

Physical activity is up in the US but so too is obesity

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American waistlines became as polarized as its politics in the first decade of this century; the fit got fitter and the fat got fatter. The overall level of physical activity increased over that period, while the level of obesity increased as well.

The analysis by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation used data generated by two large state and national surveys: the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System and the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES).¹ It has also been formatted into an interactive map for comparisons of key measures, down to the county level.²

“Around the country, you can see huge increases in the percentage of people becoming physically active, which research tells us is certain to have health benefits,” said Christopher Murphy, director of the institute.

The lowest levels of obesity and longest life expectancy tend to be clustered around cities such as Washington, DC and San Francisco, plus smaller communities such as those in the mountain west, where there is a focus on outdoor activities. The poorest health indicators continue to cluster along the obesity belt of the South.

But increased activity alone had a small effect. “From 2001 to 2009, for every 1 percentage point increase in physical activity,

obesity prevalence was 0.11 percentage points lower,” according to the analysis.

The success in increasing physical activity in some urban and rural communities suggests that more progress can be made in other parts of the country. “This progress, however, will not on its own reverse increases in obesity.” The researchers believe that it will also require structural changes in the community and a reduction in caloric intake.

One puzzling aspect of the data is that NHANES showed a reduction of self reported daily calorie consumption over time, which should result in lower rates of obesity. That did not occur. One possible explanation is that participants under-reported their eating habits or over-reported their patterns of exercise.

- 1 Dwyer-Lindgren L, Freedman G, Engell RE, Fleming TD, Lim SS, Murray CJL, et al. Prevalence of physical activity and obesity in US counties, 2001-2011: a roadmap for action. *Population Health Metrics* 2013;11:7.
- 2 Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. US health map. 2013. www.healthmetricsandevaluation.org/tools/data-visualization/us-health-map.

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