

Active Living Research

Using Evidence to Prevent Childhood Obesity
and Create Active Communities

ARTICLE SUMMARY

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Hispanic Maternal and Children's Perceptions of Neighborhood Safety Related to Walking and Bicycling

Introduction

Obesity rates in the United States have soared over the past four decades, and Hispanic youth have some of the highest obesity rates in the country. Walking and bicycling can help children become more physically active and reduce their risk of obesity, but children may not engage in this type of activity if they – or their parents – think that their neighborhood is unsafe. We assessed perceptions of neighborhood safety among a group of Hispanic children and their mothers in Houston, Tex., to determine whether their perceptions affected children's walking and bicycling behaviors.

Key Findings

Hispanic mothers perceived their neighborhoods as more dangerous than their children did. The mothers' major concerns regarding neighborhood safety were traffic volume and speed. They were least concerned with lack of lighting. In contrast, the children's major concerns were encountering strangers and stray dogs. Like the mothers, the children were least concerned with lack of lighting.

Mothers' perceptions of neighborhood safety predicted children's levels of moderate-to-vigorous activity slightly better than the children's safety perception. Lack of crosswalks was identified as a key barrier to physical activity by mothers, and was related to traffic safety concerns. Mothers with more physically active children reported greater concerns about gangs than mothers of less active children.

Methodology

Participants were Hispanic students in third, fourth and fifth grade at five elementary schools in the inner-city East End district of Houston, Tex. and their mothers. To assess neighborhood safety perceptions, we surveyed participants' concern about eight common environmental risks: (1) too much traffic; (2) cars going too fast; (3) lack of crosswalks; (4) no signals at crosswalks; (5) lack of lighting; (6) gangs; (7) strangers; and (8) stray dogs. Additionally, in a subset of 50 children and mothers, we measured physical

SOURCE

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activity with an electronic motion analyzer (accelerometer) that was worn for seven consecutive days. Mothers reported education, birthplace, income and household information.

Other Findings

Children spent an average of 49 minutes engaged in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day. Boys were more active than girls: Boys engaged in 58 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day, and girls engaged in only 42 minutes.

Implications

This study provides evidence that low-income, Hispanic mothers and children differed in their views about neighborhood safety concerns, and that mothers' safety perceptions had a more significant impact on children's activity levels than children's perceptions. Mothers were most concerned about traffic dangers, indicating that local planners should work to ensure that neighborhood traffic patterns are considered safe by parents. For example, mothers were less concerned about traffic issues when there were crosswalks nearby. Future research could identify the traffic speeds and volumes that are considered acceptable by mothers.