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Active Living for Rural Youth [Policy Brief]

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Research & Policy Brief

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Active Living for Rural Youth

Overview

Childhood obesity and inactivity are significant and growing problems in many rural areas where the prevalence of obesity and overweight has been shown to be 25 percent higher than urban rates, even after controlling for income, race, physical activity and other known risk factors. While rural areas are often viewed as an ideal setting for an active childhood, kids face a variety of obstacles to incorporating physical activity in their daily lives.

Active living research to date has focused largely on urban and suburban environments. This study investigates the complex web of determinants that support or undermine physical activity in rural youth. We visited three very different small Maine towns (Waldoboro, Dover-Foxcroft and Houlton), where we led youth focus groups and interviewed key informants including rural town planners, school personnel, recreation directors and parents. We also conducted townscape surveys of the physical characteristics of each community. Obesity and inactivity have roots in many aspects of rural life, from the physical environment, to social, policy and programmatic factors.

Community design, transportation and safety

For many rural children walking or biking to school and activities is not a realistic option. A dispersed residential layout, like Waldoboro's, makes it harder to get around without cars in contrast to a more centralized design, as in Dover-Foxcroft and Houlton, (see maps on reverse). The location of schools, parks and athletic fields relative to each other and to residential areas is also very important to activity-friendliness. In Waldoboro, for example, the high school is located five miles from the center making many children dependent on rides to attend after-school sports and other activities. "I wanted to do track but my mom won't let me because she doesn't want to drive me," said one student.

Sustaining a vibrant, pedestrian-friendly town center emerged as another key condition for active living. The downtowns in Dover-Foxcroft and Houlton, though modest, include a cinema, cafe, eateries, stores and other attractions connected by sidewalks and crosswalks. Waldoboro's center is more sparsely developed with few attractions and is bisected by busy Route One. "There's nothing really to do downtown, except hang out at the five and dime and pig out," said a Waldoboro student. "There's no reason to go downtown and walk around."

Despite the existence of suitable land, students and community members reported a shortage of public open space. "If there were trails they would get used by everybody... I would like to kayak but there's nowhere to do that," said a Waldoboro student.

Fast Facts

- Rural kids are 25 percent more likely to be overweight or obese than urban kids.
- Rural youth face unique barriers to being active and maintaining healthy weight. They should be included as a priority population in anti-obesity efforts.
- The dispersed layout of many rural towns makes adequate transportation critical to give students access to opportunities for physical activity.
- Investing in vibrant, walkable town centers near schools and athletic fields improves the activity-friendliness of rural communities.

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Threats to personal safety, from child molesters to drug dealers, also decrease walkability. Younger children said parents restrict their movements. “My mom is scared that a weird dude is going to take me away.”

Parental engagement

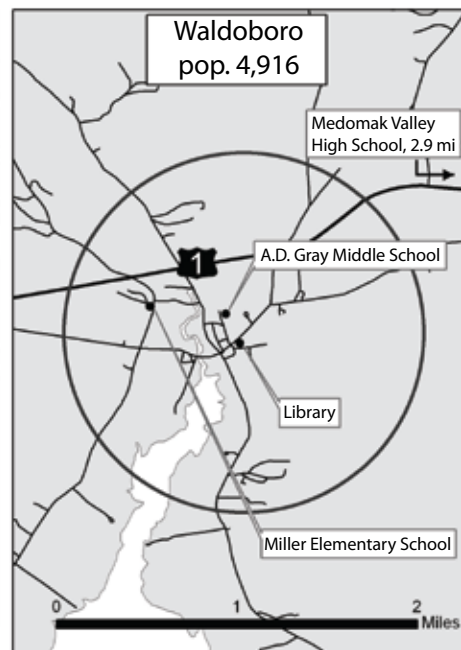
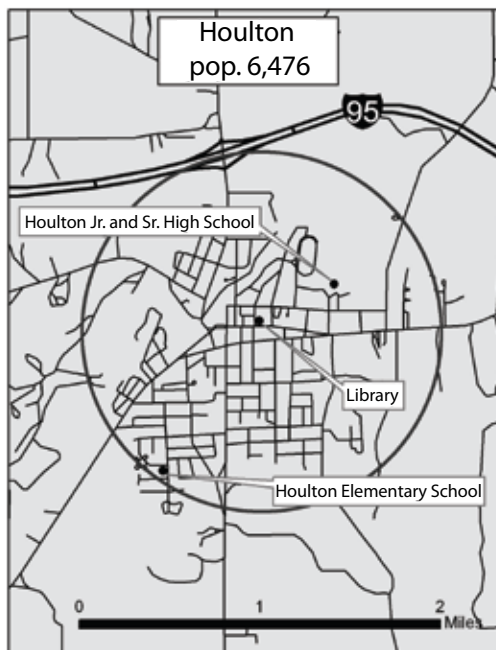
The importance of parents in promoting youth activity emerged very strongly in the study, both as role models and transportation providers. However, many parents work late shifts or commute long distances and, some children said, were unable or unwilling to be role models for physical activity. “I watch TV because my mother is too lazy to go anywhere.” “My mom is on the night shift, so she’s too tired.”

Programs

Kids spend a considerable time at school and many reported that they got much of their exercise there as well. Still recess time and physical education tend to decline in middle and high school. Some kids are very active in after-school sports while others were not interested or were unable to participate due to lack of transportation. “There are some kids who are very active ... but it is always the same kids ... maybe 15-20% of the school.”

Policy Implications

Rural youth are an at-risk population for obesity and inactivity, and often face different challenges than kids in urban and suburban environments. Because active living depends on so many intertwined factors it can be difficult for concerned community members to pick the right targets. Still, several areas appear critical.



Late buses, carpools and other transportation improvements can help children access opportunities for physical activity. Over the long-term, locating schools and parks near downtown and promoting a more centralized residential pattern can improve walkability. In addition, sustaining attractive town centers gives rural kids a reason to get out and be active.

Parents play a critical role in fostering active living in their kids, and should be included in efforts to raise awareness and build solutions. A Dover-Foxcroft program to report body mass index scores to parents has “slowly” started to change attitudes, the school nurse reports.

In rural communities, where it is often difficult to alter aspects of the natural and built environment, policies and programs that help support childhood physical activity assume extra importance. Finally, school policy should make physical activity a priority for students of all ages through recess, PE and an investment in athletics.

Rural active living is deeply embedded in all aspects of life, so change requires awareness and commitment from the entire community.

¹Lutfiya, MN et al., (2007) Is Rural Residency a Risk Factor for Overweight and Obesity for U.S. Children? *Obesity*. 15(9):2348-2356.

²Houlton: population 6476 (Aroostook County, population density 11 people/sq mi)

Waldoboro: population 4916 (Lincoln county, population density 74 people/sq mi)

Dover Foxcroft: population 4211 (Piscataquis County population density 4 people/sq mi)