Abstract

Obesity is a growing public health concern in the United States. This study explores the socio-cultural and environmental factors related to obesity in South and East Los Angeles, two of the most socio-economically disadvantaged communities in the United States. The study involved a mix of African-American and Latino residents, with the highest rates of obesity and related comorbidities.

The number of obese and overweight individuals in the United States has reached epidemic proportions. With 95% of children living below the poverty line, African American children have among the highest rates of obesity and related comorbidities in the County. Among other risk factors, poor nutrition and a sedentary lifestyle have been linked to obesity. While policy makers, researchers, and non-profits are mobilizing to create strategies to address this epidemic, identifying the socio-cultural and environmental factors that contribute to obesity in individual communities is a critical first step, especially understanding how food and activity play a role within families and communities. This study presents findings from 44 semi-structured interviews conducted with 9 leaders in East and South Los Angeles. These interviews explore the socio-cultural contexts of food and physical activity, barriers to healthy eating and activity, access to healthy food choices, and innovative solutions to address this epidemic.

Methods

Population

Two communities, South Los Angeles and East Los Angeles were selected for the study based on their socio-economic characteristics and high rates of obesity and related comorbidities. Participants included parents of children under five years old, community leaders, and health professionals, with a mix of African-American and Latino residents.

Key Findings

Selected Perceptions of Community

• South Los Angeles is a community characterized by high levels of stress, poverty, and violence. The community is characterized by a lack of green space and a focus on short-term gains.
• East Los Angeles is a community characterized by high levels of stress, poverty, and violence. The community is characterized by a lack of green space and a focus on short-term gains.

Diversity and Overweight

Teen obesity is often related to issues of physical activity and self-esteem. Some communities regard the church as a focal point of support. As one respondent noted, “I think they [the churches] outnumber the schools.”

Obesity in South Los Angeles

• The growth in numbers of new immigrants creates challenges to addressing community issues as some of the needs and characteristics of immigrant families vary considerably relative to families who have lived in the U.S. longer, often for generations.
• Many organizations in these communities struggled to find sufficient funds to consistently offer physical activity programs. With the funding available, they could only offer programs once a week.
• Financial constraints and limited access to resources make it difficult for families to engage in physical activity.

Obesity in East Los Angeles

• The high percentage of men with experience with incarceration.
• South Los Angeles is renowned, which is atypical of a poor community, such as this.

Selected Perceptions of Community

• Issues with tracking student progress;
• South Los Angeles is a community characterized by high levels of stress, poverty, and violence. The community is characterized by a lack of green space and a focus on short-term gains.

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