

Education and Racial-Ethnic Differences in Types of Exercise in the United States

Journal of Health and Social Behavior
52(2) 197–211
© American Sociological Association 2011
DOI: 10.1177/0022146510394862
<http://jhsb.sagepub.com>



Jarron M. Saint Onge¹ and Patrick M. Krueger²

Abstract

Epidemiological research typically focuses on the intensity, frequency, or duration of physical activity, without consideration of the socially meaningful dimensions of exercise. The authors use data from the 1998 National Health Interview Survey ($N = 17,455$) and information on participation in 15 exercise behaviors to examine educational differences in exercise among non-Hispanic whites, non-Hispanic blacks, and Mexican Americans. Factor analysis identifies three types of exercise: team sports (e.g., basketball, football), fitness activities (e.g., running, weight lifting), and activities that require the use of specialized facilities (e.g., golf, tennis). Cultural capital and human capital perspectives offer insight into different dimensions of the relationship between education and exercise. Whites disproportionately undertake facility-based exercise, blacks tend toward team and fitness activities, and Mexican Americans gravitate toward team sports. Our findings offer insight into the social stratification of health and can aid the design of public health interventions.

Keywords:

education, health lifestyles, physical activity, race-ethnicity, social stratification

Epidemiological research on physical activity typically focuses on energy expenditure—as indicated by the intensity, frequency, or duration of physical activity—and finds that more active individuals have better health and lower risks of death (Blair et al. 1992). But a narrow focus on the link between energy expenditure and health overlooks the socially meaningful aspects of exercise. Individuals do not simply “expend calories,” but rather, they accomplish physical activity through meaningful behaviors that reflect their identities and social circumstances, such as participating in sports or athletic activities, walking or bicycling for transportation, or working in strenuous occupations. Our study focuses on the stratification of leisure time exercise, which can aid efforts to promote health in the United States.

Education and race-ethnicity are important markers of social position in the United States that have established relationships with physical activity. Compared to whites and more educated individuals, blacks, Hispanics, and less educated individuals

exercise less often (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2000). Less is known about education and racial-ethnic differences in participation in particular kinds of exercise, which is important for three reasons. First, insight into disparities in socially meaningful types of exercise can inform interventions that aim to increase physical activity and improve health outcomes. Evidence of racial-ethnic and educational differences in types of exercise would suggest the importance of tailoring interventions to particular subpopulations. Second, types of exercise may vary in their ability to improve strength, control weight, or increase cardiovascular fitness.

¹University of Houston

²University of Colorado, Denver

Corresponding Author:

Jarron M. Saint Onge, University of Houston,
Department of Sociology, 450 PGH, Houston, TX
77204–3012

E-mail: jmsaintonge@uh.edu