

State-level Initiatives -- California
Environmental Strategies to Improve Healthy Eating and Activity
National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences
June 2, 2005

California's panel will address strategies in three sectors – home, school and community.

Home and school – Reducing recreational TV/screen time

The prevalence of overweight in children and adolescents has nearly doubled during the last three decades (1). Television (TV) viewing and screen time have been implicated as important contributors to childhood overweight (2,3,4,5). An adolescent's average exposure to screen-based media is four and one-half hours/day (5). Nearly all children live in a home with at least one TV (6,7). Two-thirds have TV sets in their bedrooms, and bedrooms are becoming multi-media centers (7,8). To address this issue, the Department of Health Services' California Obesity Prevention Initiative developed a toolkit for afterschool programs and youth-serving organizations to encourage "tweens" to increase screen-free activities while reducing screen time. The tool was based on three research methodologies: segmentation analysis of national data (Youth Styles Survey), "tween" focus groups, and key informant interviews with experts on tweens. The tool was also based on the research of Tom Robinson, MD of Stanford University. Environmental aspects related to screen-related activities will also be addressed.

School – Working with school boards on nutrition policies

Adolescents are eating more "junk foods" and less fruits and vegetables. A survey conducted by California Project LEAN found that the most common a la carte food items sold at high schools were pizza, cookies, and chips. In partnership with the California School Boards Association and the University of South Florida, Project LEAN developed an intervention to educate California school board members about the importance of developing and implementing healthy nutrition policies. Evaluation results showed statistically significant increases in the positive attitudes of school board members toward improving the school nutrition environment. Ten percent of California school districts that have at least one high school, developed or are developing healthier nutrition policies.

Community – Linking the built environment and youth physical activity

Understanding the link between the built environment and physical activity is a recognized public health priority (1). Several studies have identified factors of the built environment related to adult physical activity (2-3). These correlates characterize the features of a community including the distance between places (proximity) and ease of travel between places (connectivity) (2). Evidence suggests that adults who live in more walkable communities are more physically active and less overweight than people in less walkable communities (2, 4-6). However, it is not clear if these relationships hold for youth. Findings will be presented from two recent studies conducted with adolescents in the San Diego area that assessed physical activity measured with accelerometers and characteristics of the built environment determined from Geographic Information Systems (GIS). These studies provide some evidence that environmental features are related to adolescent physical activity. However, no environmental variables were related to body mass index. Research directions and challenges for further investigating youth physical activity and obesity in relation to the built environment will be discussed.

State-level Initiatives -- California References

Home and School: Reducing recreational TV/screen time

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