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Environmental constraints on leisure time physical activity among Latino urban residents

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While there exists growing research on the environmental correlates of physical activity among the mainstream American population, evidence of the effects of environmental constraints on leisure time physical activity (LTPA) among minority groups in this country is lacking. Moreover, the existing literature on the constraints on LTPA among minorities has concentrated primarily on socio-cultural issues. In light of this, the objective of this study was to investigate environmental constraints on LTPA experienced by Latino residents of two predominantly low-income minority communities in the city of Chicago, IL. Four focus groups with residents and 11 in-depth interviews with community stakeholders were conducted between June 2007 and December 2008. The findings of the study showed that lack of access to natural environments suitable for LTPA, poor maintenance of parks, inability to obtain recreation equipment, safety issues, language problems and lack of Spanish-language information about programmes, racial tensions and discrimination, and traffic problems limited Latino's involvement in LTPA.

Keywords: physical activity; Latinos; minority urban communities

The important role of leisure time physical activity (LTPA) in promoting health has been well established. Among other positive health outcomes, LTPA has been linked to a decreased incidence of obesity, cardiovascular disease, colon cancer, depression and osteoporosis (Lampinen and Heikkinen 2002, Weinstein and Sesso 2006). It is unfortunate that some segments of the American population, such as Latinos, fail to benefit from the salutogenic effects of LTPA. In fact, studies show that the rates of LTPA are significantly lower among Latinos than among the non-Hispanic Whites (Crespo 2000, Crespo *et al.* 2001). For example, according to the National Center for Health Statistics (CDC 2008), more than half (52.8%) of Latinos are inactive. At the same time, Latinos are known to be disproportionately affected by Type 2 diabetes and obesity. Such trends are especially troubling considering that Latinos constitute a growing portion of the American population and their numbers are expected to rise from 14.8% of the total population of the USA (over 44 million) in 2006 to 24.4% in year 2050 (U.S. Census 2004, American Community Survey 2006).

Research on LTPA participation among minority populations has significantly expanded in recent years. Studies have examined correlates of specific types of LTPA,

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such as LTPA activity among African-Americans, Latinos and American Indians (e.g., Ainsworth *et al.* 1991, Hovell *et al.* 1991, Bild *et al.* 1993, Ransdell and Wells 1998, Sternfeld *et al.* 1999, King *et al.* 2000), their unique constraints on participation (e.g., Miller and Brown 2005) and attitudes toward LTPA (e.g., Hovell *et al.* 1991, Eyler *et al.* 1999, 2002). In recent years, we also have witnessed a growing interest in the role of public parks and other natural environments in affecting LTPA among minority populations (Gobster 2002, Cronan *et al.* 2008, Floyd *et al.* 2009). Floyd *et al.* (2009) observed that although public parks and recreation areas exist in almost every community, minorities usually have less access to activity-friendly environments and recreation facilities. Such differences have been linked to disparities in LTPA participation between minority populations and mainstream Whites (Gordon-Larsen *et al.* 2006, Powell *et al.* 2006). Floyd *et al.* (2009) called for a 'comprehensive approach' to studying disparities in LTPA between low-income, racial and ethnic minority communities and affluent populations, that 'begins with extensive and thorough qualitative research in the target community' (p. S158).

This study is designed to answer this call and to fill the gap in our understanding of the reasons for low levels of LTPA among minority populations by examining environmental constraints on LTPA experienced by Latino residents of two predominantly low-income minority communities in the city of Chicago. While the study will focus primarily on environmental constraints on LTPA among Latinos, cultural and socio-economic issues will also be addressed, as they often interact with environmental constraints to restrict participation in LTPA among members of this population.

Literature review

Physical activity among Latino Americans

The literature on LTPA participation among Latino Americans has significantly expanded in recent years. The existing evidence shows that Latinos have higher rates of physical inactivity than Whites across age categories, and that Latinos are inactive even in their childhood and adolescence (Ransdell and Wells 1998, Crespo 2000, Jamieson *et al.* 2005, Health United States 2006). First-generation immigrant Latinos show higher prevalence of physical inactivity than their counterparts born in the USA and Latina women are less active than Latina men, even after controlling for age, education and income (Crespo *et al.* 2001).

Several important considerations need to be taken into account while researching physical activity (PA) among Latinos and many other ethnic and racial minority groups. First, it has been shown that many Latinos define PA differently than members of the 'White mainstream'. For example, many Latina women consider activities done in the context of the house or family care (e.g., general cleaning, vacuuming, carrying small children, caring for older adults) and walking to the bus, at work and to a grocery store as PA (Tortolero *et al.* 1999, Jamieson *et al.* 2005). In a study by Tortolero *et al.* (1999), Latina women described PA as 'doing something, moving around, walking, dancing, lifting boxes, carrying babies' or 'not having certain time for exercising but rather doing those daily activities that must be done' (p. 137). Latina women also seemed to make a distinction between PA and sport, and while they had quite positive attitudes toward PA, they perceived sport as an activity reserved for children and men. LTPA was considered as a luxury many women could not afford, as a word with negative connotations, as lazy time or time when one was of no benefit to others. It is likely that negative perceptions of leisure were the result

of the strong family orientation among female interviewees, which in turn could be responsible for their feelings of guilt about using time for oneself. However, inadequacies of the translation process may be partially responsible for this finding. Considering some of the phrases used by Latina participants, it is likely that the term 'ocio' was used to translate the word 'leisure' to Spanish language. 'Ocio' is known to have very negative connotations in Latin American countries, as it is often equated with laziness and, thus, is avoided in more contemporary studies on the topic (Juniu 2000).

It also needs to be acknowledged that many minorities, including Latinos, are known to be overrepresented in physically demanding occupations, and thus studies on PA that focused only on activity taking place in leisure time might have underestimated their overall levels of activity participation (Crespo *et al.* 1996, Ransdell and Wells 1998, Wilcox *et al.* 2000). Moreover, Latino's high participation rates in workplace PA might decrease their desire to be active in their leisure time (Crespo 2000). Among those Latinos who are active in leisure time, walking is the most frequently participated in LTPA (Bild *et al.* 1993, Ainsworth *et al.* 1999, Clark 1999, Cloutier Laffrey 2000, Gobster 2002).

Constraints on leisure time physical activity among Latino Americans

The literature that explores constraints to participation of Latinos in LTPA has grown in recent years. Many studies on LTPA among the members of this group and among Latina women in particular have identified constraints related to minority status (e.g., lack of money and lack of access to transportation) and culturally based constraints on their involvement in active recreation. For instance, lack of exposure to LTPA, absence of role models, specific gender role expectations, language problems, lack of culturally sensitive childcare facilities, culturally inappropriate facilities and programmes, absence of people from their own minority group who use the area and facilities as well as lack of self-confidence or self-efficacy were shown to affect participation in LTPA among Latinos. Similarly, family responsibilities that are known to constrain PA among the mainstream population might be especially pronounced among Latina women who have larger families (Sternfeld *et al.* 1999, Tortolero *et al.* 1999).

For instance, Eyler *et al.* (1998) reported that lack of time due to care-giving responsibilities, lack of motivation, safety concerns and lack of availability of culturally sensitive programmes were important barriers to exercise among Latina women. Sternfeld *et al.* (1999) found that Latina women who were married had children and who perceived lack of time as a constraint had the highest levels of household and care-giving responsibilities and were least likely to be involved in sport and exercise. Berg *et al.* (2002) identified family responsibilities, poor health and being too self-conscious about physical appearance as the most important constraints on LTPA among Latina women. One of the focus group participants in their study stated, 'Mexican American women are more targeted toward the family' (Berg *et al.*, p. 899). Another one added, 'Mexican American women don't think of themselves' (p. 899). Similarly, in Tortolero *et al.*'s (1999) study, Latina women indicated feeling guilty when they spent time on themselves and commented that 'the world needs taking care of' (p. 138). Skowron *et al.* (2008) confirmed that main constraints reported by Latina women were connected to their family roles and to the necessity of childcare, in particular. Taking care of children resulted in time constraints and in the lack of

energy to exercise among Latina women interviewed in their study. While ethic of care (the desire to take care of the needs of others first, often neglecting their own needs) and lack of sense of entitlement (belief that they are not entitled to leisure for themselves) are constraints affecting recreation participation among mainstream women as well (Shaw 1994), these factors may be particularly salient among many Latinas. Many women from South American countries may feel cultural pressures to sacrifice their personal lives for their families, to be kind, submissive, never to put their own needs first and not to wish for more in life than being a housewife (see the discussion of the concept of *marianismo*, defining the traditional roles assigned to Latina women in a patriarchal society, in Gil and Vazquez 1996).

Evenson *et al.* (2002) established that Latina's LTPA was also constrained by other socio-cultural issues, including cultural upbringing in the home country that did not involve structured exercise and sport, lack of support from their husbands, lack of culturally sensitive childcare, language barrier and isolation in the community. The study also identified a number of constraints not related to socio-cultural factors, including lack of driver's licence and, thus, dependence on others for transportation, lack of public transportation, lack of sidewalks and parks close to home, lack of money, safety issues and fear of unattended dogs. King *et al.* (2000) found that middle-age and older Latina women participated less in LTPA if they felt tired and if they were discouraged by others from exercising. Problems with transportation, tiredness and lack of money were also identified in the study by Berg *et al.* (2002), Eyler *et al.* (1998) and Skowron *et al.* (2008). Latina women residing in Chicago, IL, who were interviewed in Skowron *et al.*'s study, also listed cold weather as constraining their involvement in LTPA.

Studies have also shown that many Latinos may lack the awareness of the beneficial roles of LTPA in diseases prevention. For instance, Berg *et al.* (2002) showed that Mexican-American women considered LTPA to be a prescriptive therapy for a specific illness, rather than a means of health promotion or disease prevention. The women in their study were motivated to participate in LTPA by its role in improving sleep, making them stronger physically, giving them more energy and by strong commitment to their families. Similarly, Ransdell and Wells (1998) argued that minority women might be less informed about the role of LTPA in the aetiology of chronic disease. Moreover, they may work in more physically demanding occupations and be more constrained by the lack of money to join health clubs, buy exercise equipment or consult with fitness/health professionals. Similar constraints related to physically demanding occupations were identified by Skowron *et al.* (2008) and Stodolska and Santos (2006).

Extensive research exists on the environmental constraints to LTPA among the general population. A number of community characteristics have been identified that affect people's LTPA patterns. They include access to activity-friendly environments and recreation facilities (e.g., parks, bike paths, walking trails, swimming pools, playgrounds, sports fields and golf courses; Sallis *et al.* 1989, Shaw *et al.* 1991, Booth *et al.* 2000, Ball *et al.* 2001, Brownson *et al.* 2001, Humpel *et al.* 2002, Addy *et al.* 2004, Blanchard *et al.* 2005, Chad *et al.* 2005), and factor such as availability of sidewalks in the neighbourhood, traffic, hills, streetlights, unattended dogs, scenery, weather and safety (Sallis *et al.* 1997, Brownson *et al.* 2001, Troped *et al.* 2001, Humpel *et al.* 2002). Unlike the research on general population, the majority of studies that examined constraints on LTPA among Latinos focused on constraints related to their socio-cultural background and marginal position in American society. Only a few studies

identified barriers that might be related to the environments in which Latinos live and recreate. One can argue, however, that some of the environmental barriers might be unique to this population or at least might be experienced differently by Latino urban residents. For instance, many members of minority groups, including Latinos, are known to reside in neighbourhoods with less access to parks and other quality natural environments, higher crime rates, and fewer and less well-maintained recreation facilities (Floyd *et al.* 2009, Stodolska and Shinenew 2009, Stodolska *et al.* 2009). Their access to recreation facilities might be restricted by communication problems, interracial tensions or not feeling welcome in certain environments (Santos and Rozier 2007, Stodolska and Shinenew 2009). Transportation problems may also be experienced differently by immigrant Latinos who oftentimes cannot afford the expenses associated with purchasing, insuring and operating a vehicle and who might not be able to obtain a driver's licence due to their undocumented status. Many of those constraints remain obscured in studies that use quantitative methodologies that do not provide opportunities for in-depth exploration of causes of lower participation rates in LTPA among minority populations. Moreover, the majority of this research focused on Latina women, while the investigations of constraints on LTPA among Latino men are lacking. This study is intended to fill this gap in the literature by examining environment-related constraints on LTPA among Latino men and women.

Methods

In 2004, the Chicago metropolitan area had more than 1,607,000 Latino inhabitants (approximately 20% of the total population), 79% of whom were of Mexican descent (Ready and Brown-Gort 2005). This study employed focus groups with Latino Americans residing in two predominantly low-income minority communities of Little Village and East Side and interviews with stakeholders in Little Village. In 2000, population of Little Village was 91,071, 83% were Latino, median household income was \$32,320 and 23.1% of residents were below poverty level. Population of East Side was 23,688, 68% were Latino, median household income was \$39,724 and 12.4% of residents were below poverty line (U.S. Census 2000). For comparison purposes, in 2000, median household income in Chicago PMSA was \$51,680, and 10.5% of residents lived below poverty level.

Focus groups

Four focus groups were conducted between June and September 2007. Two focus groups were conducted with Latinos born in the USA and two with first-generation immigrants. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling through the existing contacts of the researchers, as well as through local churches and Latino-own businesses. Care was taken to ensure that participants were of diverse socio-economic backgrounds and that they represented both Latinos born in this country and immigrants of diverse lengths of residence in the USA.

In all, 26 Latinos (13 men and 13 women) took part in the focus groups. Participants were between early 20s (two youngest interviewees) and late 60s (one interviewee). They included people employed in construction, hotels, factories, nursing homes, baby sitters, a teaching assistant, a car mechanic, a chiropractor's assistant, valets, network operators, shipping-receiving attendants, customer service executives for an airline and two students. Moreover, two unemployed individuals were

interviewed. In the two focus groups with immigrants, the most recent immigrant was a man who moved to the USA several months prior to the interview and the person with the longest immigration tenure was a man who lived in the USA for 22 years. All interviewees were of Mexican descent. All participants have been given pseudonyms for the purpose of this study.

Focus groups lasted between one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half hours. Two focus groups with first-generation immigrants were conducted in Spanish, and the two with Latinos born in the USA were conducted in English. One of the research assistants who participated in each of the focus groups was born in Mexico and, for a period of time, resided in the neighbourhood of Little Village. His cultural background, fluency in Mexican Spanish and knowledge of issues of the local Latino community helped in establishing rapport with focus group participants and in interpreting the findings of the study. The two researchers responsible for the project were both of non-Latino descent.

One of the focus groups was conducted in the residence of one of the participants, one in a restaurant and two took place in the residence of one of the researchers. Participants were paid \$25 for participation. Moreover, pizza, snacks and refreshments were offered during each session. Focus groups were tape-recorded and video-taped. They were transcribed verbatim and the two conducted in Spanish were subsequently translated to English by the Mexican-American research assistant involved in the project. Back translation was used to improve accuracy (Brislin 1970). Moreover, the translation was verified by two independent individuals fluent in both languages.

Focus groups started with participants being asked about factors affecting their use of local natural environments for recreation and for PA in particular. Issues of safety, lack of access to natural environments suitable for LTPA and poor maintenance of parks were mentioned first. Focus group participants also commented on their inability to rent recreation equipment, language problems and lack of Spanish-language information about programmes, racial tensions and traffic problems as factors affecting their participation in recreation and PA. These questions were guided by the conceptual framework of constraints research that is a well-established sub-discipline of leisure studies (see Jackson and Burton 1999, Jackson 2005). General constraints on leisure that have been identified in previous studies, such as facilities problems, safety and maintenance, were augmented with constraints that are known to be particularly salient for minority populations (e.g., interracial tensions, language issues; Philipp 1999, Juniu 2000) and those that are known to be particularly important when it comes to PA (e.g., access to activity-friendly environments; Brownson *et al.* 2001, Humpel *et al.* 2002, Chad *et al.* 2005).

Interviews

In order to clarify and expand the data obtained from focus groups with residents, 11 interviews with stakeholders in Little Village were conducted. The interviewees included Carlos (a high-ranking member of Little Village Community Development Corporation (LVCDC) – new name Enlace), Isabel, Elena, Ricardo, Pedro (four members of LVejo – Little Village Environmental Justice Organization), Raul (a high-ranking member of the 10th District of Chicago Police Department), Michael (one of the pastors of Little Village Community Church), Maria (a high-ranking member of the local park district), Fernando (one of the Principals of Little Village High School),

Enrique (Alderman of one of the local City Wards) and Luis (assistant to the Alderman). All of the interviewees, with the exception of one (the pastor), were Latino. Eight of them were men and three were women. The youngest interviewee was 18 years old (a man who worked for LVejo) and the oldest (a high-ranking member of LVCDC) was in his late 50s. The interviews were conducted in the offices of the stakeholders. They lasted between 25 minutes (one interview) and two hours 45 minutes (three interviews). All of the interviews were conducted in English by the first author of this paper. They were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviewees were asked about factors they thought affected participation in recreation and PA among local Latino residents and about issues they might have been particularly knowledgeable about (e.g., police commander of crime issues, members of the environmental organisation about access to open spaces in the community).

Analysis of the focus groups and interview data

The analysis of the interview and focus group material began after the first interviews and focus groups had been completed and lasted throughout the duration of the study. Following each focus group/interview, two sets of notes were created. The first set of notes included all the contextual information regarding the focus group/interview in question (characteristics of participants, location, events that occurred during the focus group/interview, etc.). The second set of notes included a summary of the main themes that had surfaced during the conversations and the researchers' preliminary interpretation of the information. These notes shared among and discussed by the researchers were helpful in adjusting questions asked in the following focus groups/interviews. After all the focus groups/interviews had been transcribed, the transcripts were analysed using a constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In order to isolate the themes and sub-themes and to group them into categories, each focus group/interview transcript was independently read several times by both researchers and then discussed until a consensus was reached on the classification of the data. After all the relevant points had been synthesised, the transcripts were re-read again to ensure all of the important aspects of the phenomena had been accounted for.

As Sparkes (1998) have argued with respect to the criteria for judging the quality of qualitative research:

The emergence of a multitude of criteria for judging the qualitative research process and product clearly signals that there can be no canonical approach to this form of inquiry, no recipes or rigid formulas, as different validation procedures or sets of criteria may be better suited to certain situations, forms of representation, and desires for legitimization. (p. 380)

In this research study, we have decided to use Guba and Lincoln's (2005) criteria of fairness, ontological authenticity, educative authenticity, catalytic authenticity and tactical authenticity to evaluate methodological rigour of our inquiry (Sparkes and Smith 2009). These criteria were used to 'pose questions about and raise considerations of the data to further data analysis and guide ethical decisions' (Manning 1997, p. 94). In our research process, we have strived to represent multiple points of view among the residents and the stakeholders and encouraged them to voice their opinions in a non-judgemental and supportive environment. Both the researchers and the participants (focus group interviewees and stakeholders) embarked on a process of self-discovery, mutual learning and understanding of their own perceptions of reality. This

process was fostered by caring, honest and trustful researcher–participant relationships that were built throughout the duration of the study. Focus group questions allowed the participants to examine their own experiences and perceptions and confront them with those of others, while interviewed stakeholders were encouraged to reflect on their own opinions and evaluations of reality when faced with the material obtained in focus groups. It is our hope that this process of inquiry will lead to increased understanding of constraints on PA among Latino urban residents and will empower them to action that will lead to lasting social change.

Findings

When asked about factors that affected their involvement in LTPA, focus group participants brought up a number of issues: lack of access to natural environments suitable for LTPA in one of the studied communities, poor maintenance of parks, lack of recreation equipment and inappropriate use of park grounds and facilities, safety issues, language problems, racial tensions and discrimination, and traffic problems. Interviewed stakeholders were asked to comment on each of these factors.

Lack of access to outdoor natural environments

Focus group participants complained that Little Village suffered from insufficient access to nearby parks suitable for recreation, including LTPA. The one park used by the participants (Piotrowski) was crowded and insufficient in size to meet use demands. Conditions in East Side were better in terms of access, although a number of issues obstructed the use of parks by local residents. Asked whether they thought Little Village had sufficient access to natural areas, focus group participants were in agreement. Jesus replied, ‘No’. Belen nodded her head and elaborated on his response:

Definitely not! I live on 31st and Pulaski. There is only in existence one park. It is also very small for all the people that live there. A lot of times we pass driving through there and it’s always full. My kids need more sociability and they are no places where they can be. I rather go to a bigger park. There is need for more parks. I’ve wanted to go to Piotrowski Park a lot of times with my two children, and they have disabilities. They both have epilepsy and slow development. I’ve always tried to take them there but with so many people they’ve never been able to go in. So it’s insufficient.

Carla linked residents’ desire for open spaces with their cultural heritage and upbringing in Mexico.

If you live in Little Village, it’s because you are just coming in from Mexico, and you’re used to bigger green areas. You don’t usually necessarily come from the city. You come from the working land, and they’re used to those big areas. They’re used to having trees. They’re used to having a big space to run in.

Paulina agreed, ‘I think there is a little bit of a culture where older people in Mexico hang out in the *plaza*. They just like to be outdoors.’ Martha linked Little Village residents’ desire for open spaces to their limited access to backyards and to the culture of Mexican immigrants.

In Little Village, not a lot of people have backyards. And you can’t just let your kids running by themselves. They need to play. In Mexico there are bigger spaces than just

an apartment. Some people don't have backyards and they are used to being outdoors. You walk a lot in Mexico. You do a lot outside. You are used to that.

Disadvantaged socio-economic status interacted with the environmental constraint of lack of open spaces to negatively affect LTPA participation. Both communities were located on the edges of Chicago's industrial corridor. According to one of the interviewed stakeholders, more than 250 industries were located in Little Village alone and the pollution from the local coal power plant and odours from the Stickney Water Reclamation Plant, the largest wastewater treatment facility in the world, were difficult to ignore while spending time outdoors. The majority of East Side parks and other green areas were former brown fields that were criss-crossed by industrial canals and surrounded by factories and oil refineries. Asked about their residential choices, focus group participants commented on their poor economic situation and lack of resources to move out to safer and better-maintained suburban communities with more access to parks and quality recreation facilities.

All of the stakeholders from Little Village agreed that lack of open spaces was a big problem in the community. Carlos (LVCDC/Enlace) commented that Little Village has only 61 acres of public open space – the second lowest open space-to-resident ratio of the 77 Chicago community areas. With its 23 acres, Piotrowski Park is the neighbourhood's largest park. Douglas Park, located on the north-east edge of the community, is rarely utilised by local Latino residents for LTPA due to its poor accessibility to pedestrians and the perception that it 'belongs' to North Lawndale – a neighbouring predominantly African-American community. 'I am talking about [insufficient] park space, I am talking about youth centres,' Carlos remarked. 'Half of Little Village population is under the age of 25 and we have two Boys and Girls Clubs and one small park. It's not enough!' He later elaborated on LVCDC's plans to develop a network of community gardens as well as small 'pocket' parks and lots that would be interspersed throughout the community. Elena from LVejo added,

we have been struggling as a community for open space for a long time. With a community of this size we should have at least 120 acres of open space [referring to the city's official Cityspace Plan], and we are barely at maybe at 20–25 acre mark. We only have one park and that's Piotrowski Park, and it's accessible only to about the fourth of the community. And we make a lot of jokes, that on a nice summer day the kids are waiting in line for hours, it's like being in the Great America [referring to the amusement park] waiting for a ride or to get on the swing.

She later elaborated how LVejo contributed to the development of a skate park for Latino youth and on their plans to develop a new park on the east side of the community that would feature a soccer field, basketball courts and an indoor pool.

Poor maintenance of parks

While insufficient access to natural environments suitable for LTPA only hindered participation among residents of Little Village, focus group participants from *both* neighbourhoods commented on the poor quality of natural areas available to local residents. Jogging trails full of potholes, dilapidated playground equipment, trash, lack of water fountains and unsanitary restrooms dissuaded people from using parks

for LTPA. Paulina, one of the interviewees, described Piotrowski Park in these words:

It is disgusting! When it rains it is always flooded on the path around the park. There are these big holes that they just filled them up with big rocks and part of the track around the park. There is broken glass all around. The water runs in the bathroom. You can't see yourself in the mirrors because they are so dirty and so scratched up ... The pool is just crowded, dirty. There are just too many people there. It's just too overcrowded to begin with. It's dirty. You feel uncomfortable. There is broken glass all around. Where the grass doesn't grow there is just glass.

Other respondents complained about graffiti in the park and about the rusty and 'falling apart' playground equipment. Daniel and Paulina made a connection between the poor condition of open spaces in Little Village, the crime problem and the lack of care local residents showed toward public spaces in the community.

Daniel: If there was a lot more clean areas, like having actual grass, some flowers that would induce people to bring more children, people running at the park instead of [it] being taken over by gang bangers. Because it is deteriorating. It's not a park anymore; it's just a waste land that gangs can use for whatever they want. Not for exercise or for having fun, playing Frisbee, having a dog, like it's supposed to be.

Paulina: Yeah they [Little Village residents] will sit and complain [about poor maintenance of parks] but no one actually cares, takes a stand or anything.

Some focus group participants believed that insufficient funding was to blame for the problems with park facilities, while others echoed Paulina's comments and admitted that community members were partly responsible for the poor state of local parks. For instance, Carla, a 24-year-old resident of East Side, remarked about better maintenance of parks in suburban communities: 'More money goes into it, it's the upkeep, and people keep it nice. You don't see someone drinking a can of Kool-Aid and throwing it on the floor. They actually take the time to take it to the wastebasket.'

Maria, one of the people responsible for managing Piotrowski Park, also attributed the difficulties maintaining park space in Little Village to the attitudes among the local population and described park's improvement initiatives:

I've never seen as much graffiti, tagging, as in this community. It costs so much money to remove the graffiti from park buildings! I wish I could put the money we spent into removing graffiti into additional programmes. Our [Latino] families do not respect the park the way they should, they throw away diapers, food. I have asked people personally to respect the park 'Would you throw this dirty diaper on the floor in your house?' 'Would you throw this plate on your own floor?' You are only as good as your community is!

She added that the maintenance issues had improved lately since the adult men's soccer leagues started to clean up after themselves and that significant capital investments were being made in the park, including putting new landscaping, improving jogging trail, creating a new soft surface soccer field for children, new skate park for the teens and remodelling basketball courts (to be completed in 2009) and developing a new playground by 2010. Asked whether lack of funding was to blame for problems with maintenance of facilities in Piotrowski Park, she replied, 'Not at all. Chicago

Park District has actually been very generous with giving us funds. We do have the money that we need for this park.'

Lack of recreation equipment and inappropriate use of park grounds and facilities

Focus group participants also mentioned problems with not being able to afford to buy or to rent recreation equipment and stated that certain park facilities were improperly used by other Latinos. Several participants suggested that visitors could benefit from tennis racquet rentals; however, they also believed that staff of some parks did not trust local residents enough to offer recreation equipment rentals. As Iris commented, 'They think [Latinos] would steal it, damage it, probably. Not take care of it.'

Iris also expressed her indignation because of the improper use of park facilities by other Latinos:

I used to live a block away from a park, and it used to crack me up that they had really nice tennis courts, but they used them for everything else except playing tennis. They would play basketball in them, they would rollerblade, and I'm like 'What? Okay, they're meant for ...' And then you go around to the suburbs, you can never find an empty tennis court.

Other participants were concerned about drugs being sold in parks and about people drinking alcohol. Carla, who had lived in the East Side for 15 years, commented, 'There are many times that I have seen that they are smoking marihuana there'. Another participant commented on the use of alcohol in East Side parks, 'To me, it is a bad example to have beer there because it serves as the example that they are given the kids that are there, around the park. Me as a mom I feel like never going back.'

Safety and fear of crime

Focus group participants were in agreement that the lack of safety was one of the most important factors negatively affecting the use of parks and other natural environments for LTPA. The problem of gang activity, in particular, was raised by all focus group participants.

Presence of gangs in parks

Some of the parks were considered gang territory and were often subject of territorial fights among competing gangs. Gang members were involved in selling drugs and the mere presence of gangs deterred legitimate park use. Many incidents of drive-by shootings in the vicinity of the parks were recalled by the interviewees. Participants commented that gang members were almost constantly present in local parks, that they 'owned the parks', and that parks were public spaces that gangs often fought over. Paulina described that presence of gangs make jogging in the park a very unpleasant experience:

The other day I went [to the park] and there were groups of 20-year-old-something men in a little circle on the path, so you have to run around them. I was with my nephew and he was on his bike and then we stopped because he was hurt or something. They [the gangbangers] were just walking off. I was scared for a little bit like, are they walking towards me?

Erik narrated a story of what had happened when his friend, a Marine from California, came to visit him in Little Village.

He had his hair shaved up. He had a bunch of tattoos. He said, 'Let's go to the park and run.' So he took off his shirt and started running and he had a lot of tattoos. And they [the gang members] started throwing signs on him, and he was, 'what the hell?' I was like, 'hey man let's just go home.' They got off the car and were like, 'hey what's up homie?' 'Let's go home dude, they are going to start crap' and we walked home.

Several of the focus group participants commented that because of lack of safety they had to travel to suburban forest preserves if they wanted to play soccer. For instance, according to Juan, a 23-year-old recent university graduate from Little Village, 'We would go to the suburbs or a forest preserve where we can [play] soccer ... even if there is nothing else. You know, calm or whatever. Not on the regular business, but maybe on the weekend.' Other participants replied, however, that travel to suburban recreation environments was a luxury not many working-class Latinos could afford. Lack of car, driver's licence or money to buy gas, as well as lack of time, and being tired due to hard physical work made such trips difficult for most residents.

Due to the prevalent safety problem, Roxana almost completely resigned from visiting parks and opted to use indoor facilities for exercising instead. She recalled times of her childhood when she and her family would visit parks on regular basis. Now she was more inclined to buy a membership to a fitness club.

When I was little we used to go to the park. There were a lot of activities. Well, I wasn't involved much, but I know we did go. But from when I was 10-year old to now I don't go to parks that often. I rather have a membership to Bally's. I'd rather exercise indoors. It's safer, it's nicer. I just rather work out in a Bally's or something than in the park.

Many others, however, could not afford fitness club membership and were forced to rely on public places such as parks to participate in LTPA. Paulina, for example, jogged in the parks in the morning but was keenly aware of her surroundings while participating in PA.

Ever since I've been home [from school] I've been running in the park. It can feel not safe a lot of the times. I try to go in the morning. In the morning all the families are with the kids and they are all just playing baseball because that's when the games are. The gangs haven't woken up yet.

Gangs taking control of other public spaces in the community

Participants also commented that gangs were not only present in the parks, but that they 'hijacked' the entire neighbourhood and made it unsafe to play, walk or bike on the street, or travel to the park. Carmen, a nursing home worker from East Side reflected on the gang problem in their community, 'I've lived here for two years. It's always the same, gangs, gangs, gangs. Not long ago we got to see how they almost killed a young man with a bat.' Esther, an immigrant living in Little Village asked about opportunities for PA in her community replied, 'Farragut [High School] is close to where I live. There are no trees but you can run. Yet it is very dangerous because sometimes you are running and you hear gun shots and you have to run back inside your house.' Paulina added, 'I'm not going to bike in these streets ever. There is nowhere else to go run. I'm not going to go run around the neighbourhood. That's just

dumber than going to the park and running.’ Gloria, an immigrant residing in Little Village, described a situation where a group of women who used to jog on their children’s school track abandoned the activity due to the presence of ‘young men’ in the vicinity of the school. In fact, it was unclear if these men were in fact members of a gang, and yet fear of crime made women abstain from the activity. In Gloria’s words:

There is an organization of ladies on the 31st [Street] from Lawndale [Ave] to Avers [Ave]. There are more than 10 ladies involved because they take their kids to school, to Garry, or Little Village [High School], or Ortiz de Dominguez. They are ladies that like to take their kids to school and later they run on the track two or three times and then go home to do chores. Now we are not seeing that. Even in the daylight they are not going to run because there are young men that don’t go to school and are now in the streets because their parents do not take care of them. In reality we don’t know if they are just lazy people or they are gangs. They [the women] rather stay at home because there is not a lot of security.

Belen described how a street festival in Little Village was interrupted by a gang-related shooting. The incident occurred a year prior to the focus group. The citizens’ committee received permission to close about 10 streets close to the park and sponsored ‘games, basketball, balloons, a carnival, hotdogs, and lights. (...) There was music, food, basketball, there were boys from 6 to 12-year old playing and competing in teams’. Belen liked the event as it brought families together by making them play for the teams and because it was attended by a mix of people – Blacks, Latinos and Puerto Ricans. After it got dark, some cars passed by on the 31st Street and the occupants started shooting. As a result, the crowd dispersed and people went back to their houses.

Angelica made sure to closely watch her children while they were playing and drove them to a different neighbourhood to go for walks. She commented, ‘There are a lot of gangbangers around this area. I don’t feel safe with my kids. Because two weeks ago they just shot someone right on the corner of my house. It is scary.’ Asked if she was afraid to go outside, she added, ‘Yeah, when we go outside we usually go far. Not around here.’ Later she remarked that she only allowed her children to play inside her house, in her fenced back yard while she was watching them, or at a family member’s or close friend’s house. Her comments were echoed by all other female participants who had young children. While the desire to protect one’s children from crime is typical to all parents, regardless of their ethnicity, race or national origin, Latina women are likely to be particularly sensitive about such issues as they are socialised to be protective of their children and to be responsible for the welfare of their families.

Socio-economic and legal factors have also played a significant role in increasing the negative impact of crime on Latino’s ability to participate in out-of-home activities, including LTPA. Restricted ability to travel to safer environments for leisure has already been discussed. Participants also commented that their difficult financial situation made them unable to move out to safer and more upscale communities. Other participants brought up an issue of undocumented status of many Latino immigrants that made them less likely to seek protection of the local law enforcement and, thus, made them more vulnerable to crime.

All of the stakeholders interviewed in this study confirmed the significance of the gang problem in Little Village. According to the interviewed Police Commander, in 2008, there were six Latino gangs operating in 4.4 square miles of Little Village.

Lawndale Avenue, a major thoroughfare in Chicago, divided the community along a north–south axis. The area roughly west of Lawndale Avenue was controlled by *Two-Six* (a gang belonging to the Folks Nation Alliance) and a large portion of the area east of Lawndale Avenue was controlled by *Latin Kings* (belonging to the Peoples Nation). Frequent fights over the control of gang territory, retaliations for perceived infractions of gang rules, and drug dealings led to frequent drive-by shootings, victims of whom were often innocent bystanders. These incidents contributed to pervasive feelings of fear among Little Village residents and to their perception that gangs ‘took control of the entire neighbourhood’.

Language issues

Lack of English fluency also seemed to hinder interviewees’ ability to take advantage of opportunities for LTPA available in the community. For instance, Belen described that only by accident she found out about programmes offered by the local recreation centre:

I say this because I did not know of programmes that the park had by Lake Shore Drive and 83rd. I went one time because I was informing myself and it was then when I noticed all the programmes that it has. That is because we are afraid of not speaking English – we don’t go.

Moreover, some of the Latino interviewees believed that the Anglo staff intentionally failed to distribute information in Spanish to give preference to children of White, Anglo residents. Similar comments were made with respect to disabled Latino children. As Belen commented,

I think the communication exists, but a lot of the times there isn’t a lot of information out there in Spanish ... they don’t really make a big effort at communicating that in a native language. You have a class in the park, let’s say gymnastics. They never put out that information in Spanish. It would always be fliers in English, so the community doesn’t find out that we have that.

However, according to Maria, one of the people responsible for managing Piotrowski Park, opinions of residents were unsubstantiated. She revealed that Piotrowski Park offered numerous opportunities for PA including soccer, baseball, basketball, dance, gymnastics, swimming and even skiing trips in winter, and that information about these activities and programmes was distributed through announcements made on the Spanish-language radio and Spanish-language Chicago cable channel, as well as through Spanish-language fliers distributed via churches, schools and the local police department. Moreover, 9 out of 10 staff members in Piotrowski field house spoke Spanish.

Racial tensions and discrimination

Racial tensions related to different racial background of other park users, staff of recreation centres and even police officers were also mentioned by focus group participants as negatively affecting their participation in LTPA. Latino interviewees recounted experiencing discriminatory acts in parks, recreation centres, playgrounds and swimming pools. Several participants commented that on occasion they felt

unwelcome in parks and other recreation locations due to being closely followed by the local police and by other recreationists. Some of them felt that they were being stereotyped and that all young Latino men were considered suspicious due to heavy gang activity in the area. As Profidio recalled the times of his youth:

We were never welcome. We would always get a look or we always get followed by certain police enforcements. ‘They’re all guys. Hmm, they could be gangbangers, you know?’ That’s targeted as, ‘Oh yeah, let’s follow these guys, make sure they’re not causing trouble,’ which makes you feel unwelcome, you know?

While some Latino interviewees seemed to be discouraged by the undesirable attention they received from the police, others justified negative attitudes on the part of the police by the high level of crime and gang activity in the Latino neighbourhoods. They commented that while they were being mistreated as young teenagers, such acts of discrimination stopped once they grew out of this ‘phase’, stopped dressing in a way that might have hinted their gang affiliation and adopted more mature dress patterns.

In addition to being targeted by the police, several focus group participants brought up examples of racial tensions between Latino and African-American park users. For instance, a young mother described an incident where a fight broke out between African-American and Latino women watching their children at a playground. Elena, a woman in her 30s who had been living in the USA for three years, believed that there were also tensions between visitors and staff who worked in the field house. She mentioned that sometimes she witnessed Latino children being prevented from using the local swimming pool when African-American attendants were on duty:

In the park which is right here in front, almost everyone who comes are Black, but in the mornings there are swimming lessons. My son goes there. Sometimes if the person who is taking care of the pool is Black, believe me or not, they sometimes don’t let Mexicans go in there.

Asked to explain the incident, Elena shrugged her shoulders, ‘Racism. I have gotten the opportunity to see that. That has happened a lot of times.’ When asked why he did not visit Douglas – a large park located in the African-American community of North Lawndale, right on the boundary with Little Village, Andres replied, ‘Oh, it gets dangerous, sometimes when you are walking back. They don’t know you so they will start saying stuff.’ When asked what he meant, Andres replied, ‘They treat you like crap ... people who live around it [the park] and sometimes [people] in the park. You know, mishaps happen.’ At the same time, however, Latino interviewees were quite ambivalent about their attitudes toward outsiders and revealed a desire to protect ethnic boundaries of their community. As Paulina mentioned,

Hispanic people wouldn’t go to Douglas Park because that park is the *Black people’s park*. You are starting to see Black people in Piotrowski Park, but you wouldn’t see that many of them because, like I said, that is the *Hispanic park*. There is always that definition.

One of the interviewed stakeholders, Michael (pastor of the Little Village Community Church), attributed interracial tensions to the lack of exposure among people in this ethnically enclosed community to members of other racial and ethnic groups:

If you live really close to the [neighbourhood] boundary, you may go to a school that has kids from both races, but if you go farther into the neighbourhood, then kids are just not exposed to really anything outside of their neighbourhood. It's just Hispanic kids and unfortunately there are a lot of biases in the neighbourhood against African-Americans.

Conversely, the interviewed Alderman noted that racial tensions were not very pronounced, and that interracial incidents were primarily related to thefts and robberies on the boundary between the predominantly African-American community of North Lawndale and predominantly Latino community of South Lawndale (Little Village). Douglas Park was described as a 'buffer' separating the two communities.

Traffic problems

Some of the residents of East Side expressed their concern that cars driving too fast prevented local residents, and children in particular, from visiting local parks. As Elena commented:

I would like to see speed bumps in the avenue because there was already one death. I have been hit by a car two times already. The cars, at times they pass by the park really fast. It is an area where there are a lot of little children and there's not a single speed bump. The cars ... they don't let you cross and then another car passes from the other side.

Michael, one of the pastors of Little Village Community Church, also acknowledged the existence of the problem, 'Yes, I know kids are getting run over. Obviously if one kid gets run over it's a problem.' Carlos, the President of LVCCDC, asked to comment on the traffic issues in Little Village, replied: 'Traffic is a problem, traffic congestion is a problem, more so on weekends.' However, he also suggested that heavy traffic was an unavoidable part of urban living and development of the area. 'I've now come to appreciate it. I see it as a sign of the vitality of the neighbourhood. Would you rather have that or would you rather have vacant store fronts?' He also expressed doubts as to the effectiveness of speed bumps and stop signs in slowing down traffic:

You know, everybody wants a stop sign on the corner. That only causes more congestion. Stop signs also cause accidents which people don't know (...) And now there are stop-signs all over the neighbourhood and (...) I don't know that it really does the job.

Discussion and conclusions

The results of the study showed that LTPA among Latino residents of the two low-income communities in Chicago was constrained by a number of environmental factors. While many of these factors were also shown to have a negative effect on LTPA among the general population (e.g., safety, lack of facilities), they often took on a different dimension when applied to Latino urban residents. In many instances, environmental constraints were closely intertwined with the low socio-economic status of Latinos and cultural factors that conditioned their participation in LTPA.

While lack of access to suitable outdoor recreation environments was a clear issue in the case of Little Village, residents of East Side had access to a number of large parks where they could potentially participate in active forms of leisure. However, even if parks were available in the community, their utilisation for LTPA was affected

by certain environmental constraints and so their benefits may not have been fully realised. For instance, our research has shown that minorities' LTPA levels may depend not only on the availability of parks and recreation facilities but also on whether such places are accessible, safe, well maintained, and whether they constitute welcoming environments. Thus, while there is overwhelming evidence that access to parks is correlated with higher levels of LTPA (Godbey *et al.* 2005, Kaczynski and Henderson 2007, 2008, Kaczynski *et al.* 2009), we should not automatically assume that such natural environments may hold uniformly positive effects regardless of the community in which they are located, their quality level and the characteristics of the local population. As previous research has shown, in some cases parks may not be welcoming to minority recreationists at all but may act as 'green walls' between communities (Gobster 1998), while in others they may be more likely to be utilised for passive forms of recreation rather than for LTPA (Floyd *et al.* 2008). Moreover, in central city minority communities, limited access to quality parks, trails and forest preserves makes residents more likely to use other community open spaces such as school yards, empty lots, side streets and alleys. Further, LTPA in minority neighbourhoods is not solely relegated to parks and open spaces, but also to youth organisations (e.g., YMCAs, Boys & Girls' Clubs), schools, health clubs and other venues organised by churches and non-profit organisations. Thus, research on correlates of active leisure should focus on broader, community-level resources that may affect LTPA participation among minority groups rather than only on access to urban parks. Moreover, our study has also shown that environmental factors that affect LTPA are often intertwined with social, cultural and economic variables, and thus employing ecological approaches to modelling health behaviours such as LTPA would clearly be beneficial.

Such research is already being conducted among the mainstream population, and there is extensive evidence on how built environment, transportation routes, availability of facilities and safety may interact with socio-cultural variables to affect LTPA among mainstream Americans (Sallis *et al.* 1998, Brownson *et al.* 2001, Saelens *et al.* 2003). Unfortunately, active living research related to minority communities is very limited (Kaczynski and Henderson 2008). What we argue here is that low-income, central-city minority residential enclaves may be characterised by a unique combination of factors that set them apart from many middle-class and some working-class mainstream neighbourhoods.

Based on the findings of the study, we developed a model (see Figure 1) that highlights factors that affect the utilisation of existing open spaces for PA and possible environmental constraints that need to be addressed if our goal is to increase Latino's participation in LTPA. It shows that even if natural environments are available, their utilisations for LTPA in minority neighbourhoods might be negatively affected by their poor maintenance, poor accessibility and safety issues.

First, both the residents and Latino stakeholders interviewed in this study attributed *poor maintenance* of local parks to the lack of care among the local residents and their lack of responsibility for public resources in the community. High mobility of the largely immigrant population, general disorganisation of the neighbourhoods and undocumented status among many residents that prevented them from taking an active stance in the matters of the local community might have contributed to the problem.

Second, while parks located in mainstream middle- and working-class neighbourhoods might also be affected by physical *accessibility* problems (e.g., busy

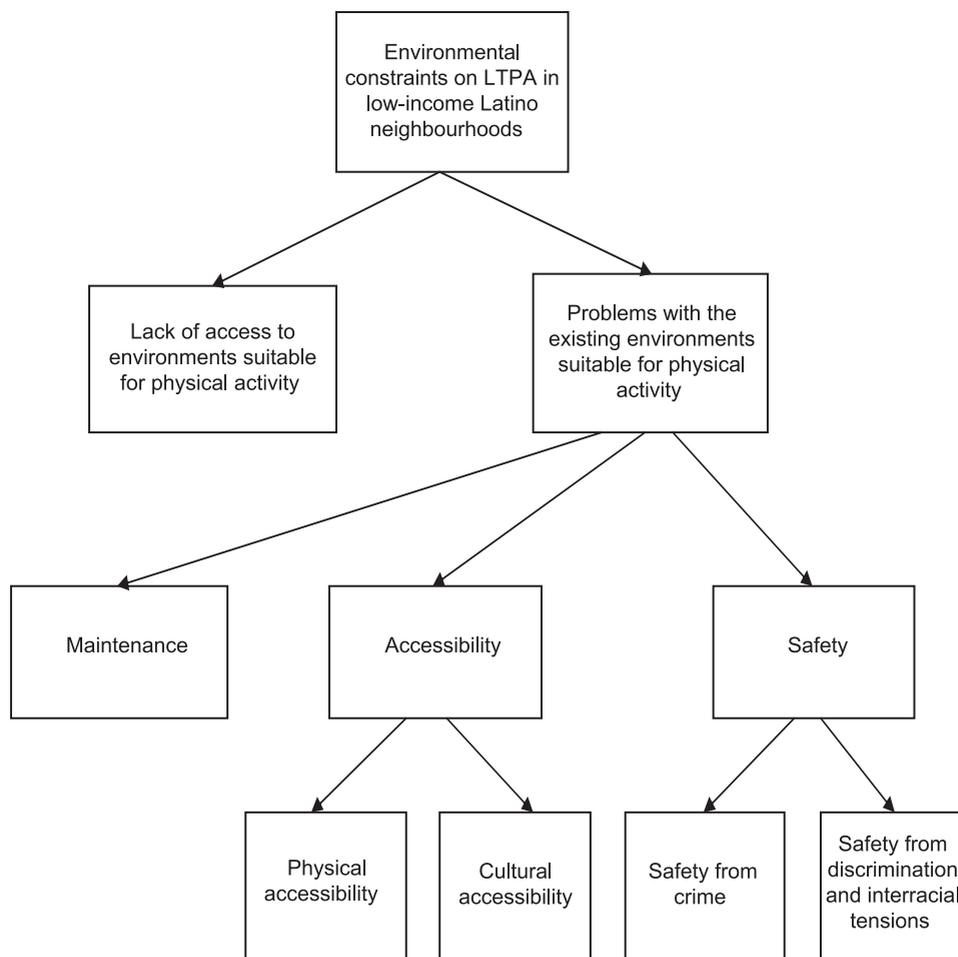


Figure 1. Environmental constraints on LTPA in low-income Latino neighbourhoods.

thoroughfares in the vicinity of parks), accessibility of LTPA programmes in parks located in minority communities might be further influenced by cultural factors – lack of information available in their language and in a form accessible to potential users.

Third, *safety issues* that are likely to affect many other parks seemed to be aggravated in the case of the Latino communities investigated in this study due to heavy gang activity in the area. Moreover, an additional aspect of safety has been identified in this study that negatively affected use of parks for LTPA among minority members – safety from interracial tensions and discriminatory encounters in parks. As Gobster's (2002) study demonstrated, minority users are more likely to be constrained by these factors even when recreating in 'mainstream' parks.

Moreover, we argue that minorities may not only experience more constraints while trying to engage in LTPA in their communities, but also they may be less able to negotiate these constraints due to their often underprivileged position – lack of time, money, undocumented status (among many) and unique cultural backgrounds (Ransdell and Wells 1998). For example, the effect of safety constraints was further

aggravated by the socio-economic and cultural factors such as the financial inability to move out to safer communities, fear of seeking police protection and culturally determined gender roles and obligations.

Our findings suggested that there were three potential outcomes of the environmental constraints on LTPA among Latino interviewees. While in some cases they limited or stopped participation in LTPA, in others they altered their participation, or experienced reduced comfort while participating in PA. For instance, some of our interviewees commented that they were less likely to visit neighbourhood parks and chose to travel to suburban communities to play soccer, visited local parks only at certain times of the day, with other people, or were especially vigilant while recreating. Fear of crime and tensions related to potential interracial conflict or expectation of negative treatment limited their comfort while participating in LTPA.

This study, although it offered a number of interesting results, also had some important limitations. It provided only a 'case study' examination of two communities in the City of Chicago, and, thus, its results may not be generalisable to other communities across the USA. Moreover, it examined constraints among Latinos residing in ethnically homogenous urban neighbourhoods and, thus, it is unclear if similar results would have been obtained if the study had targeted Latinos residing in more integrated communities or in rural areas. Lastly, it examined people's perceptions of constraints only and, thus, we cannot tell to what degree these constraints actually restricted Latino's participation in LTPA or if they were able to negotiate some of these negative factors.

Overall, our findings provide additional evidence that parks and other outdoor environments are a microcosm of communities in which they are located. Thus, they are not immune to the influences of negative factors that affect many minority communities such as high levels of crime, maintenance issues, interracial conflicts and perceived discrimination. Thus, if our goal is to increase LTPA levels among Latinos and other minority members, a comprehensive approach to addressing community-wide problems is needed. Moreover, focus needs to be placed not only on parks but also on other community spaces utilised for recreation. We believe that although research on socio-cultural determinants on LTPA among minority groups is needed, future research should place more emphasis on the unique dynamics of communities in which minorities reside. Moreover, not only the effects of the dynamics of the traditional central-city ethnic enclaves need to be investigated but also of the environmental characteristics of the new gateway communities in which increasing numbers of minority residents settle (Singer 2008). It would also be desirable to conduct detailed examinations of LTPA patterns among Latinos residing in their home countries, the constraints on LTPA they experience, and the role of built environments, parks and other natural environments in fostering or constraining LTPA among this population. It would also be worthwhile to compare constraints on LTPA among Latino and non-Latino residents of the same communities to try to disentangle the effects of ethnic and racial backgrounds, socio-economic status and environmental barriers on participation. Such investigations are clearly needed in light of the growing numbers of Latinos in the USA and the high prevalence of diseases among this population that are attributable to low levels of LTPA.

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