

The Activities and Settings of Leisure as Sources of Physical Inactivity: Changes in North America since 1970

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Extended Abstract

Overweight and obesity has increased dramatically in North America in recent decades. The health effects of overweight and obesity are substantial. Even moderate weight excess (10 to 20 pounds for a person of average height) increases the risk of death, particularly among adults aged 30 to 64 years.ⁱ Trends in obesity and overweight over the last 30 years have led some to label it an “epidemic”. Recent reports of rising overweight and obesity have spurred interest in understanding the causes and potential remedies.ⁱⁱ

From an individual perspective, excess body weight is due to an imbalance in energy consumption (diet) and expenditure (physical activity). Research into the etiology of obesity has often taken such a perspective, focusing on changes in individual attitudes, tastes, and orientations about diet and activity rather than structural changes in the activities and settings available to them. Besides focusing narrowly on individual agency rather than structural constraints, existing research also tends to focus on causes of obesity *per se* rather than causes of *increases* in obesityⁱⁱⁱ.

This study focuses on the often neglected role of routine leisure activity (outside of work) and the sources of its change. We probe the causes of declining physical activity. While leisure time has not substantially changed since 1970 on average, the amount of time devoted to physical activity during leisure time has *decreased*. Few studies address why North Americans are less physically active than before. Most work has focused on diet (food quality, prices, and marketing) rather than physical activity as sources of obesity.

What, if anything, has changed in the activities and settings of routine leisure to reduce physical activity? Individuals decide to spend their leisure time based on both their personal preferences and structural incentives that make some activities more or less appealing. Do changing behaviours reflect primarily changes in structure or individual tastes? We investigate both the changing structural incentives among choices of leisure culture and patterns of individual time use. First, we focus on activities and settings of individual time use outside of work as sources of *increasing* physical inactivity. Time-use data from Canada and the United States since the late 1970's identify changing configurations of leisure activities. We code routine activities according to mode of transmission, setting, and price gradient.

We hypothesize that changes in the nature of routine leisure activities (along high cost/low cost, captive/freeing, and private/public dimensions) found from time-use data corresponds to identifiable changes in structural incentives and priorities (political, economic, social significance) that favour investment in industries promoting a new typology of activities. These changing incentives are represented in subsidies and retrenchment for various modes of leisure. Are these changes responses to demand or

causes? We address this issue of causality with a time ordering of changes in political priorities (e.g. subsidization of television) and changes in time-use activities.

Results suggest that the activities and settings of leisure have changed and diversified, producing cost and spatial barriers, effectively lowering barriers to sedentary forms of leisure culture while increasing the cost of more active ones^{iv}. Data from time-use diaries, industry statistics, and longitudinal surveys support three hypotheses. First, the “modal” settings and activities through which leisure culture take place have *changed* from emphasizing collective experiences in “ecologically distinctive” public settings to individualized experiences in indistinct private settings. A greater share of the nation’s collective resources and creative energy has been invested in these latter forms of leisure culture, which are inherently more sedentary. Second, there is *a diversification of leisure activities and settings* available to choose from, with a noted proliferation of more sedentary choices. Third, *price gradients* have arisen across the range of activities and settings, with lowered barriers to sedentary activities and heightened barriers for more active ones. This pricing mechanism may be an important contributor to socioeconomic and racial/ethnic differentials in physical inactivity and obesity. Lower cost activities and settings of cultural transmission have particular features: they are strongly tied to consumer roles, they emphasize a captive audience, they emphasize unidirectional experiences, they are individualistic rather than collective, and they take place in “de-ecological” settings. Conversely, interactive-tactile activities in “ecologically distinctive” settings command a premium price.^v

ⁱ The U.S. Centers for Disease Control reported that Diabetes, a disease directly related to lifestyle for most victims, has increased three fold between 1965 and 1995.

ⁱⁱ More than 60 percent of the American public is overweight or obese. Separate studies show that the prevalence of obesity in the United States increased markedly between 1976-80, 1988-94, and 1991-1998 (Flegal, Carroll, Kuczmarski and Johnson, 1998; Mokdad, Serdula Bowman 1999). The rate of obesity increased across all states, genders and socio-economic status (Mokdad et al, 1520). The health consequences of obesity are among the most burdensome issues faced by the Nation (*Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*). This burden manifests itself in premature death and disability, in health care costs, in lost productivity, and in social stigmatization. The risk of death rises substantially with increasing weight.

ⁱⁱⁱ a body of research prominent in sociology emphasizes the social construction of obesity as a social problem

^{iv} operators of settings/activities cater to regular customers

^v We attempt to document the underlying forces driving these trends. Political priorities and economic restructuring have subsidized development of and emphasized equal access for only a select range of leisure activities. For example, equal access initiatives for television and the internet had enabled heavy investments in “de-ecological” and market-driven mass forms of culture transmission rather than shared “organic” physical environments and experiences for the public. If such structural priorities are root causes, then reducing obesity by “promoting” activity requires a more serious look at how culture is experienced and the interests of economic entities that deliver these experiences. Deregulation has expanded the orbit of what money buys into a greater share of activities and settings of daily life by enabling increasing

embeddedness of commercial interests in leisure culture. The preferred mass-delivery model of deregulated leisure enterprises emphasize the typology proposed: private experience, captive attention, and low entry costs.