

# Poorer people are less physically active

**Rising inactivity and obesity increases the risk of chronic ill health, with subsequent large costs to individuals and society. However, physical inactivity is not just a public health problem, but is also connected to economic and cultural issues. Gaining a better understanding of who is physically inactive is essential to designing effective policy interventions to reverse the numbers.**

Researchers from the ESRC Centre for Market and Public Organisation (CMPO) and colleagues from Monash, RMIT Melbourne and Lancaster universities examined data on over one million adults in England using the Active People Surveys. The large sample size and detailed local information made it possible to produce precise estimates of the link between physical inactivity and different aspects of individual socio-economic positions, adjusted for local cost of physical activity.

Their research shows high levels of inactivity are closely associated with people's socio-economic position – specifically income, education and local area deprivation. Other factors influencing physical activity include gender, ethnic group, age and geographic area.

Physical activity has a direct cost in terms of money and time which is higher for the poor than the well-off. The costs of physical activity will also be determined in part by where individuals work and live; low-income areas may have smaller tax funds to provide recreation and other facilities for exercise, and higher crime rates can also make physical activity more difficult.

The findings indicate that England is developing a large future health problem which is heavily graded along a socio-economic scale. The large socio-economic gaps suggest that the many current campaigns may not be reaching those who need them most. Unless behaviour patterns are altered, the health disparities are likely to grow.

## Key findings

- Levels of physical inactivity in England are very high; nearly 80 per cent of the population do not hit key national government targets.
- Education, household income and local area deprivation are all independently associated with inactivity. These differences are already evident in young adults, and increase steadily with age.
- Females, ethnic minorities, and people in low socio-economic positions are all less likely to do any activity than males, people classifying themselves as White, and those with the highest socio-economic positions.
- Inactivity increases the more people are disadvantaged in socio-economic terms. Even low-cost activities such as walking are affected by socio-economic position, and the difference increases with increasing activity cost.
- Local area facilities and geographical factors explain very little of the variation in physical inactivity in England; the variations are primarily associated with individual and household characteristics.

## Policy relevance and implications

- Including more physical activity in the school curriculum and improving school facilities may help cross socio-economic divides early in life.
- More targeted health education in certain key groups may help, in order to raise awareness of inactivity as the most important risk factor which can be modified for chronic illness.
- Subsidising sports centres and swimming pools to keep prices low could enable low-income people to attend local facilities.
- Financial support for the development of sports facilities in lower socio-economic areas with reduced tax bases could provide gyms, football pitches and pools which are free at the point of access.



## BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The CMPO Working Paper *The Socioeconomic Gradient in Physical Inactivity in England* analysed survey data of over one million individuals in England to identify and separate the associations between physical inactivity, socio-economic position and local geographical factors. The findings reveal very high levels of physical inactivity in England. The degree of inactivity is closely associated with people's socio-economic position.

Lisa Farrell, Bruce Hollingsworth, Carol Propper and Michael A. Shields: *The Socioeconomic Gradient in Physical Inactivity in England*  
Web: [www.bristol.ac.uk/cmpto/publications/papers](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/cmpto/publications/papers)

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The ESRC Centre for Market and Public Organisation, based at the University of Bristol, combines expertise in economics, geography and law. CMPO's objective is to study the intersection between the public and private sectors of the economy, and in particular to understand the right way to organise and deliver public services.  
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