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## Commentary

## Recommendations for advancing opportunities to increase physical activity in racial/ethnic minority communities

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## ABSTRACT

We provide suggestions for advancing opportunities for effective and sustainable strategies for increasing physical activity in racial/ethnic minority populations.

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Evidence is accumulating that regular physical activity increases longevity, improves quality of life and is good for overall health (Blair and Morris, 2009). Unfortunately, a large proportion of the population continues to fall below recommended levels of daily physical activity. Historical data suggest that the proportion of the adult population who do not engage in leisure-time physical activity has hovered between 20% and 30% for the past two decades (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2005). Similar trends are observed in children (Eaton et al., 2008). The proportion of individuals who fail to meet physical activity guidelines tends to be disproportionately higher among girls/women and among racial and ethnic minority groups compared to men and non-Hispanic Whites, respectively (Crespo et al., 2000), although recent population level data on objectively monitored physical activity showed equivalent and sometimes slightly higher levels of physical activity in racial/ethnic minorities compared to non-Hispanic Whites (Troiano et al., 2008).

Although funding for programs to increase leisure-time physical activity has increased, the focus has primarily been on individual level behavior changes in relatively small populations and has not made a major impact on physical activity at the population level. Many action plans, best practice, or expert recommendations (e.g., The Task Force on Community Preventive Services) have suggested community level strategies for increasing physical activity, such as community-wide campaigns and social support interventions in community settings, to make large-scale changes in physical activity in the population (Anonymous, 1989). Unfortunately, the impact of community level

strategies has been hampered by lack of complimentary policies to enforce community level changes in physical activity, built and social environments that are not necessarily supportive of physical activity, and limited resources to implement and sustain community level strategies, particularly in communities where creative strategies may be critical to compensate for lack of resources. What is now needed are public policies, informed by research, that support population-level approaches to increase physical activity. Strategies focused on improving opportunities for physical activity in neighborhoods, schools, and worksites, particularly in areas with high-density racial and ethnic minority populations, can play a major role in improving population-level estimates of physical activity participation.

Incorporating physical activity and physical education into the school day has been shown to have positive health and academic benefits among children (Mahar et al., 2006) and has been recommended as a strategy for increasing physical activity among children (Anonymous, 1989). However, in low resource schools (typically schools in neighborhoods with a high concentration of racial/ethnic minority groups) it is often difficult to identify successful and sustainable strategies for increasing opportunities for physical activity. Adding brief (i.e., 10 min) activity breaks throughout the school day and using simple, cost-effective materials (e.g., CDs, DVDs) has been shown to increase on-task behavior among children, decrease disruptive behavior and school nurse visits among children, and improve health among adults (Mahar et al., 2006). Recent work by Drs. Antronette Yancey and Melicia Whitt-Glover have highlighted the feasibility, acceptability, and sustainability of implementing activity breaks in elementary schools, utilizing a model called *Instant Recess™*. Additional studies using similar concepts (e.g., *Take 10!, Energizers*) have also shown to be successful. Similar strategies

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among adults focused on incorporating physical activity breaks into the workday have also shown promise (Yancey et al., 2004). Specific strategies for integrating these ideas into low-income and racial/ethnic minority communities are needed, particularly strategies that focus on creating policies to encourage school and worksite staff to offer physical activity breaks during the day.

Successful strategies for increasing physical activity and improving health may also require “out of the box” thinking that does not focus directly on physical activity but could lead to increased physical activity through improvements in other areas. In some cases, these population strategies may also influence other social-level concerns (e.g., education, employment, safety, environment, energy), thus leading to major improvements in other areas that influence health status in racial and ethnic minority communities. For example, historically, urban neighborhoods that have a high concentration of racial and ethnic minority subgroups tend to be poorer and have less access to resources (deprivation amplification), which includes substandard schools with limited resources and in neighborhoods that may be deemed unsafe, and less access to free resources for physical activity (Taylor et al., 2007). To compensate for lower resources, schools in lower income areas often have to cut programs that may be deemed non-essential, including physical education and sports. Creating better schools in low income neighborhoods may solve several problems. Adequate neighborhood schools increase the likelihood that children live within walking distance to schools and can choose active transportation to school. Increasing the number of highly trained teachers and the availability of resources in schools in low-income neighborhoods can improve the quality of education available, thus increasing future opportunities for further education, better and higher paying jobs, and better health care access. Increased income and health care access among racial/ethnic minority groups are important milestone in the elimination of health disparities. Similar approaches for adults may include environmental strategies such as point-of-decision prompts to encourage use of stairs to increase incidental activity, provision of flexible time and access to opportunities for physical activity during the work day, and incentives for employees who engage in regular physical activity. It is important to note, however, that most of these approaches will not be successful without complimentary policies to support their implementation.

It is also important to focus on building infrastructure in racial/ethnic minority communities to support and allow engagement in active forms of transportation and physical activity. These strategies include sidewalks, walking trails, bicycle lanes, increased availability of reliable public transportation, and other structural enhancements that allow individuals to make choices to engage in active transportation (e.g., community-scale urban design and land use policies) (Anonymous, 1989). Community-wide social marketing interventions have shown some success in increasing physical activity participation at the community level and have also resulted in grassroots efforts to

change policy and environmental supports for physical activity (Reger-Nash et al., 2008). These types of strategies have not yet been widely tested in racial/ethnic minority communities, and additional research is needed, particularly to understand how to increase political will within communities to support community-level changes. In addition, particularly in communities where access to physical activity facilities is limited, it may also be important to make schools, community centers, churches, and other community-based gathering places open and accessible for community use (e.g., keeping schools open after school hours or in the evenings for public use). In rural communities where most of these community resources are lacking, even access to schools during after-school hours is difficult.

While research has advanced quite far with regard to individual-level strategies for increasing physical activity, it is apparent that these types of strategies will not be sustainable without policy and environmental level supports that allow individuals to easily make choices to be physically active. Policy and environmental level supports may be particularly critical in communities most impacted by low levels of physical activity and related poor health outcomes. Additional research is needed to identify successful methods for community-wide strategies that are supported by complimentary policy and environmental changes.

#### Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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