



Original article

Social and Cultural Environment Factors Influencing Physical Activity Among African-American Adolescents

Monica L. Baskin, Ph.D.^{a,*}, Akilah Dulin-Keita, Ph.D.^b, Herpreet Thind, Ph.D., M.P.H.^c, and Emily Godsey^d^a Department of Medicine, Division of Preventive Medicine, UAB School of Medicine, Birmingham, Alabama^b Department of Behavioral and Social Sciences, Institute for Community Health Promotion, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island^c Department of Psychiatry and Human Behavior, Centers for Behavioral and Preventive Medicine, Brown Alpert Medical School and the Miriam Hospital, Providence, Rhode Island^d Department of Sociology, University of Alabama at Birmingham, Birmingham, Alabama

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A B S T R A C T

Purpose: African-American youth are at high risk for physical inactivity. This study explored social and cultural environment facilitators of physical activity among 12- to 14-year-old African-American adolescents living in a metropolitan area in the Southeast.

Methods: Youth (n = 51; 45% male) participated in brainstorming focus groups responding to the prompt, “What about your family, friends, and community, encourages you to be physically active?” In a second meeting, participants (n = 56; 37.5% male) sorted statements (n = 84) based on similarity in meaning and rated statements on relative importance. Statement groups and ratings were entered into Concept Systems software where multidimensional scaling and hierarchical cluster analysis were used to create graphical representation of ideas. Finally, researchers named clusters according to the gestalt of grouped statements.

Results: The total sample included 28.9% of youth with household incomes ≤\$30,000 (area median income = \$30,701), 29% who perceived themselves as overweight, and 14.5% who reported being active for 60+ minutes everyday. Nine clusters, in rank order, emerged as follows: access/availability of physical activity resources; family and friend support; physical activity with friends; physical activity with family members; inspiration to/from others; parental reinforcement; opportunities in daily routine; pressure from social networks; and seeing consequences of activity/inactivity. Themes analyzed by gender were very similar (r = .90); however, “pressure from social networks” was more important for girls than boys (r = .10).

Conclusions: Clear patterns of social and cultural facilitators of physical activity are perceived by African-American adolescents. Interventions targeting this group may benefit by incorporating these themes.

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IMPLICATIONS AND
CONTRIBUTION

African-American adolescents are at greater risk of being physically inactive and, concomitantly, of being obese. It is critical to identify facilitators of physical activity for this population. Study findings identify access/availability and family and peer social supports that can be used to develop ecologically valid physical activity frameworks for African-American adolescents.

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* Address correspondence to: Monica L. Baskin, Ph.D., Division of Preventive Medicine, UAB School of Medicine, 1717 11th Avenue South, MT 618, Birmingham, AL 35205.

E-mail address: mbaskin@uab.edu (M.L. Baskin).

Adolescent obesity quadrupled over the past three decades [1]. Youth with high body mass index are more likely to become obese as adults [2] and are at risk for chronic conditions including hypertension, stroke, heart disease, diabetes, and certain cancers [3]. Although obesity rates increased across populations, low-income and minority youth are at greatest risk [4]. An inverse relationship between socioeconomic status (SES)

and obesity has been noted by some studies [5,6]; but others suggest this relationship is more complex, particularly among racial/ethnic minorities [4,7]. For white adolescents, higher SES appears to have a protective effect; however, black youth obesity rates do not differ by SES [7]. With respect to geographic differences, southern U.S. states have the highest rates regardless of race/ethnicity [8].

Regular physical activity can help reduce risks for obesity and related comorbid conditions [9]. Despite potential benefits [10], most youth do not meet recommended guidelines. Nationwide, only 28.7% meet recommendations for 60 minutes of daily physical activity, with African-American adolescents having lower levels of physical activity and higher levels of inactivity relative to whites [11]. Moreover, physical activity declines with age [12], with peak decline from 13 to 18 years [13]. This decline is particularly steep among African-American girls compared with that of white counterparts [14]. Adolescents from southern U.S. states report the lowest physical activity and the highest sedentary behavior levels, likely contributing to increased rates of overweight and obesity [15]. Taken together, more research on facilitators of physical activity among racial ethnic minority adolescents and those residing in the southern United States is warranted.

An ecological model can be used to explain determinants of physical activity. The model asserts that an interactive relationship between characteristics of a person (e.g., gender, self-efficacy), intrapersonal factors (e.g., family and peers), social (e.g., cultural norms, social support/reinforcement), and physical environment (e.g., built environment) factors can influence behavior, including physical activity [16–18].

With regard to social factors, parents' social support and reinforcement have been associated with minority adolescents' physical activity in some studies [18,19] but not all [20]. A recent systematic review suggests parental role modeling and social support do not significantly influence physical activity outcomes for African-American youth [21]. Other social factors such as cultural beliefs may partially explain physical inactivity among some African-Americans. Culture, which includes unique shared values, beliefs, and practices of a group, may impact the acceptance and adoption of health promoting messages and influence health-related behaviors [22]. For example, valuing automobiles as a sign of economic attainment and/or purchasing multiple televisions (including for children's bedrooms) may support sedentary behaviors [23]. Furthermore, physical activity may be seen as "work" and thus competing with desires for rest and relaxation [24]. Such values may be linked to historical vestiges of slavery in which African-Americans worked tirelessly six or more days per week in agriculture and other labor-intensive positions, particularly in the southern United States [25]. Some interventions for African-American youth have integrated cultural beliefs and values (e.g., religiosity, collectivism) and culturally tailored intervention materials and physical activities [21]; however, intervention effects have been inconclusive or nonsignificant [21].

Contradictory results have also been noted regarding the influence of the physical environment on African-American adolescent physical activity. Access to safe parks is inversely related to physical inactivity among whites but not African-American youth [26]. Furthermore, our prior work suggests that perceptions of neighborhood social disorder do not significantly influence physical activity among African-American adolescents, although neighborhood perceptions do increase risks

for obesity [27]. These findings point to other factors (e.g., cultural influences) as potential drivers of physical inactivity in this population. This further suggests that there may be other aspects of the physical environment (e.g., perceptions of safety) worth consideration.

Given the gaps in our understanding of the influences of intrapersonal, social, and physical environment factors on physical activity among African-American adolescents, insights from youth are needed. The present study used a community-engaged approach to identify the social and cultural factors influencing physical activity among African-American adolescents residing in an urban metropolitan area in the southeastern United States. Young adolescents (ages, 12–14 years) were targeted to better understand and potentially intervene before significant declines in physical activity.

Methods

Study participants

Youth who self-reported as African-American, English-speaking, aged 12–14 years, and in generally good health (i.e., without physical condition limiting mobility) were included. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling and flyers placed at local recreation centers, churches, schools, and newspaper advertisements. The study protocol was approved by the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB) Institutional Review Board for human subjects. Adolescent participants and their parents provided assent and consent respectively. A total sample of 69 African-American girls ($n = 42$) and boys ($n = 27$) from the metropolitan area participated.

Data collection

Concept mapping, a structured approach that produces maps of ideas or concepts developed by individuals or groups using mixed methodology for data collection and analysis [28], was used in this study. The qualitative approach includes generation of ideas through focus groups and unstructured sorting of ideas. The quantitative portion involves multidimensional scaling and hierarchical cluster analysis of the statements based on the rating metric [28]. With this methodology, there is a collaborative process whereby participants are actively involved in generating ideas, structuring the statements, and identifying factors that are most relevant to address the research question [29].

Concept mapping involves five phases: preparation, generation, structuring, map analysis, and interpretation [29]. For the preparation phase, our research team brainstormed potential focus group prompts. Potential prompts were pilot tested with a convenience sample of African-American adolescents ($n = 7$; 57% female) to select and refine the prompt for age-appropriate language and clarity.

During the generation phase, male and female adolescents (gender-specific groupings) participated in a 1-hour focus group. There were four separate sessions held with a total of 51 adolescents (55% female) with approximately 8–13 adolescents per session. Youth responded to the focus prompt, "What about your family, friends, and community, encourages you to be physically active?" A definition of physical activity [15] was provided to ensure a common understanding when generating ideas. Youth were instructed, "by physically active, we mean do you play or

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