Fitting it in:
How being new to Canada influences physical activity

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Background

As of 2011, one in five people in Canada were foreign-born. Importantly, immigrants to Canada are less likely to be physically active compared to non-immigrants and often experience a decline in health status as their time in Canada increases. Physical activity has routinely been shown to positively influence mental and physical health. An understanding of the diverse factors that impact physical activity participation is required in order to promote physical activity for immigrants to Canada. Social Ecological Models (SEM) provide a robust way to measure these factors. SEMs consider multiple levels of influence including intrapersonal (e.g., knowledge, attitudes), interpersonal (e.g., family, relationships), institutional/organizational (e.g., social institutions, schools), environmental (e.g., weather, sidewalks), community (e.g., organizations, informal networks), and public policy (e.g., policy, laws).

These models are especially useful because many levels interact with one another. For example, even though someone has a positive attitude toward physical activity, they may not have the opportunity to participate regularly because they live far away from recreational facilities. Newcomers to Canada may face challenges related to why they immigrated, and the nature of immigrating itself that may influence their physical activity engagement in unique ways.

The current research used focus groups to understand how the experience of being new to Canada impacted opportunities and participation in physical activity.

Transitioning to Canadian Life

Multicultural health brokers and students enrolled in English as a Second Language courses participated in a focus group interview. Several factors influenced their physical activity that were related to their immigration and adjustment to Canadian life. Overall, the participants valued physical activity. However, they found they were less active due to Canadian lifestyles which often required intentional physical activity (e.g., going to the gym) versus incidental or daily physical activity (e.g., doing chores).

SUMMARY

This article presents the findings from a study conducted by the Alberta Centre for Active Living.

Overall, transitioning to Canadian life influenced participation in physical activity through family, social relationships, costs of being active and the cold Canadian climate.

Implications for practice and policy are suggested, including enhanced community engagement and organizational modifications.

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Moreover, participants felt that the Canadian system was less open and accessible to communities compared to their home countries due to administrative requirements and language issues.

The focus groups also revealed that relationships with family and friends can play a large role in physical activity. Family provided motivation and support to be active. However, care for the family (e.g., cooking, working extra hours) often took priority over personal physical activity, and this left participants feeling tired and unmotivated.

A lack of relationships outside of the family were noted as participants expressed feelings of isolation that made physical activity participation difficult. This lack of community connectedness and neighbourhood activities was a clear barrier for the newcomers.

Other influences on physical activity were more tangible, such as cost and inclement weather. The cost of participation was highlighted as participants referred to different types of expenses, such as purchasing equipment and paying gym memberships. Additionally, time spent working to make money to care for the family left little time and disposable income for physical activity. Although systems were in place to support people living with lower incomes in Canada, they were not perceived or experienced as accessible due to lack of information or knowledge about the programs. Additionally, many participants mentioned that the qualification criteria often left out those who really needed assistance. Finally, the cold Canadian climate and short winter days were mentioned by nearly all the participants as a barrier to being physically active.

Identifying Barriers and Increasing Participation

Overall, the participants identified barriers at each level of the SEM. At an individual level, different attitudes and knowledge about physical activity was a barrier, in addition to motivation to be physically active. Motivation also has been identified as a barrier among several minority populations. Interventions could target individual knowledge, motivation, goal setting and strategies to overcome barriers to facilitate physical activity.

Interpersonal relationships developed through family and community social support were also essential for promoting physical activity to newcomers. Programs which include community recreation that are accessible and open to all community members could help foster engagement in physical activity for new Canadians.

At the institutional level, access barriers due to long working hours, cost, language differences, lack of knowledge of recreation centre etiquette, program delivery, and fee assistance in Canada limited participation. More activities on weekends and inclusive programs were recommended by participants to overcome these barriers. Environmental barriers such as weather and limited daylight hours could be overcome through specific winter strategies, including clearing trails of snow and providing skates.

Lastly, on a policy level, barriers included a lack of accessibility to government programs (e.g., income-based subsidies), lack of knowledge regarding policies to encourage participation, the inability to navigate application systems, and a lack of consideration of family circumstances (i.e., dual income) or stages of transition to Canada which could make current policies inappropriate for this population. Using immigration services to provide recreation passes to newcomers and continuing support beyond the first year of immigration have been suggested to improve inclusion through physical activity participation.
Conclusions

Multi-level interventions are needed to effectively promote physical activity among immigrants to Canada. For example, for policies to be effective, people need knowledge about the policies and how to access them, as well as motivation through social connections to make them effective. Interventions should be long-term, driven by the needs of the community, focus on social and environmental components, and receive media support.13

The unique experiences of newcomers to Canada need to be considered in context with physical activity. Physical activity is one part of the lives of newcomers and may carry little weight in comparison to other challenges they may face (e.g., language barriers, family care obligations, financial concerns).

Involving and facilitating family and community into programming, and considering the long working hours of many immigrants to Canada, could help meet the needs of these communities. Coordinators need to work with immigrant organizations to effectively communicate access policies, procedures and programs while considering the perspective of the newcomers. Integrating physical activity into the lives of newcomers should be prioritized as part of the transition to Canadian life, and multiple strategies are required to support immigrant health and wellness.

References


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kimberley Curtin, MHK, is a second-year PhD student in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta. Her research interests include the impact of culture on physical activity and promoting physical activity.

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