



# Crime, physical activity and outdoor recreation among Latino adolescents in Chicago

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose.** The purpose was to examine how fear of crime, crime victimization, and perceived level of community incivilities are related to physical activity participation and outdoor recreation among Latino adolescents.

**Method.** The study utilized a mixed methods approach that included 25 qualitative interviews and 390 school-based surveys collected from youth across three schools in Little Village, Chicago, Illinois.

**Results.** Results showed that Latino adolescents who expressed greater fear of crime also engaged in less physical activity and outdoor recreation. There was no association between crime victimization and physical activity and outdoor recreation. Those who perceived greater levels of community incivilities also engaged in less outdoor recreation, but perception of incivilities had no significant association with physical activity levels. Interview data revealed most of the children believed crime was a serious problem in their neighborhood and it impacted their ability to be physically active and play outside.

**Conclusions.** Fear of crime was related to lower physical activity and outdoor recreation. It is imperative that communities provide safe environments for children to be active. Increasing police and adult presence in parks and school grounds is recommended. Moreover, efforts must be made to reduce the gang problems in Latino communities.

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## Introduction

Studies exploring relationships between neighborhood safety and physical activity (PA) have found mixed results. Although there is evidence that crime is associated with lower PA among adults (Ross, 2000; Ross and Mirowski, 2001), it is not clear whether this relationship holds for adolescents. While some studies have identified relationships between youth PA and crime (Zhu and Lee, 2008), a recent review suggested this relationship is unclear. However, there was some evidence that youth's perceptions of incivilities (e.g., graffiti, trash, and gangs in the neighborhood) were associated with lower levels of PA (Ding et al., 2011). The authors noted the need for research using specific measures of crime-related safety (e.g., fear of crime) and examining the association between incivilities and youth's PA (Ding et al., 2011). Other studies have indicated attention should be given to how subgroups of the population, particularly minorities, are affected (Ding and Gebel, 2012). Few studies have examined environmental correlates of PA for subgroups of youth, with only one or two addressing crime-related aspects of safety (Whitt-Glover et al., 2009). The gap in

the literature is particularly large with regard to crime-related safety and PA among Latino youth, which is surprising given that Latino adolescents often reside in communities with high crime rates and may suffer disproportionately from the effects of limited PA and access to outdoor recreation environments (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, 2010; Crutchfield et al., 2006; Zhu and Lee, 2008).

The purpose of this study was to examine how fear of crime, level of crime victimization, and perceived level of incivilities in the community were related to PA participation and outdoor recreation among Latino adolescents living in an urban area. Outdoor recreation was included as a distinct aspect of PA because research has indicated that Latino youth are significantly less likely than their non-Hispanic White peers to be involved in organized PA outside of school (Johnston et al., 2007; Singh et al., 2008). It was hypothesized that fear of crime, crime victimization, and perceived community incivilities would be negatively associated with PA and outdoor recreation participation. Hypotheses were tested using quantitative methods, and qualitative research was used to supplement, deepen and extend these findings.

## Methods

### Participants and settings

Data were collected through 25 qualitative interviews and 390 school-based surveys collected from youth across three schools in Little Village, Chicago,

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Illinois. Four schools were contacted and three agreed to participate. Schools were selected based on their proportion of Latino students and location in the community. Two schools had a Latino population of 98% and the third school had a Latino population of 91%. Data were collected between May 2010 and May 2011. All Latino students in grades 6–12 were given parent consent forms (Spanish and English) to take home. A second attempt to reach parents was made during parent report card pick-up day. Spanish-speaking college students approached parents and asked them to consent to their child's participation. Less than five parents declined. All students whose parents consented also assented, and then they completed the surveys. Out of a total of 253 students in grades 9–12, 200 students completed surveys which equates to a 79.1% response rates. Out of 211 students in grades 6–8, 190 students completed surveys for a response rate of 90.1%. All students who completed a survey were given a \$10 gift card. All procedures and instruments were approved by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign IRB and by the Chicago Public Schools.

#### Quantitative phase

The school-based survey utilized items from previously validated scales (Ross, 2000; Ross and Mirowski, 2001). To measure fear, respondents were given eight statements and asked whether the statements were “not true at all,” “sometimes true,” or “mostly true.” Statements included items such as “I worry about being hurt by gangs in the neighborhood.” Scale reliability was high ( $\alpha = 0.86$ ). Two measures of victimization (witnessed and direct) were included. Witnessed victimization was assessed using an additive scale validated in past research for use with adolescents (Eitle and Turner, 2002). The scale included five items such as “I have seen a relative or friend being beaten up.” Response categories were “never,” “at least once,” or “more than once.” To measure direct victimization (but not victimization by family members), respondents were asked if in the last year they had been hurt by someone in the neighborhood (no = 0; yes = 1). To assess perceived incivilities, youth were asked about six potential problems in their neighborhood: graffiti, trash, vacant houses/apartments, people selling drugs, people using drugs, and gangs. Responses ranged from “not a problem” to “a big problem.” The scale was created by summing the items and dividing by the number of items. Scale reliability was good ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ). The incivilities scale has been validated in previous research (Perkins and Taylor, 1996).

PA and outdoor recreation were measured using items from the “Active Where?” survey (Kerr et al., nd). PA was assessed by averaging two items: the average number of days per week respondents reported being physically active in a typical week, and the number of days respondents reported being physically active in the week prior to the survey. Past research has established the validity of these items (separately) for use with adolescents (Prochaska et al., 2001). The scale ranged from 0 to 7 and reliability was high ( $\alpha = 0.82$ ). The outdoor recreation scale ranged from 0 to 3 (“never,” “once a month or less,” “twice a month,” “once a week or more”) and measured the average frequency at which respondents were active in six different outdoor locations (yard, driveway, street, park, schoolyard, neighbor's house/yard/driveway). Scale reliability was good ( $\alpha = .77$ ). Past research indicates the measure has adequate test-retest reliability (Kerr et al., nd).

All models also included a number of control variables that prior research has shown to be related to PA and/or delinquency. Socioeconomic status (SES) was assessed using the Family Affluence Scale; the scale ranged from 0 to 9, with higher scores indicating greater SES. The low self-control scale, a previously validated scale widely used in the criminology literature, ranged from 1 to 3 with higher scores indicating lower self-control. Level of assimilation and whether the respondent was born in the United States were also included as controls. Assimilation was assessed using the assimilation score of the Acculturation, Habits, and Interests Multicultural Scale for Adolescents (AHIMSA) (Unger et al., 2002). The scores ranged from 0 to 8 with higher values signifying greater assimilation to U.S. culture. Dichotomous measures indicating the school that each respondent attended were also included.

Descriptive and correlational statistics were examined. Next, path models in the Mplus 6.0 statistical software program (Muthén and Muthén, 2008–2010) were used to test the hypotheses. Models with more than one dependent variable—such as in this study—can be easily modeled using path analysis in Mplus. Each construct in the models was measured by a single variable (most variables were in fact summated scales) and was therefore observed rather than latent. The model tested is shown in Fig. 1. The statistical significance of model parameters was assessed by their *p*-values, with values less than .05 indicating statistical significance. Model fit was not assessed because the model was saturated

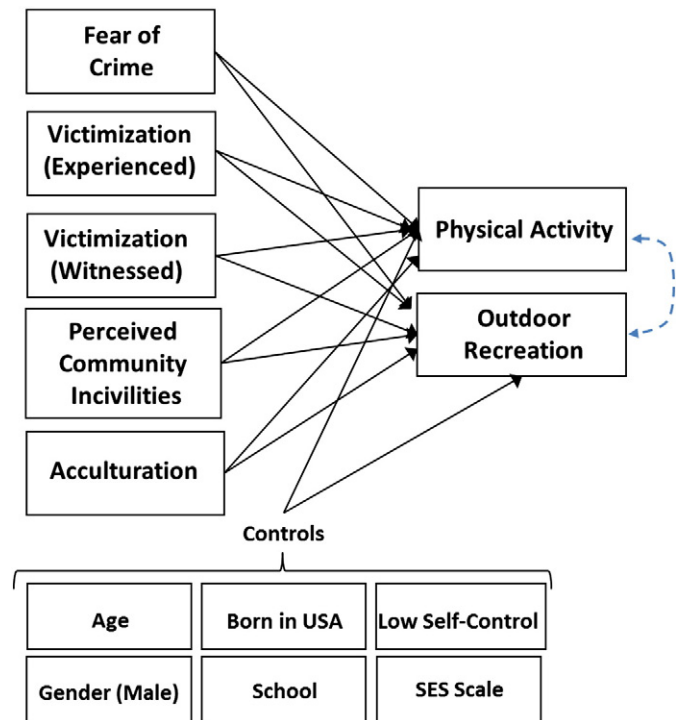


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model tested, predicting physical activity and outdoor recreation.

(Bollen, 1989). Specifically, one model on the full sample of 386 (those who did not report gender were removed) Latino adolescent respondents was estimated, predicting the PA and outdoor recreation scales as dependent variables. Because the dependent variables were normally distributed (although the distribution of the physical activity measure had slight aberrations and could be considered slightly polykurtic), standard path model procedures in Mplus were deemed appropriate.

#### Qualitative phase

Twenty-five interested students who perceived crime to be a problem in their neighborhood were randomly selected to be interviewed about their experiences with crime and the extent to which crime affected their PA and outdoor recreation. Interviews lasted 20–35 min and were conducted in English by the study's authors. Students were interviewed on school grounds. Each student was offered a \$30 gift card for their participation. The sample included 13 middle school children (7 male and 6 female) and 12 high school students (7 male and 5 female). All students (except one who was born in Mexico) were second-generation immigrants from Mexico.

Interviewees were asked about crime levels in their neighborhoods, and whether fear of crime, crime victimization and perception of incivilities affected their recreation participation, and what they did to increase their safety. High school students were additionally asked whether there were any differences based on age in how fear of crime affected their recreation. Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interview data were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Each interview transcript was reviewed and major themes and sub-themes were isolated. As the analyses continued, the initially identified sub-themes were revised and other sub-themes were added. New observations and emerging themes were explored in subsequent reviews. After the completion of all interviews, the transcripts were reread again and relevant data that confirmed and/or contradicted emerging themes were identified. Due to the sensitive nature of the study both the surveys and the interviews were anonymous and thus transcripts could not be sent for verification and feedback. In order to confirm the reliability of the data, informal conversations were conducted with school personnel and individuals actively involved in the local Latino community.

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