Noncommunicable diseases: a global epidemic

Noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) are diseases of long duration and generally slow progression (WHO, 2011). NCDs now account for nearly half of the global burden of disease (WHO, 2011). NCDs affect people of all ages, nationalities and socioeconomic levels. Better diet, healthier lifestyles and more physical activity could prevent millions of premature death each year.

Physical activity: a public health priority

Although the benefits of physical activity on health are well known a growing number of people living in cities are found insufficiently active for optimal health benefit. The determinants of physical activity are numerous and complex. Individual, environmental and social factors including age, gender, climate and safety all impact on people’s decision to participate in physical activities. In cities worldwide some people do not get the opportunity to participate in physical activity and some communities are insufficiently active.

Crime: a significant barrier to active living

It is acknowledged that concerns about personal safety are obstacles to regular participation in physical activity and local walking (Duncan and Mummery 2005; Van Cauwenberg et al. 2011). Nevertheless, the impact of crime on physical activity has thus far received little attention. Since crime and violence are a fact of life for many people living in cities (WHO, 2010) there is an urgent need to investigate the relation between crime and participation to physical activities in urban settings and further, its implications for urban planning. In places afflicted by crime governments may face greater difficulties for promoting physical activity.

Results

Crime and fear of crime inhibit physical activity

While it is widely recognized that crime is a threat for health and well-being the review also indicates that crime and fear of crime are significant barrier to physical activities: out of 54 studies 35 found that real or perceived crime was correlated with participation in physical activities. From this review it appears that people are likely to be active if they perceive their neighbourhood as being safe from crime and that people have lower rates of physical activities when they fear crime.

Urban design matters

Findings indicated that the perception of safety can be altered by the environment. For example, lack of street lighting or presence of graffiti can lead to greater fear of crime and consequently lower participation in physical activities.

People who have access to a safe place appear to be more likely to participate in physical activities and therefore maintain good health.

Some are more vulnerable than others

After statistical adjustments, a number of studies found that perception of crime and fear of crime were not evenly distributed among population groups. For example, we found evidence that gender, age, and socioeconomic status are strongly correlated with the perception of crime. Women, children, older people and those of lower socio-economic status are less likely to do physical activity when there is crime or a fear of crime.

Focus: Bogotá

Interventions aiming to support PA in cities may also be effective for addressing crime and fear of crime.

In one of the most dangerous cities of the world, the local government took direct actions to encourage personal mobility, recover the public space and create safe and accessible parks (Velásquez 2003).

This intervention not only supports physical activities but also has a positive impact on the quality of life overall: the city has undergone a notable decrease in violence and now hosts an efficient public transportation network that includes bike paths and pedestrian areas.

The city’s transformation and its efforts to reduce crime had a positive impact on opportunities for participation to physical activity. Strong associations were found between perception of safety during the day and high levels of walking as a mode of transportation (L. F. Gomez et al. 2010; Pama et al. 2010).

Conclusion

Fear of crime increases the probability of sedentary lifestyles and due to socio-environmental factors certain populations are more exposed to that threat.

There is evidence that the perception of safety can be altered by environmental factors and that urban renewal strategy focusing on crime reduction can have a positive impact on physical activity.

For local government, addressing crime issues can be an opportunity to develop intersectoral actions (ISA) that also increase opportunities for physical activity, improve urban health and urban welfare.

Nevertheless, to date, a number of links between crime and physical activity remain unclear. In particular the relative importance of social and geographical exposure to crime and fear of crime.

A better understanding of the multilevel impacts of crime is necessary and future research should investigate how people respond to this threat: for example whether they avoid public spaces, join a private club to exercise or restrict their children’s outdoor play.

Finally, studies are predominantly reporting experiences from developed countries. Consideration of the association of crime-related safety with physical activity in developing countries could enhance the evidence base and provide a focus to local governments for increasing inspiration and innovation.

Literature review: objectives and method

The aim of this study was to review the relationship between crime and physical activity, its consequences for health and wellbeing and its implication for urban policies.

We reviewed the findings of both qualitative and quantitative studies focused on urban settings that addressed the relationship between physical activity and crime. Our objectives were to review the associations that have thus far been identified and to highlight the implications for public policies at the local level.

We searched the following electronic databases: Science Direct, WHOLIS, Pub Med and Google Scholar to identify potentially relevant articles published in the English language between 1997 and 2011.

The keywords used for the search were the following crime, perception, safety, urban, physical activity, exercise. The literature search generated 152 records and we also manually examined the reference lists of review articles and retrieved an additional 5 articles. Only original studies examining the association between crime and physical activities were included. Reviews, reports and case studies were excluded.

References


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