Neighborhood Safety and Physical Activity among New York City Adults

Stephen J Mooney1, Michael DM Bader2, Katherine F Bartley3, Gina S Lovasi1, Kathryn M Neckerman4, Julien O Teitler5, Daniel M Sheehan1, Andrew G Rundle1

BACKGROUND
Qualitative research suggests lack of safety deters physical activity, but quantitative findings have been more mixed.

To date few studies have used both independently observed and subject-reported measures of both neighborhood safety features and physical activity in order to test different hypotheses in the same subjects.

We tested three complementary theories relating neighborhood safety to activity:
1) Observed safety measures influence activity by affecting perceptions of safety.
2) Neighborhood disorder may deter activity both directly through the aesthetic displeasure of experiencing a chaotic environment and indirectly as a root cause of crime, which itself deters activity.
3) Subject's tendencies to report positively or negatively may create artifactual associations between perceptions of safety and activity.

METHODS
This study used data from the New York City Physical Activity and Transit (PAT) survey, which included both a random-digit dial survey representative of adult residents of New York City and a follow up portion, in which a subset of respondents wore accelerometer and GPS devices for one week in March-November of 2011. This analysis included the 509 PAT subjects who had 4 or more 10+ hour days of GPS and accelerometer data. We used the accelerometer data to compute daily average moderate-equivalent minutes of physical activity. The survey also included self-reported information on: (1) demographic characteristics, (2) physical activity, and (3) whether crime made it unsafe to walk in their neighborhood during the day.

We geocoded subject home addresses and computed levels of homicide and disorder in 1km radial buffers around home addresses. The homicide measure was estimated from the New York Times website’s reports from 2005-2010 using kernel density methods. The disorder measure was constructed by virtual street audit using the Computer Assisted Neighborhood Visual Assessment System (CANVAS) with Google Street View imagery. Most disorder audit items were developed from measures used by the Project for Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods for videotape-based street audits.

KEY LIMITATIONS
- Cross-sectional design does not allow us to account for neighborhood self-selection
- Small sample size increases risk of false negative associations
- Potential for measurement error due to participant non-compliance
- Perceived safety measure was one dichotomous item and may not be sensitive to small-scale variation in safety perceptions
- 1 km radial buffer may not be the most relevant neighborhood definition

CONCLUSIONS
- Fear of crime does not appear to deter physical activity
- Disorder appears to influence fear of crime, but does not appear to deter physical activity
- High levels of homicide in a neighborhood may deter physical activity among nearby residents
- Researchers should be cautious not to over-interpret associations between self-reported neighborhood safety and self-reported activity

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Stephen Mooney, 722 W 168th St, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10032 Email: sjm2186@columbia.edu Supported by a T32 fellowship from NCI (CA09529)

1Department of Epidemiology, Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University, New York, NY; 2Department of Sociology, American University, Washington, DC; 3Epidemiology Services, Division of Epidemiology, New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Queens, NY; 4Columbia Population Research Center, Columbia University, New York, NY; 5School of Social Work, Columbia University, New York, NY