playgrounds and/or sports fields had no association with levels of physical activity, obesity or BMI for teens. The authors conclude that such settings may be more important for increasing physical activity among younger kids, but more research is still needed in this area.

“Active living neighborhoods are an essential part of reversing our nation’s obesity epidemic,” said lead researcher Sandy J. Slater, Ph.D., of the University of Illinois at Chicago. “We’ve found that young teens who can walk and bike safely near home and have access to physical activity settings are much more likely to be active and much less likely to be obese.”

The authors emphasize that what’s working to promote physical activity in compact neighborhoods doesn’t necessarily work in sprawling areas. They encourage further research on environmental strategies for increasing physical activity and note the importance of considering age and gender when designing such interventions. The authors also highlight the need for more policies that aim to help communities support physical activity and prevent childhood obesity.

[Full text](#) from “The Association between Community Physical Activity Settings and Youth Physical Activity, Overweight and BMI,” is available online.

This research was funded by the National Institute on Child Health and Human Development and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation through its Bridging the Gap program.

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