

Greener neighborhoods better for kids' waistlines

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By Megan Rauscher

Children living in city neighborhoods with higher "greenness" ratings seem to gain less weight over time than their counterparts living in areas with less green space, a new study suggests.

In the study, Dr. Janice F. Bell of the University of Washington in Seattle and colleagues followed more than 3,800 low income mainly African American children, 3 to 16 years old, who resided at the same address in Marion, County, Indiana, for 2 consecutive years.

"We had their height and weight measured 2 years apart and linked that data to satellite images of the kids' neighborhoods and found that the children who lived in greener neighborhoods did better weight-wise than kids who lived in less green neighborhoods," Bell told Reuters Health.

Having greener surroundings was associated with lower body weight changes in the children, regardless of other residential density characteristics of the neighborhood.

Other studies with adults have shown that those who live in residentially dense areas, in which there are more apartments or housing units per acre, walk more, spend less time in their cars, and are leaner as well.

"But in our study," noted Bell, "density wasn't as important" as greenness when the two factors were considered together.

She suggests that "the way kids move in urban environments isn't the way that adults move, and if this is a physical activity finding, which it may or may not be, then it may be that greenness is more important for children," Bell said.

"Greenness may present a target for environmental approaches to preventing obesity," Bell and colleagues suggest in the study, which is published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

"Therefore, as we think about how we set up communities in terms of density, we don't want to lose places where kids may go out and play," Bell continued.

These findings, the researchers say, are in line with previous research linking exposure to green landscapes with health improvements. Among adults, a green surrounding is associated with less stress and lower body weight and improved self-reported health.

In children, the positive health effects of greenness include improved brain functioning and fewer symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.