



## Recreational Resources Promote Active Living

### INTRODUCTION

In light of the growing obesity crisis, governments, private foundations and community-based organizations are striving to better understand the relationships between the urban built environment and physical activity.<sup>1</sup>

We know that enhancements to the built environment such as sidewalks and bike paths make neighborhoods more attractive for walking and cycling. And parks, green spaces and trails — also part of the built environment — provide structured settings that promote physical activity.<sup>2</sup>

But these more traditional characteristics of the built environment that encourage active living are only part of the story. New evidence suggests that recreation programs, in addition to parks themselves, may also play an important role in preventing childhood obesity.

A 10-year study of more than 3,000 children living in 12 communities of southern California found that those who lived closer to recreational programs and parkland had much lower rates of obesity compared to children who lived further away.<sup>3</sup>

Moderate to vigorous physical activity has been linked to reductions in risk for cardiovascular disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes and some forms of cancer.<sup>4</sup> Yet the utility of the built environment — namely, recreation programs that offer varying levels of physical activity — remains understudied.<sup>5</sup>

Though recreational programs offer a lower-cost, highly-targeted approach to obesity prevention, a new study found they are lacking in communities where they are needed most. Residents of low household income and communities of color, already burdened with disproportionately high obesity rates, have few opportunities for physical activity.<sup>6</sup>

*Low-cost recreation programs are lacking in communities where they are needed most.*

This policy brief summarizes new research that suggests lower-income cities in Los Angeles County offer considerably fewer recreational resources compared to cities that are predominantly White and more affluent.

In addition to low household income, race and ethnicity play a significant role in shaping the allocation of recreational resources at the municipal level with Latino, African-American and Asian communities having the fewest recreational programs.<sup>7</sup>

## Methods Summary

Researchers assembled detailed information on recreational resources offered by 96 southern California municipalities, primarily in Los Angeles County. They restricted their data collection to city parks or recreation centers and other city-sponsored sites. Recreational resources were limited to those requiring moderate to vigorous physical activity.

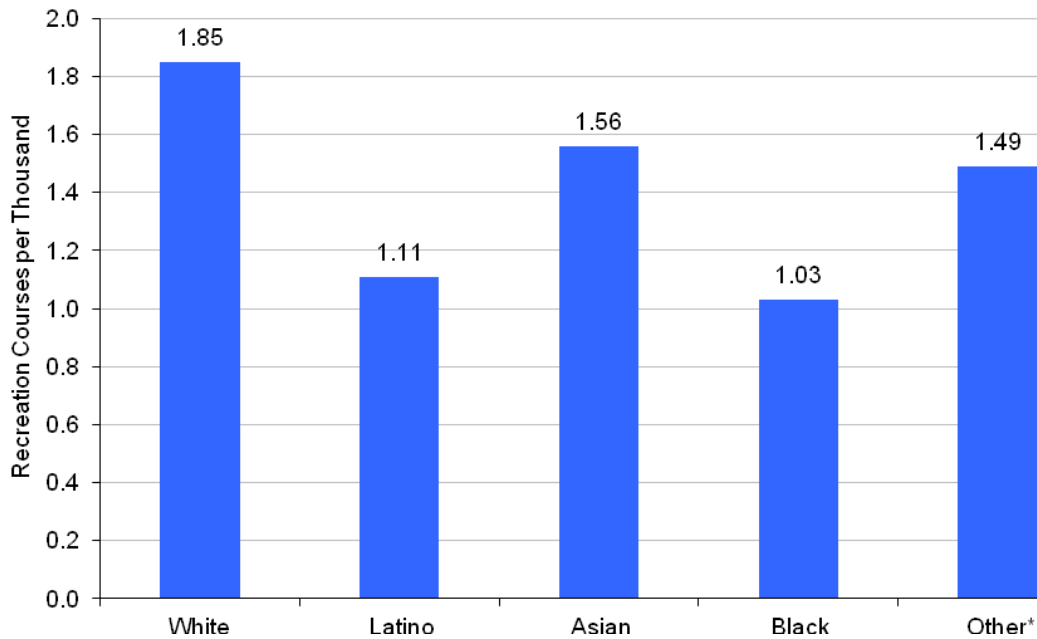
Scientists mapped the location of each recreational program based on a detailed audit of program offerings by municipality, and they used 2000 Census of Population and Housing to describe demographic data. Information included population size and density, race, ethnicity, age distribution and housing type.

Researchers created indicators of municipal finance capacity using Annual Reports of the California State Controller's Office from 2001-03. Information on nonprofit organizations with recreational resources came from 2003 National Center for Charitable Statistics.

### Key Research Findings

- Cities characterized by low household incomes, low fiscal capacity, communities of color and multi-unit housing are disadvantaged with respect to recreation programs.<sup>8</sup>
- Cities with a higher number of White residents have more recreation programs in comparison to those with more African-American, Asian and Latino residents.<sup>9</sup>
- In Los Angeles, many recreation programs are not in parks. More than 40 percent are in other facilities such as free-standing recreation centers, local schools, non-profit organizations and private churches or synagogues.<sup>10</sup>
- Up to 60 percent of the recreation programs audited as part of the study required moderate to vigorous activity, suggesting they benefit health.<sup>11</sup>
- Nearly 75 percent of these programs were designed for children and youths under age 18.<sup>12</sup>
- Less than 6 percent of program courses were free. The price for the majority of courses ranged from \$20 to \$75 — a financial obstacle to physical activity in low-income neighborhoods.<sup>13</sup>

Fig. 1 Disparities in Access to Recreational Programs



\*Other Races and Ethnicities

## What Can Policy-makers Do?

This policy brief suggests that urban planners and public health advocates should enhance and expand recreation programs in low-income communities that have diverse ethnic and racial populations to reduce disparities, encourage physical activity and prevent obesity among residents. This policy brief recommends strategies to support these objectives, such as:

- Creating recreational programs as a lower-cost, highly-targeted approach to preventing obesity within communities most at-risk;
- Increasing the number of recreational programs offered at public and non-profit facilities in high density, low-income neighborhoods and communities of color where they are in short supply;
- Introducing free and low-cost recreational programming where fees may otherwise limit participation; and
- Endorsing recreational programs that promote physical activity in local schools and non-profit facilities located in older cities with little land available for park space.<sup>14</sup>

## Acknowledgements

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## Sources

<sup>1,5-14</sup>Dahmann N, Wolch J, Joassart-Marcelli P, Reynolds K, Jerrett M. The active city? Disparities in provision of urban public recreation resources. *Health and Place*. 2010 May;16(3):431-45.

<sup>2,3</sup>Wolch J, Jerrett M, Reynolds K, McConnell R, Chang r, Dahmann N, Brady K, Gilliland F, Su JG, Berhane K. Childhood obesity and proximity to urban parks and recreational resources: A longitudinal cohort study. *Health and Place*. 2010;16(3):137-57.

<sup>4</sup><http://www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/everyone/health/index.html#ReduceCardiovascularDisease>