



RESEARCH BRIEF

Prevalence of recess and supportive practices at public U.S. elementary schools

Overview

School recess provides an important opportunity for children to be physically active. Regular national surveillance of recess practices can inform policy needs and equitable access to recess. However, updated estimates are needed. This study provides nationally representative, prevalence estimates of elementary school recess practices in the United States from the 2019-2020 school year.

Main Question

1. Among U.S. elementary schools, what is 1) the average amount of time provided for recess, and the prevalence of 2) having trained recess supervisors, 3) policies allowing students to voluntarily stay inside during recess, 4) withholding recess as a consequence of poor behavior, and 5) withholding recess to complete schoolwork?
2. Do practices vary by school sociodemographic characteristics, including region, urbanicity, size, and racial and ethnic composition and socioeconomic status?

Study

Surveys were sent to a sample of 1010 public elementary schools across the U.S. in the 2019-2020 school year; a total of 559 responses were obtained. Results were compared by region (Northeast, Midwest, South, West), urbanicity, size, and racial and ethnic composition and socioeconomic status (percent eligible for free/reduced-priced meals).

The Bottom Line

Most U.S. elementary schools provide the recommended 20 minutes of daily recess time. However, regional and economic disparities prevent optimal recess engagement for all students. Promoting supportive practices that enhance recess quality and access, particularly for schools serving lower-income communities, is necessary.



Spotlight on results

- Most schools provided at least 20 minutes of daily recess (87.9%) and over half of schools provided at least 30 minutes (59.4%).
- A quarter of schools (26.6%) had trained recess supervisors.
- Most schools did not allow students to voluntarily stay inside during recess (71.6%) and around half prohibited withholding recess for poor behavior (45.6%) or to complete schoolwork (49.5%).
- Several practices varied by region. Having at least 30 minutes of daily recess was more common in the West and there was wide regional variation in practices around withholding recess. Withholding recess was also more prevalent among schools with lower student socioeconomic makeup.

Call to Action

Regular national surveillance of recess practices is needed to inform policy needs and advance equitable access to recess. Recess quantity and quality should both be considered when developing recess policies.

Source

Tsai, Marisa M., Deborah A. Olarte, Erin R. Hager, Juliana FW Cohen, and Lindsey Turner. Prevalence of recess and supportive practices at a nationwide sample of public elementary schools in the United States. *Journal of School Health* (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13368>

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