

Move More, Eat Less: It's Time for Americans to Get Serious About Exercise



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Walk down any street in the US, and the evidence is all around you: Americans are getting fatter.

Waistlines have been expanding for years, and our junk food, white carb, high-fructose corn syrup diet is often blamed for our tight clothes.

In this issue of *The American Journal of Medicine*, new research examines the role chronic inactivity has played in the US obesity epidemic. Ladabaum et al¹ analyzed National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) data on obesity, abdominal obesity, physical activity, and caloric intake. They found that declining physical activity—and not caloric intake—has contributed significantly to the increased prevalence of obesity in the general population.

Comparing 1988-1994 NHANES data with 2009-2010 data, the proportion of adults who reported no physical activity increased from 19.1% to 51.7% in women and from 11.4% to 43.5% in men.¹ Average body mass index increased in all age and race/ethnicity subgroups, with young women (ages 18-39 years) having the greatest increase in obesity.¹ When Ladabaum et al grouped respondents to the most recent NHANES survey by race/ethnicity and age, they found that more than 50% of the workforce-aged adults in 8 demographic subgroups reported no leisure-time physical activity: all women (51.7%), black women ages 18-39 years (59.9%), Mexican American women ages 18-39 (57.2%), black women ages 40-64 (71.1%), Mexican American women ages 40-64 (70.3%), Mexican American men ages 18-39 (52.8%), black men ages 40-64 (57.4%), and Mexican American men ages 40-64 years (63.2%)¹ (Figure 1).

To study physical activity, NHANES survey respondents were grouped by activity level: no reported physical activity, intermediate physical activity, or ideal physical activity. Physical activity was categorized as moderate or vigorous. In this research study, the underlying standards for “ideal”

physical activity paralleled the US government's long-time recommendation: 30 minutes of moderate activity on 5 or more days per week or ≥ 75 minutes of vigorous activity per week or ≥ 150 minutes with a combination of moderate and vigorous activity.²

Much has been written in the popular press about the quality of the American diet and our gradual shift in recent decades from fresh foods to processed foods. Ladabaum et al didn't study participants' diet in detail—only how much they ate. They found that caloric intake didn't change significantly overall or by race/ethnicity, but did differ by age, sex, and level of physical activity. Average daily caloric intake increased for women who didn't exercise at all and decreased for men who were in the ideal exercise category.¹

SOCIETAL CONTEXT

What is missing from the Ladabaum et al paper is societal context. The finger-wagging Puritan in me wants sedentary folks to get up off the couch and exercise, but my public health background cautions me to go beyond the data tables and look at the lives of Americans today.

Life, work, and leisure have changed substantially in the US since 1988. With the blossoming of the Internet, the widespread use of computers and mobile devices at home and at work, and the increasing popularity of video games, our lives have been transformed. On an economic level, the prosperity of the 1990s dissipated after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks; years of war; the off shoring of manufacturing jobs; and the Wall Street crash of 2008. Ubiquitous home foreclosures, layoffs, and continued unemployment/underemployment have fueled historic income inequality.

Are Americans too lazy to exercise or just too busy keeping food on the table to jog around the block? The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) analyzes how we spend our time.³ A 2012 report studied a range of leisure-time activities, including sports, exercise, and recreation; watching television; socializing and communicating; reading; relaxing or thinking; playing games and computer use for leisure; and other. According to the BLS, Americans spend an average of 5 to 6 hours per weekday and 6 to

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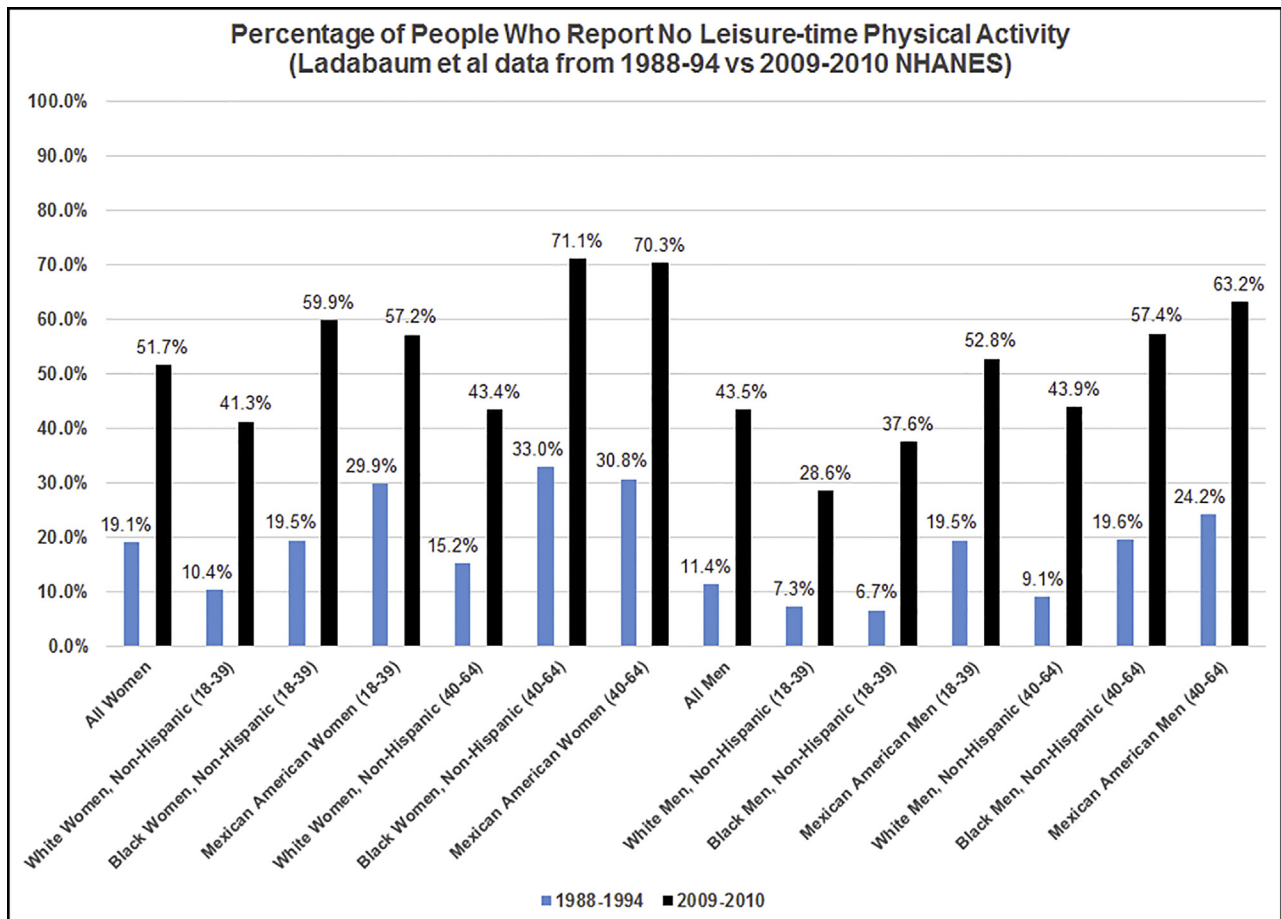


Figure 1 When Ladabaum et al grouped respondents to the most recent National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey by race/ethnicity and age, they found that more than 50% of the workforce-aged adults in 8 demographic subgroups reported no leisure-time physical activity. (Data source: Ladabaum et al.¹)

7 hours per weekend day engaged in leisure-time activities; unfortunately, our most popular leisure-time activity is watching television (2.8 hours per day on average).³ Although seniors watch the most television (4 hours per day on average), when you look at the workforce, the lowest paid, least educated workers spend more hours and a greater percentage of their leisure time watching television, compared with higher-paid workers or college-educated workers.³

As with the Ladabaum et al data, the BLS report reveals that leisure-time physical activity is just a blip in most Americans' lifestyles. Compared with women, men have more overall leisure time,³ spend more time watching television,³ and spend more time engaged in leisure-time physical activity.^{1,3} Men spend an average of 21.6 minutes per weekday and 32.4 minutes per weekend day being physically active, while women average 15 minutes per week day and 12.6 minutes per weekend day.³ Active people are averaging more than 1 hour per day in leisure-time physical activity (1.9 hours per day for men, 1.4 hours per day for women).³ When broken down by income, everyone is more physically active on the weekend—except

the lowest-wage workers, who average 9.6 minutes per weekday engaged in leisure-time physical activity and only 2 minutes more per day on the weekend.³

Factoring in poverty, we find that single moms, African Americans, Hispanics, and people with less than a high school education are more likely to live in poverty.⁴ Approximately 25% of African American and Hispanic women and 34% of Native American women were living in poverty in 2012.⁵ In the same time period, the poverty rate of households headed by single moms was 41%.⁵ In 2011, 35.7% of US births were to unmarried women.⁶ In the District of Columbia, Mississippi, Louisiana, and New Mexico, nearly half of all births are to unmarried women.⁶ Looking at income and education, it's no surprise that the poorest and least educated women are most likely to be single moms.⁶

Obviously, there are millions of Americans living at the bottom of Maslow's pyramid.⁷ Many are unemployed, while others are working multiple jobs to make ends meet.⁸ Single mothers have been hit the hardest. Is it any wonder that Ladabaum et al found such a substantial increase in leisure-time inactivity among young women? If you are

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