



FACTSHEET

Overcoming Possible Unintended Outcomes of Policy and Environmental Strategies to Increase Physical Activity in Rural Communities



Policy, Systems, and Environmental Changes and Physical Activity

Physical activity is important for health and reducing risk of many chronic diseases like heart disease, stroke, some cancers, among others. It also contributes to improved mental health and reduction in stress.^{1,2}

People living in rural communities are less likely to meet physical activity recommendations and are more likely to be impacted by many of the chronic diseases that physical activity can help prevent.^{3,4}

Policy, systems, and environmental (PSE) changes can work to increase physical activity of communities as a whole.⁵ PSE changes focus on making healthy choices easier by improving access and availability of resources and activities that promote healthy behaviors like physical activity.⁶

Policy changes include written statements that describe a decision or course of action.⁷ An example would be the creation of local ordinances that support the building and maintenance of sidewalks or bike trails.

Systems changes include the creation of new activities for reaching the communities and populations served by an organization or group.⁷ This can include the leading of organized walking groups by community members, using the trails and parks that exist within a community.

Environmental changes are changes to the physical environment that we live, work, and play in that alter our access to or promote healthy living.⁷ Changes in the environment can include the creation of new sidewalks or bike lanes or the addition of safety features being added to existing sidewalks, bike lanes, or roads that protect pedestrians or bikers.

Below are some example issues that rural areas should consider when planning and running new PSE changes related to increasing physical activity:

Possible Issue in Rural Areas	Potential Solution
Trails and bike lanes can increase risk of collisions with cars	Design bike lanes and trails using best practices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriers to separate walkers and bikers from cars • Well-marked and well-maintained crosswalks
Speed limits are higher and less physical barriers may be available to separate bikers and pedestrians from cars	
Encounters with wildlife or unleashed pets	Ensure people are aware of the wildlife hazards and safety tips to stay safe in their region
Rural residents may be less likely to wear protective equipment like helmets ⁸	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct safety campaigns • Programs that give away needed resources (i.e., helmets or masks) to community members
Some infectious disease prevention strategies such as social distancing have been shown to be practiced less frequently in rural communities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have community leaders such as providers advocate and talk about the importance of prevention (i.e., wearing helmets, wearing masks and social distancing when sick)
If injured, lack of access to emergency health care (i.e., transport and greater distances to emergency healthcare, healthcare shortages)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conduct safety campaigns that focus on injury prevention • Promote public awareness of the importance of having first aid kits handy • Encourage residents to carry cell phones and notify others when being physically active
Improving access to trails and bike lanes as well as adding greenspaces has been shown to increase property and rent costs—making these spaces unaffordable for people who live there that cannot afford these increasing costs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While increasing access to amenities and resources in rural communities, be aware of this potential for displacement • Check in often to intervene and make program changes to ensure displacement of residents does not happen • Engage community partners and policymakers on plans for controlled growth
Potential for created programs and infrastructure changes not benefiting and being equitable for all people (e.g., low-income, minority populations, all genders, all ages, etc.) could widen disparities that already exist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk with your community partners and people in the community as you plan the addition of new programs. • Make sure vulnerable individual and minority populations have a voice in planning efforts • Ensure that low-income and minority populations have access to PA resources such as parks and green space—resources developed with an emphasis on health equity • Make sure resources developed for a wide range of life experiences and interests • Promote tailored programs to accompany new infrastructure developments such as new parks and trails

Takeaway: This is not meant to discourage PSE change efforts to promote physical activity, but as a guide for community leaders and program planners to start conversations to prevent potential negative outcomes of created programming.

References

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