

Child Obesity Policy Brief

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The Pervasive Effects Of Environments On Childhood Obesity

Americans are well aware of the impact neighborhoods can have on residents' safety and well-being. Poorly lit urban areas often help create high crime rates. Neighborhoods designed without sidewalks mean that people take fewer walks. How much do these aspects of the "built" environment -- including where and how homes are sited, what means of transportation are available, and whether there's a playground down the block -- influence obesity rates?

Using data from the 2007 National Survey of Children's Health, an analysis found that the odds of a child's being obese or overweight were 20-60 percent higher in neighborhoods with the most unfavorable socioeconomic conditions, such as poor housing and no access to parks and recreation centers.

THE VULNERABILITY OF GIRLS

The effects were substantially greater for females and younger children. For example, girls ages 10-11 in unfavorable neighborhoods were two to four times more likely to be overweight or obese than their counterparts from more favorable neighborhoods.

Problematic built environments are not uncommon. Of all U.S. children, 26.7 percent were reported by their parents to have no neighborhood access to sidewalks or walking paths, 19.2 percent to have no access to parks or playgrounds, 35 percent to have no access to recreation or community centers, and 14 percent to be without access to a library or

bookmobile. In addition, 14 percent of children were reported to live in unsafe neighborhoods; 17 percent in neighborhoods with litter or garbage on streets or sidewalks; 14.6 percent in neighborhoods with poor or dilapidated housing; and 11.6 percent in neighborhoods characterized by vandalism, such as broken windows or graffiti.

BAD NEIGHBORHOODS, MORE OBESITY

What was the impact of the built environment on children? Kids living in neighborhoods with the most unfavorable social conditions were 50 percent more likely to be physically inactive, 52 percent more likely to watch television more than two hours per day, and 65 percent more likely to engage in recreational computer use more than two hours per day, compared with children living in the most favorable social conditions.

Still, the situation is far from hopeless. Social policies can help modify many aspects of the neighborhood environment that are thought to influence obesity and physical activity levels. These aspects include socioeconomic deprivation; poor housing; crime and safety concerns; inadequate street lighting; lack of sidewalks, parks, and playgrounds; a shortage of recreational facilities; inadequate public transportation; and not enough local grocery stores that carry healthy foods.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Provide **increased opportunities for physical activity** by using more federal funding to improve communities' existing trail or path systems and sidewalks, and to create bike trails, playgrounds, and recreational facilities.
- Devote additional resources to state and local agencies so that they can do more **surveillance, monitoring, and prevention of obesity**, as well as conduct more research on intervention strategies.
- Launch **educational or media campaigns** that encourage parents to limit children's television viewing and other recreational screen time.
- Increase **access to healthy foods** in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods by encouraging the development of grocery stores and farmers' markets through grants, loans, and tax benefits.

RESOURCES

Steve Bogira, "Youngsters Trade Bagels and Butter for Cucumbers and Carrots," *Health Affairs* 29, no. 3 (2010): 491-497.

Gopal K. Singh et al., "Neighborhood Socioeconomic Conditions, Built Environments, and Childhood Obesity," *Health Affairs* 29, no. 3 (2010): 503-512.

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