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# Keeping Our Promise to America's Youth

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The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Active Living Research Program focuses on the prevention of childhood obesity in low-income and high-risk racial/ethnic communities by supporting research to examine how environments and policies influence active living for children and their families. This agenda has advanced transdisciplinary research among researchers from exercise science, public health, transportation, urban planning, architecture, recreation and leisure, landscape architecture, geography, economics, policy studies, and education to inform environmental and policy changes that promote active living among Americans.

The papers in this special issue of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*<sup>1-13</sup> focus on numerous policy and environmental barriers faced by populations with low rates of physical activity. Many of these barriers to active living are reflected in broader social and environmental justice issues that amplify the context for active living research.

One cross-cutting theme throughout the issue is safety concerns related to crime. Certainly, the more attractive and safe an environment is perceived, the more likely it will attract users.<sup>14</sup> However, safety concerns pose a significant barrier to physical activity.<sup>15</sup> Safety-related barriers to physical activity are particularly challenging in distressed neighborhoods where residents, most often low-income people of color, often limit their time in public spaces to reduce their risk of experiencing violent crime.<sup>16</sup>

The premise that a well maintained, adequately supervised and effectively administered public space is an "active living" asset may be relevant only in communities where the physical infrastructure exists and has the ongoing support of policymakers, professional administrators, and citizen stewards. The lack of availability of facilities that enable and promote physical activity may, in part, underpin the lower levels of activity observed among populations with low socioeconomic status and minority backgrounds.<sup>17</sup> It has been shown that young people in high poverty communities have fewer community resources, such as parks and after-school activities, poorer quality schools, and higher levels of environmental hazards.<sup>18</sup>

For most of the 20th century, research, policies, and programs, particularly those that addressed poverty,

focused on remediating the perceived deficits in neighborhoods, families, and children rather than acknowledging and leveraging the strengths, positive networks, and relationships that exist in these contexts and individuals.<sup>19</sup> Regardless of race or income, the odds of success strongly favor children experiencing multiple resources in their lives, such as caring adults, safe places, preventive health care, effective education, and service to others. A study commissioned by America's Promise Alliance found that young people receiving at least four of these five fundamental resources are more likely to achieve academic success, be socially competent, participate civically, and avoid violence.<sup>20</sup>

Only 37% of children and youth experience safe places that offer opportunities to make constructive use of their time.<sup>20</sup> Both of these attributes, safety and constructive use of time, are integral to any meaningful definition of these developmental resources. Moreover, they affect opportunities for outside play where children are most likely to be active. It is important that children be safe at home, at school, and in their neighborhoods. However, it is equally important for children's development that these settings engage them constructively and actively. The National Promises Study commissioned by America's Promise Alliance also revealed that only four in ten young people participate in high-quality activities that teach skills needed to form lasting relationships with others and make important decisions, according to parent and adolescent reports.

Recently, the most comprehensive assessment conducted to date by UNICEF® of the lives and well-being of children and adolescents in economically advanced nations ranked the U.S. 20th (of 21) overall and 21st in health and safety.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, U.S. Census Bureau data show that 8.7 million children were without health insurance coverage in 2006, with 17 states reporting higher rates of uninsured children than the national rate, including some of the largest states like California, Texas, and Florida. Addressing the basic and often unmet preventive healthcare and safety needs of children and families in poverty is a key component to advancing social policy that puts children and youth first. Efforts to reduce disparities in access to physical activity resources, like public parks and safe environments, can contribute to broader goals of positive youth development.

The differences in life chances of racial/ethnic minorities versus nonminorities are well documented.<sup>22</sup> From health coverage to juvenile justice to educational institutions, children are the beneficiaries of a wide

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range of social policies and investments: Head Start, Child Care and Development Block Grants, 21st Century Learning Centers, SCHIP/Medicaid, and the Workforce Investment Act are just a few examples of federal policies in place to support children as they grow and develop.<sup>19</sup> Citing the White House Task Force on Disadvantaged Youth report and the Government Accountability Office report on early education and care,<sup>23,24</sup> these policies lack any semblance of coherence, do not encourage synergies across policies, and result in a system of competing demands and ineffective, and at times insufficient, investments in children.<sup>19</sup> The Active Living Research Program approach to address physical inactivity through a transdisciplinary approach is an effective model to advance broader social and environmental justice concerns that influence public policy affecting children. Reducing obesity prevalence among minority and low-income children will not be possible without also improving their social and economic environments. For example, a potential synergy for the federal youth programs mentioned above would be to integrate physical activity promotion in their missions, wherever possible.

Changing the trajectory of the lives of disadvantaged youth will require greater amplification of comprehensive approaches to address the social and environmental circumstances of children and families living in poverty. Recent research puts the high school graduation rate between 68% and 71%, respectively, with about one third of all public high school students in America failing to graduate; for minority students (black, Hispanic, or Native American), the rate at which they finish public high school with a regular diploma declines to approximately 50%.<sup>25</sup> The competitive growth of our global economy will continue to put our nation at risk if we fail to ensure that every child has an effective education, healthy start, caring adults, safe places and opportunities to serve others. Articles in this special issue<sup>1-13</sup> frame the complex factors that influence physical activity rates among disadvantaged groups and reinforce the need for a more comprehensive and integrated approach to address social and environmental justice issues affecting populations with the lowest rates of physical activity.

The emerging work of the Active Living Research Program is likely to contribute to addressing the broader social and environmental justice issues affecting children and families in low-income and high-risk racial/ethnic communities. As the opportunities and threats of a technologically advanced, culturally diverse, and increasingly global economy influence social and environmental policy, we must be mindful that children are our future. The work of America's Promise Alliance is to see that all children are supported with the comprehensive supports that they need to succeed in life, which should include being physically active and

avoiding obesity. Working together, this should be our promise to America's young people.

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