

Health Equity: Access to Outdoor Fitness Equipment

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Abstract

Adequate outdoor fitness equipment is essential for physical activity in lower income neighborhoods. San Francisco, CA, in the United States will be highlighted as a city with a large death rate, which could be improved by installing, promoting, and allowing access to fitness equipment. More than 2700 accidental overdose deaths have occurred since the year 2019, with a projected cumulative death rate expected to exceed 3000 human lives by the end of 2023. A contrast of the health inequities is illuminated in one of the nation's wealthiest cities. This is a call to action to bring about change, save lives, and promote healthier behavior.

Introduction

In 1948, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights article 25 proclaimed, "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself ... (1)." Elucidating what is considered suitable for fostering human dignity, in 1978, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO) governing body passed a resolution promoting physical activity (PA) as a fundamental human right. Included in that resolution, article 5 focused on the installation of adequate and sufficient fitness equipment. Being an important authority on defining the right to health, the United Nations adopted this resolution. By the 1980s, many of the major city parks in the United States installed outdoor fitness equipment to improve the health of the community. Unlike playgrounds at local parks and school yards, these installations were made to withstand adult use. They provided a space where one could balance out their muscles through bodyweight resistance training exercises. In 2015, the United Nations provided a revision of this resolution in article 8, again addressing public authorities to provide and optimize the use of fitness installations (2).

Fatal Outcomes

Many US cities fall short of following the international standards of installing and allowing access to outdoor fitness

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equipment in low-income areas or in neighborhoods for those who cannot afford gym memberships. In this commentary, San Francisco, CA, will be highlighted as a city that has rapidly growing fatal results due to a lack of public access to outdoor fitness equipment for adults in lower income areas. One of the wealthiest cities in the United States has provided access to outdoor fitness equipment for adults only in the affluent areas with less dense population. San Francisco's elected officials embody an implicit bias that poses a wellness

barrier between the residents of lower income areas and the path to good health. The disturbing results have led to more than 2700 accidental overdose deaths since the year 2019, with a projected cumulative death rate expected to exceed 3000 human lives. Currently, two to three people are dying each day from an accidental overdose (3). To place these numbers into perspective, about 1214 lives were lost due to COVID-19. Currently, in San Francisco, one to two people are dying each week from COVID-19 (4). What is available for the residents in these areas include access to harm reduction and leniency for open drug use and sales.

Physical Activity Intervention

If someone is in pain, it is human nature to search out ways to dissolve the discomfort. Individuals do not set out to become dependent on opiates or stimulants. Rather, in the course of searching for ways for alleviating that pain, be it physical, mental, or both, it is a human inevitability that one will be influenced by what is available within their surroundings (5). In San Francisco's Tenderloin and South of Market neighborhoods, where the highest rates of deadly accidental overdoses occur, there is a lack of promotion for PA.

The presence of a pull-up bar(s) is more than a symbol of fitness, it provides a space where people know they can exercise without someone questioning what they are doing. Finding the motivation for exercise is a challenge in itself. To be harassed, questioned, or interrupted when exercising could deviate the participant toward unhealthier available options for alleviating pain. Studies have shown that when park goers visit a park, they use the pulling equipment most when it is available (6). Adding a few simple pull-up bars in lower income neighborhoods will supply the need for balancing out the muscles. The ability to do a full pull-up is not even needed for one to receive benefits for

strengthening their middle and upper back muscles. This goal can be achieved by performing hanging scapular retractions.

With the absence of exercises that strengthen the back, one's posture results in an abnormal rounding of the upper back developing kyphosis. As the muscles become balanced, pain is alleviated, the posture is corrected, self-efficacy develops, and self-esteem improves. The effectiveness of exercise to treat depression has already been shown to have less adverse effects while elevating the mood quicker. In a study done with 53 participants with mental health issues, a significant main effect for self-esteem and mood postactivity was reported after participating in a single session with outdoor fitness equipment (7).

Outdoor fitness equipment produces good results without costing a lot of money. After the installation of fitness equipment in a Los Angeles (LA), California public park, researchers observed 6906 park visitors. The fitness installation appeared to have increased the level of moderate to vigorous physical activity in the park at a very favorable cost-effectiveness, showing a net gain of 1909 METs in more than 70% of park users (8). Also, in LA, to detect if an acute period of exercise (8 wk) would produce even a short-term reduction in methamphetamine (MA) use, an experimental study included 135 participants (66 in an exercise intervention, 69 in harm reduction education). Those who attended exercise sessions twice a week were 10% more likely to be MA abstinent at 1, 3, and 6 months postintervention, compared the education group (9). In 2001, Los Angeles County was ranked #22 in accidental overdoses while San Francisco County was ranked #1 (10).

Contrasts of Inequity

San Francisco's Crissy Field in the Marina neighborhood has a large variety of outdoor fitness equipment, with dozens of options for pulling exercise equipment. This space is one of the largest areas for free outdoor fitness. There are no fences closing off access, and it is miles away from the epicenter of accidental drug overdoses. To illuminate the health inequity, Boeddeker Park in the Tenderloin has one fitness installation with one piece of adult pulling exercise equipment. The park does not open before residents go to work and is closed when work is over. Unlike in the Marina, where a resident can exercise as early as 5 a.m., the Tenderloin Park does not open until 9 a.m. There are 6125 more residents in the Tenderloin, and the park that is supposed to serve them is not as accessible. Moreover, 26.5% of the households in the Tenderloin are below the poverty line, while only 4.1% of the households in the Marina are below the poverty line (11). The Marina residents are more likely to be able to afford a gym membership than those in the Tenderloin.

Call to Action

San Francisco and other major US cities can do better to promote physical activity and provide access to outdoor fitness

equipment. Currently in San Francisco, the focus of public authorities is to improve the unhoused population through a housing program. Without access to the resources that lead to good health and self-efficacy, the results of that housing program are residents dying indoors instead out outdoors. In 2022, 71% of accidental drug overdoses were residents who had a fixed address. With 4% of deaths with an unknown address, only 25% were unhoused (3). San Francisco's tragic overdose rate is not an unhoused problem. The problem lies in the access to physical activity resources. With more access to harm reduction sites promoting safe drug use, rather than outdoor fitness equipment promoting healthy physical activity, the options for alleviating pain are limited. Prior to November 2023, promoting and funding outdoor fitness equipment in neighborhoods stricken with higher accidental overdose rates is the only thing that the city of San Francisco has not yet tried. This is a call to action to bring about change into the lives of those who are suffering.

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