

MEMO

To: Mayor Daniel Rickenmann

From: VEDI GANGURU, University of South Carolina

Re: Impact of Neighborhood Crime on Physical Activity in Columbia, SC

Problem Statement

High crime rates in Columbia's low-income neighborhoods are preventing residents from engaging in physical activity, contributing to rising obesity rates and sedentary lifestyles. Fear of violence keeps children and adults indoors, exacerbating health problems such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, and mental health issues. This policy brief presents actionable strategies to reduce crime, improve safety, and foster healthier lifestyles by enhancing the city's infrastructure, which is critical for the well-being of Columbia's residents.

Background

Neighborhood safety plays a crucial role in promoting physical activity. In areas with high crime rates, residents, especially children and women, are less likely to engage in outdoor activities like walking or exercising. This inactivity leads to a cascade of health problems, including obesity, heart disease, and depression. Research shows that areas with high crime levels have significantly lower physical activity rates (Mitas et al., 2018). Columbia's crime index places it among the least safe cities in the nation, with violent crime rates far exceeding the national average (Neighborhood Scout, 2018). Low-income neighborhoods are particularly affected, where crime often forces families to limit outdoor play and exercise. These neighborhoods also suffer from a lack of accessible parks, walking trails, and recreational spaces. Meanwhile, wealthier areas benefit from well-maintained amenities that encourage physical activity. The negative effects of crime and inactivity create a cyclical pattern. Reduced physical activity leads to poor health outcomes, which in turn strain public health systems. Furthermore, crime and fear contribute to mental health issues such as stress, anxiety, and depression (Heisler, 2015). This lack of safe infrastructure—such as proper lighting, bike lanes, and pedestrian-friendly sidewalks—further limits opportunities for exercise. Addressing these gaps is essential for improving both physical and mental health outcomes across Columbia.

Policy Options : Columbia should focus on three key policy options: enhanced police patrols, revitalization of abandoned spaces, and community education programs. Increasing the presence of police officers in high-crime neighborhoods is an essential first step. A visible police presence deters criminal activity and helps residents feel safer engaging in outdoor activities. Deploying officers to patrol crime-prone areas during peak hours, such as after school or in the evenings, can address safety concerns effectively. For parents, the reassurance of a secure environment would allow their children to play outside without fear. Adults would also feel more comfortable exercising outdoors, whether by walking in their neighborhoods or using nearby public spaces. This approach has proven effective in reducing crime and improving trust between law enforcement and residents, which further strengthens community cohesion (Neighborhood Scout, 2018). Revitalization of Abandoned Spaces which involves transforming abandoned lots into parks, playgrounds, and recreational facilities offers a long-term solution to both crime and physical inactivity. These spaces not only provide residents with safe places to exercise but also serve as community hubs that encourage social interaction and discourage criminal behavior. Revitalized spaces equipped with lighting, fencing, and visible sightlines are particularly effective in reducing crime. Features such as walking trails, outdoor gym equipment, and sports

courts can cater to all age groups, ensuring widespread use. Research indicates that the presence of recreational amenities significantly increases physical activity levels, especially among children and adolescents. Additionally, these projects enhance the aesthetic appeal of neighborhoods, making them more attractive to residents and visitors alike. Community Education Programs would involve educational initiatives that can empower residents with knowledge about the health benefits of physical activity and strategies for staying active despite safety concerns. Workshops, outdoor fitness classes, and group activities led by trained professionals can build a culture of health and wellness in the community. These programs could also include information on crime prevention, such as forming neighborhood watch groups or practicing safety during outdoor activities. By partnering with local schools, businesses, and nonprofits, the city can ensure these events are accessible and engaging. Studies show that well-informed communities are more likely to participate in physical activity and advocate for their own safety and well-being (Rees-Punia et al., 2017). By focusing on enhanced police patrols, revitalizing abandoned spaces, and implementing community education programs, Columbia can effectively reduce crime while promoting active and healthy lifestyles.

Recommendation: To effectively address the interconnected issues of crime and physical inactivity in Columbia, we urge the city to adopt a comprehensive approach that includes enhanced police patrols, the revitalization of abandoned spaces, and community education programs. These measures are essential for creating safer neighborhoods and fostering a healthier, more active population. Increasing the presence of police officers in high-crime areas is a critical first step. A visible and active police force deters criminal activity, instills a sense of safety, and encourages residents to engage in outdoor activities. Transforming abandoned lots into parks, playgrounds, and recreational facilities offers a sustainable solution to both crime and physical inactivity. These spaces provide safe and engaging environments for people of all ages to exercise and interact socially.

According to the National Collaborative on Childhood Obesity Research (NCCOR, n.d.), making urban spaces safer and more accessible can increase physical activity levels, especially in communities with limited recreational opportunities. Features like lighting, fencing, walking trails, and sports courts can enhance the usability and safety of these spaces. Additionally, revitalized public spaces contribute to neighborhood pride and aesthetic appeal, making communities more attractive and livable. Partnering with local businesses and organizations to fund and maintain these projects ensures they are cost-effective and long-lasting. Community education programs are equally vital. Workshops, outdoor fitness events, and health campaigns can empower residents with the knowledge and tools needed to incorporate physical activity into their daily lives. These initiatives should also include practical crime prevention tips, such as forming neighborhood watch groups and staying vigilant during outdoor activities. By implementing these strategies, Columbia can tackle the root causes of inactivity and crime while promoting a culture of health and resilience. We strongly urge you, Mayor Rickenmann, to prioritize these actions. Your leadership in mobilizing resources, forming partnerships, and championing these policies will transform Columbia into a safer, healthier, and more vibrant city for all its residents.



Reference List

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