



Neighborhood safety and green space as predictors of obesity among preschool children from low-income families in New York City



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ABSTRACT

Background. Neighborhood safety, green space, walkability, and sociodemographics may influence physical activity and childhood obesity.

Methods. Data on measured height and weight, demographic characteristics, and home ZIP code were collected from year 2004 enrollees in a means-tested preschool program in New York City. Each ZIP code was surrounded by a 400-m buffer and characterized using data from the US census, local government departments, New York Times website, and Transportation Alternatives. Linear and Poisson models were constructed using cluster robust standard errors and adjusting for child's sex, race, ethnicity, age, and neighborhood characteristics.

Results. Analyses included 11,562 children ages 3–5 years living in 160 residential ZIP codes. A higher homicide rate (at the 75th vs 25th percentile) was associated with a 22% higher prevalence of obesity (95% CI for the prevalence ratio (PR): 1.05 to 1.41). A higher density of street trees (at the 75th vs 25th percentile) was associated with 12% lower prevalence of obesity (95% CI for the PR: 0.79 to 0.99). Other neighborhood characteristics did not have significant associations with childhood obesity.

Conclusions. Among preschool children from low-income families, neighborhood homicide rate was associated with more obesity and street tree density was associated with less obesity.

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Introduction

Neighborhood built and social environments may shape physical activity and obesity throughout the life course (Davison and Lawson, 2006; Lee and Moudon, 2004; Papas et al., 2007). Very young children may be more responsive to the home environment (Rundle et al., 2009a; Suglia et al., 2012), while adolescents are able to take advantage of neighborhood physical activity facilities (Evenson et al., 2007; Gordon-Larsen et al., 2006; Grow et al., 2008). A few studies have shown the relevance of the neighborhood built environment to physical activity and adiposity for preschool aged children (Kerr et al., 2006; Lovasi et al., 2011; McDonald, 2008; Spence et al., 2008) but evidence

remains mixed (Burdette and Whitaker, 2004; Davison and Lawson, 2006).

Many built environment and health studies have focused on walkable urban form (Ewing and Certero, 2010; Papas et al., 2007; Saelens and Handy, 2008), including features such as residential density, land use mix, and street design. However, these measures of walkability may not be salient for all population groups (Lovasi et al., 2009a,b). Further, even neighborhoods with highly walkable urban form may have safety or aesthetic problems, particularly in economically deprived areas (Neckerman et al., 2009; Zhu and Lee, 2008).

Green spaces such as tree-lined streets and parks may encourage physical activity and a healthy weight (Boldemann et al., 2006; Larsen et al., 2009; Lovasi et al., 2011, 2012a). Yet accounting for other aspects of the environment, such as safety, may be crucial for understanding disparate quality of green space available to residents of low-income urban neighborhoods (Weiss et al., 2011).

Children in resource-limited urban settings may be particularly vulnerable to safety problems that could stop parents from allowing their children to play outdoors (Carver et al., 2010; Lovasi et al., 2011; Weir et al., 2006). Although perceived safety has been previously linked

Abbreviations: BMI, body mass index (weight (kg)/height(m)²); NYC, New York City; GIS, Geographic Information Systems; GPS, Global Positioning Systems; PLUTO, Primary Land Use Tax Lot Output.

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to childhood physical activity and obesity (Davison and Lawson, 2006; Lumeng et al., 2006), point-level objective (audit-based or GIS) measures of safety are not widely investigated and studies have not consistently accounted for other aspects of neighborhood context that may confound an association between safety and obesity.

To advance our understanding of how walkability, green space, and safety affect early life adiposity, we used data from a large population of preschool children from low-income families. Geographic data were linked to individual sociodemographic and anthropometric data. We hypothesized that children living in areas with more crime and traffic safety hazards (indicated by homicide rate and pedestrian-fatality rate) would have a higher BMI z-score and obesity prevalence, even after accounting for walkable urban form and green space (street trees and parks), which were hypothesized to predict lower BMI z-score and obesity prevalence.

Methods

Subjects and setting

Data were from a cross-sectional census of 16,176 unique enrollment records for a large preschool program in New York City (NYC) as of October 2004 (Young et al., 2006). Eligibility to enroll in this preschool program was based on whether household income was below the federal poverty line. Analyses of these data were approved by the Columbia University Medical Center Institutional Review Board.

Individual anthropometric and sociodemographic data

Measured height and weight were recorded by the child's health care provider, along with demographic data and physical exam date, on a form submitted at the time of initial enrollment in the preschool program. Height and weight were used to calculate a BMI z-score based on a comparison to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) growth charts for children of the same age and sex (Ogden et al., 2002). BMI z-score was categorized into normal weight (<85th percentile), overweight (85th to 94th percentile), and obese (\geq 95th percentile). Missing values and implausibly extreme values were excluded in accordance with CDC recommendations.

Recorded date of birth was used to calculate age in months at the time of the physical exam. Children in the dataset with physical exams before the age of 3 years ($N = 3293$) or after the age of 5 years ($N = 95$) were excluded, as were those with a physical exam date before 2003 ($N = 14$) or after 2004 ($N = 3$) to limit confounding by age or year. Sex (male or female) and race/ethnicity (Hispanic, Black/African American, White, Asian-American, or other/American Indian/Alaskan Native) categories were recorded. The racial categories White and Asian-American were combined for analyses based on relatively small numbers and similar mean BMI z-score and obesity prevalence observed.

Geographic measures

The enrollment file included the postal ZIP code for each child's home address; children with invalid or missing ZIP codes were excluded ($N = 51$). The children lived in 160 unique NYC ZIP codes (90% of the 177 ZIP codes in NYC). To include resources and hazards relevant to physical activity that are potentially within a short walk from the ZIP code boundary, each home ZIP code was surrounded by a 400-meter buffer; 400-meters was selected to approximate a 5 minute walk, and the addition of this buffer increased the median neighborhood land area from 3.2 km² to 6.4 km². Water bodies were removed before calculating land area of postal and buffered ZIP codes. Buffered ZIP code neighborhoods were characterized through a spatial overlay with geographic data from multiple sources.

Sociodemographic characteristics (percent poverty, percent black race, and percent foreign-born) and population (count of residents) were measured through block group-level data from the year 2000 US Census, summary file 3. Block groups were intersected with buffered ZIP codes to create area-weighted averages.

Land use mix and residential density were constructed using the 2004–2005 Primary Land Use Tax Lot Output (PLUTO) data, a parcel-level dataset available from the NYC Department of City Planning. Intersection density was calculated using the street centerline GIS layer from the New York

State Accident Location Information System (NYS-ALIS). Subway stops per square kilometer were from 2007 NYC Metropolitan Transit Authority data (2007 data were preferred over earlier versions because of improved spatial alignment and because stop locations are relatively stable over time). A walkability index was constructed as previously described (Freeman et al., 2012; Neckerman et al., 2009) by summing z-scores for residential density (residential units per km²), land use mix (an entropy-based measure constructed from residential, educational, entertainment, retail, and office land uses), retail floor area ratio (retail floor area per km²), intersection density (unique street intersections per km², a measure of street connectivity), and subway stop density (subway stations per km²).

The density of street trees (based on a 2005–2006 street tree census) and park area per km² were estimated as described previously (Lovasi et al., 2011, 2013; Weiss et al., 2011) based on data from the NYC Department of Parks & Recreation. Large parks were defined as 0.024 square kilometers (6 acres) or greater.

Safety hazard indicators included homicide rate and pedestrian-auto fatality rate. Homicide locations for years 2003 and 2004 were collected from the New York Times website (<http://projects.nytimes.com/crime/homicides/map/>) as described previously (Lovasi et al., 2012a, 2013; Weiss et al., 2011). Homicide rate was selected as the primary indicator of crime safety because of its spatial precision (in contrast to other crime data available at the precinct level), and because of expectations that homicide rate would be potentially salient in shaping safety perceptions and correlated with less severe criminal infractions. Locations of fatal pedestrian-auto collisions in 2003 and 2004 were based on the nearest intersection provided by Transportation Alternatives (<http://crashstat.org/resources/>). The pedestrian-auto fatality rate was used as the primary indicator of traffic hazards to limit potential bias from selective under-reporting of less serious injuries.

ArcGIS, version 10.0, was used for all geospatial analysis (ESRI, Redlands, CA).

Statistical analysis

Primary analyses were continuous linear models predicting BMI z-score. Prevalence ratios (PRs) were estimated via Poisson regression models (Lovasi et al., 2012c) predicting obesity (BMI z-score \geq 95th percentile) versus normal weight or overweight. All models accounted for clustering within 160 ZIP codes using robust standard errors, and included adjustment for the child's sex, race/ethnicity, and age in months, as well as all neighborhood characteristics. Regression models were estimated using Stata 11.0 (Stata Corp., College Station, TX, USA).

Results

Of 16,176 records, 11,562 (71%) were ages 3–5 years at the time of their physical exam in 2003 or 2004, and were successfully matched to neighborhood characteristics based on buffered ZIP codes, and had valid BMI z-scores and complete covariate data (Table 1).

Neighborhood sociodemographic composition, built environment measures, and safety hazard indicators varied across ZIP codes (Table 2). These neighborhood characteristics, based on ZIP code plus a 400-m buffer, have been rescaled for ease of comparison to have an

Table 1
Characteristics of children enrolled in a large means-tested preschool program in October 2004, New York City, NY.

| Individual characteristics ($N = 11,562$) | Mean (SD) or % |
|--|----------------|
| Age (months) | 44 (6) |
| Female | 51% |
| Hispanic | 57% |
| Black | 26% |
| White/Asian | 13% |
| Other | 4% |
| BMI z-score | 0.7 (1.3) |
| Normal weight | 60% |
| Overweight | 16% |
| Obese | 24% |

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