
Recommended actions to increase physical activity of diverse and disadvantaged adolescents in the summer



Background

Our research with 207 low-income adolescents from five racial/ethnic groups found that all adolescents, regardless of race, ethnicity, or sex, were substantially less physically active and reported more screen time in the summer than the school year. Based on those findings, the recommendations below can be undertaken by multiple stakeholders to increase physical activity in the summer and ultimately improve health. Results from the study provide direction for promoting adolescent summer time physical activity generally and for tailoring actions for specific subgroups.



Actions to increase physical activity in the summer

Target programs and resources to increase summer physical activity for American Indians, Latinos, and girls. These groups had the lowest physical activity during the summer and should be the highest priorities for programs and resources.

- ✓ Increasing availability of programs and places for low-income adolescents to be active during the summer is likely to require development of community coalitions.
- ✓ Local coalitions can develop approaches that fit the needs and preferences of youth and their parents, and be directed to groups of adolescents at highest risk for inactivity.

Adopt specific actions to reduce screen use in the summer. Screen time was higher in the summer than in the school year for almost every group of adolescents.

- ✓ Because screen use occurs primarily in the home, parents have a special role in setting limits on screen time and finding opportunities for adolescents to be involved in physical or social activities out of the home.
- ✓ Parents need to be supported by local government and non-profit groups which can create attractive and affordable programs as well as safe and accessible places for adolescents to be active.

Create easily-accessible supervised summer programs so adolescents can be active with their peers. Adolescents enjoy being active with other youth. A surprising finding of the study was that enjoyment of physical activity was lower in the summer among all groups of youth.

- ✓ Local government or non-profit groups will have to take the lead in mobilizing local resources to offer attractive and affordable group physical activity programs for adolescents in the summer.



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Promote walking programs, provide targeted incentives or adopt activities that encourage walking. Walking was the most preferred physical activity across all subgroups and seasons.

- ✔ Walking is a simple and affordable activity that requires a minimum of resources.
- ✔ Walking can also be done in groups and could be incorporated into games, though local organizations would need to invest in organizing and promoting adolescent walking programs.

Start running programs or exercise classes that are aimed at adolescents. Exercise and running were highly rated by all race/ethnic groups.

- ✔ Both of these types of activities can be done in groups. Running groups would require a leader and safe places to run, and exercise groups require a skilled leader.
- ✔ Organizations such as the YMCA and Boys & Girls Clubs already offer such programs for low-income youth, but they need to be expanded so they serve all low-income communities.
- ✔ Extra efforts to recruit adolescents in the summer and overcome transportation challenges are likely to be needed.

Promote water-based activities to provide a respite to the summer heat. Girls showed strong preferences for water play.

- ✔ Because girls are consistently less active than boys, it is a priority to offer activities that will attract many more girls to participate.
- ✔ Swimming pools are often not available in low-income communities, or they may not be affordable. Thus, it may be necessary to provide girls transportation to splash parks or free swimming pools for open swim, lessons, or water exercise classes.

Provide safe and supervised activities throughout neighborhoods, rather than invest in expensive facilities. In and around the home were the most preferred places to be active, regardless of season, except for Latinos and non-Hispanic Whites. This preference might reflect a desire to be active with friends and relatives, the difficulty of arranging transportation to other places, or parental instructions to stay close to home.

- ✔ The good news is that preferences for walking, running, and group exercises near home in all subgroups of low-income adolescents lead to low-cost recommendations such as neighborhood-based, supervised activities.
- ✔ Though suitable places for physical activity are needed, meeting most adolescents' preferences will not require large fields, swimming pools, and gymnasias. Such facilities would not be feasible to provide to every low-income neighborhood in the near future.
- ✔ Investments are still needed to organize programs, provide supervision that will make parents comfortable about safety, and ideally offer programs on a daily basis to meet the health and social needs of adolescents.



What can stakeholder groups do to help adolescents be active in the summer?

In this section we give ideas on how specific groups of stakeholders can help low-income adolescents be more physically active in the summer.

Parents

- ✔ Parents need to be informed that adolescents are generally less active in the summer and spend more time watching screens. Parents can then encourage their adolescents to move more and help them find safe, local, and enjoyable activity programs. Other stakeholder groups need to support parents in those efforts.

Parks professionals

- ✔ Providing activities for adolescents in the summer is consistent with the mission of parks and recreation departments, though they may not always have the resources to provide the needed programs. Parks may be less available in low-income neighborhoods, and their budgets are likely to be limited. Parks departments could prioritize summer programs for adolescents, but they will likely need to partner with other groups to be able to follow through, especially with providing daily physical activity opportunities.

Public health departments

- ✔ Health equity is a core principle of public health, so local health departments are likely to have a commitment to, and experience working with, low-income communities. Health departments may be able to lead coalitions with the goal of providing more summer programs for low-income youth. However, health departments are unlikely to have the funds to support implementation of programs.

Youth program providers

- ✔ Youth physical activity program providers cover a wide range, including YMCAs, Boys & Girls Clubs, youth sports leagues, and dance classes. Many such programs offer sliding scales or free programs, so they serve low-income communities well. However, many programs are provided in limited locations, which creates transportation barriers. We encourage youth program providers to develop new models of sending qualified staff to local neighborhoods in the summer to greatly expand access to low-income adolescents.

Faith-based organizations

- ✔ Faith-based organizations, especially those serving mainly race- or ethnic-specific congregations, have numerous skills and resources that could be fine-tuned to deliver summer physical activity programs to adolescents. Faith-based groups have facilities, volunteers, and community organization capacities that could provide widespread benefits.

Educators

- ✔ Schools are in every neighborhood, so they could offer highly localized physical activity programs that would be perceived as safe. Schools rarely have the resources to provide such programs in the summer, but they could partner with other organizations through shared-use agreements. Community colleges and universities could develop summer internships for credit to train and support their students to supervise physical activity programs for adolescents in low-income neighborhoods.

Social justice/equity advocates

- ✔ Social justice organizations, such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and Unidos USA, are powerful forces for their communities. Such organizations are usually dedicated to improving health, and building capacity to provide youth physical activity in the summer could contribute to those goals. Social justice organizations could also mobilize volunteers and play leadership roles in community coalitions.

Health care providers and organizations

- ✔ Individual health care providers, health care organizations, and health advocacy groups all share a commitment to health. They also have resources that could be devoted to enhancing health equity through summertime youth physical activity programs, so they could be powerful contributors to community coalitions. Health advocacy groups routinely engage volunteers, so they could support volunteer efforts to provide supervised youth physical activity during the summer.



Working together

Throughout this brief we have encouraged local groups to come together in coalitions to deliver needed programs. Coalitions are needed because no single stakeholder group has the combination of youth physical activity leadership skills, dedication to health equity, expertise in diverse communities, volunteer programs, and access to facilities, staff, and funding required to create sustainable summer physical activity programs. Although national organizations could create a national initiative, local operations would also require multi-group coalitions to deliver the programs in a culturally-informed manner. We urge the types of groups named above to begin efforts to create a national initiative with local impact.



Recommendations for further research

Every study has limitations, and we consider this an initial study of racial, ethnic, and sex differences in physical activity comparing the school year and summer. Even though the results from our study provided clues about solutions, larger studies could build on these strengths and answer additional questions that could guide interventions tailored to the needs and preferences of each racial/ethnic group.

- ◇ Though our study had an unusually diverse sample of adolescents, the numbers in each race and ethnic group were small. Thus, larger studies would be useful to determine whether present results can be replicated and clarified.
- ◇ Our study did not adequately represent the diversity present in each race/ethnic group. For example, American Indians were recruited largely from a single school, and it would be useful to recruit adequate samples from each of the major Asian, Pacific Islander, and Latino heritage groups. The across-group differences that were seen in this study justify a larger study with more representative samples.
- ◇ We were unable to recruit from rural areas, so larger studies of rural adolescents from diverse racial/ethnic groups are needed, because the preferences, resources, and challenges in rural America are likely to require their own solutions. Studies with larger and more diverse samples are likely to identify more group-specific differences that can lead to intervention solutions tailored to each group.
- ◇ Enjoyment of physical activity emerged as an important difference between the school year and summer. Further studies are needed to explain this difference. Qualitative studies that ask adolescents about what affects their enjoyment of physical activity in the school year and summer are encouraged.
- ◇ Our measure of supervised teams and classes was very limited, and it would be useful to know what types of teams and classes are available and preferred in low-income communities. It is also worthwhile to know the frequency of sessions and duration in months of each team and physical activity class.
- ◇ Our original plan was to assess adolescents' movement patterns with GPS devices so we could identify where they spent time and where they were active during the school year and summer. However, adolescents often declined to participate immediately after this measure was introduced. Thus, it will be a challenge for future studies to create acceptable arrangements and safeguards so adolescents are comfortable participating in this type of measurement.

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Research brief of the full article, available at:

<https://paresearchcenter.org/are-adolescents-less-physically-active-in-the-summer/>

Full article published in Preventive Medicine, available at:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0091743519302713>

