

Unsafe Streets, Inactive Lives: The Toll of Urban Violence on Physical Activity in Brazil

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Key Points

- Urban violence is a significant but overlooked barrier to outdoor physical activity, disproportionately affecting individuals in lower-income communities and exacerbating health inequities.
- Fear of crime discourages physical activity in public spaces, limiting opportunities for exercise and increasing sedentary behavior, which negatively impacts public health.
- Addressing urban violence as a public health issue is essential to ensuring equitable access to safe environments for physical activity and promoting population-wide health benefits.

Over the past 50 years, the benefits of physical activity have been extensively investigated, and its positive effects on health are now indisputable for both women and men of all ages. Despite this, approximately 31% of the global population do not meet the recommended levels of physical activity.¹ In developing countries such as Brazil, the situation is even worse. Indeed, approximately 59.5% of the Brazilian population is considered physically inactive.²

The literature highlights several barriers that prevent individuals from regularly engaging in physical activity programs, including the presence of disease, lack of social support, limited access to exercise facilities, lack of time, perceptions of physical activity as boring, and socioeconomic factors, among which urban violence stands out.³ Urban violence has been extensively discussed in relation to its negative impacts on education, economic development, and health outcomes. It has been identified by the World Health Organization as a critical public health issue and is increasingly recognized as a key social determinant of health.⁴

In this context, it is reasonable to assume that when individuals perceive their neighborhood as unsafe, they are less likely to participate in outdoor physical activity due to concerns about personal safety.⁴ Beyond the direct harm it causes, the fear and instability associated with violence discourage outdoor activities, reducing opportunities for regular physical exercise, and exacerbating health inequities.³ For instance, experiencing robbery or other forms of urban violence, such as being pushed, grabbed, shoved, kicked, or hit has been linked to a decline in physical activity, as evidenced by a 3-year

cohort study involving 22,595 participants.⁵ de Lira et al⁶ highlighted that a significant proportion of Brazilian Paralympic athletes had been victims of armed violence, suggesting that many of them might not have been disabled had they been born in a developed country.

Recently, 3 violent incidents in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city and one of the biggest in the world, shocked the population. In the first case, a cyclist, coach, and trainer were brutally murdered over a stolen cell phone.⁷ In the second case, an older woman was assaulted and physically attacked while running, targeted by 2 criminals for her ring.⁸ In the third recent case, a 51-year-old cyclist was robbed and beaten on the bike path, with her bicycle stolen.⁹ These incidents gained significant media attention and illustrate how urban violence can deter people from engaging in physical activity, especially in outdoor environments. It is reasonable to assume that individuals with better financial conditions can afford to exercise in gyms, while those who prefer or can only engage in outdoor physical activity face greater risks. On the other hand, while individuals living in wealthy neighborhoods have more access to safe outdoor leisure-time physical activity spaces,⁴ socioeconomically disadvantaged adults may feel unsafe engaging in outdoor physical activity in their own neighborhoods, especially in areas with high crime rates or poor infrastructure, a concern that is often even greater for women.^{3,10}

Therefore, we argue that urban violence is a pressing issue that must be addressed by Brazilian policymakers and civil society to promote a more equitable and just society, where all individuals, regardless of socioeconomic status can safely engage in physical activity and reap its well-documented benefits.

References


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