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Teens Face Barriers to Fitness

By Nanci Hellmich

Teens in poorer minority neighborhoods have very few places to exercise, which might be one reason they are more likely to be overweight than adolescents who live in more affluent areas, researchers say.

In a study in Monday's *Pediatrics*, researchers examined the physical and geographic data of more than 20,000 teens nationwide. They found that poorer neighborhoods have fewer parks and recreation centers and that the teens who live there are heavier.

"We thought that community recreation centers, parks and YMCAs would be found equally in more and less advantaged neighborhoods, but the more affluent areas are more likely to have a wider range of facilities — not just fancy gyms," says Penny Gordon-Larsen, a nutrition professor at the University of North Carolina's Schools of Public Health and Medicine.

The findings come at a time when there's growing concern about childhood obesity. About 31% of adolescents ages 12 to 19 are either overweight or at risk of becoming so, dramatically increasing their chances of developing type 2 diabetes, high cholesterol and other obesity-related illnesses.

Obesity is more prevalent among minorities, government data show. About 41% of Mexican-Americans ages 12 to 19 are overweight or at risk of becoming so compared with 37% of blacks the same age and 28% of whites.

For the latest study, UNC researchers used weight and activity data on teens in grades 7 through 12 and compared it to databases on exercise options within a 5-mile radius of the teens' homes. These included parks, public and private recreation facilities, pools, tennis courts, schools, tennis clubs and YMCAs. The findings:

- Teens in the least educated, minority neighborhoods are half as likely to have an exercise facility nearby as those living in the most affluent, white areas.
- Teens in areas with fewer facilities were less likely to exercise and more likely to be overweight. If they have even one exercise facility in their area, they are 5% less likely to be overweight.
- If teens have four recreation options in their area, they are 20% less likely to be overweight and 14% more likely to do five sessions of moderate activity a week.

"Our results suggest that there are few opportunities in the more disadvantaged and minority neighborhoods to play or get exercise," Gordon-Larsen says.

Public health officials have been encouraging Americans to be physically active, she says, but until communities have more safe, affordable places to exercise, it will be difficult for people in poorer neighborhoods to reach that goal.

Other studies have found that stores in lower-income areas offer far fewer options for healthful food. "Less affluent people get stuck with fast food, and they don't have access to fresh fruits and vegetables in grocery stores, and on top of that they don't have places to exercise," Gordon-Larsen says. "It's saddling them with a double burden."

Changes must be made, experts say. "This study provides strong evidence that it is not enough just to encourage our children to be physically active; we must make sure that they have safe places to be active," says James Hill, co-founder of America on the Move, which urges people to start making small changes by eating smarter and walking more. "Our best hope of reducing childhood obesity is to create healthy communities, and many places across the country want to do that."

Says Russell Pate, professor of exercise science at the University of South Carolina: "The changes that need to be made are not going to be quick, inexpensive or easy."