

Education doesn't increase odds that minorities play 'high-status' sports

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Black and Mexican American doctors and lawyers aren't any more likely to play "high-status" sports such as golf or tennis than less educated people within their racial-ethnic groups, and more educated blacks may actually be less inclined to do so, suggests a new study in the June issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*

Relying on nationally representative data from the 1998 National Health Interview Survey-Sample Adult Prevention Module, and focusing on 17,455 adults ages 25 to 60, the study finds that racial-ethnic differences in the types of physical exercises people engage in don't narrow with increasing education. According to the study, whites disproportionately undertake facility-based [exercise](#) (e.g., golf and tennis), blacks tend toward team sports (e.g., basketball, football, and soccer) and fitness activities (e.g., running, [weight lifting](#), and cycling), and Mexican Americans gravitate toward team-centered athletics.

"We assumed that people with higher levels of education were more likely to be in prestigious fields such as law or medicine, and if we think about the physical activities that lawyers and doctors participate in, they are often sports like golf or tennis," said study co-author Jarron M. Saint Onge, an assistant professor of sociology at the University of Houston.

"We expected that regardless of race-ethnicity, people at the upper levels of the educational spectrum would gravitate toward these so called high-status behaviors of the dominant group."

But, instead, Saint Onge and co-author Patrick M. Krueger, an assistant

professor of sociology at the University of Colorado-Denver, find this is not the case, and that for blacks the opposite actually holds true regarding their participation in "high-status" sports. With increasing education, blacks also move further away from whites when it comes to participation in team-based athletics and the gap between whites and Mexican Americans grows as it pertains to fitness activities.

"We find no evidence of narrowing racial-ethnic differences in exercise with increasing education,"

Saint Onge said. "Rather, what we find is that with increasing levels of education, we continue to see this racial-ethnic division and, in fact, it grows."

Saint Onge said there are several possible reasons why racial-ethnic differences in exercise persist and, in some cases, expand with more education. "One possibility is that high-status minorities may seek to differentiate themselves from whites in an effort to maintain their racial and ethnic solidarity and to increase their political power," Saint Onge said. "Exercise and sports provide social contexts that allow groups to create social identities and resist—or sometimes reinforce—cultural stereotypes."

Other possible reasons include the fact that blacks and Mexican Americans often attend lower quality schools than whites, where they may acquire less human capital per school year and have limited access to cultural resources that encourage high-status behaviors. And, even highly educated blacks and Mexican Americans may live in segregated neighborhoods where exercise preferences are shaped by cultural norms and the availability of recreational opportunities.

While the study finds that whites, blacks, and Mexican Americans are not more likely to engage in the same types of physical activities as their education levels increase, the likelihood that they participate in some

type of exercise does rise with education.

"More educated people generally have more motivation to exercise," Saint Onge said. "They know the benefits of exercising, they spend time with people who are more likely to be exercising, and they have the time and resources to exercise."

In terms of policy implications, Saint Onge said the study could aid the design of effective public health interventions to promote physical activity. "Public health interventions might be more effective if they take into account the fact that more education leads to more physical activity and also recognize that members of different [education](#) and racial-ethnic groups gravitate toward certain types of exercise, either because of their limited access to recreational facilities or because of different exercise preferences," Saint Onge said.

Provided by American Sociological Association

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