

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF PHYSICAL ACTIVITY IN A COMMUNITY RECREATION CENTER DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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I have been conducting ongoing research at a community recreation center in Fairbanks, Alaska, since 2016. My return to teaching and training undergraduate students in medical anthropology the year prior led me to engage regularly with local spaces as ethnographic field sites, including a community gym that was easily accessible to my students. Gyms serve as culturally vibrant spaces for anthropological inquiry, such as research on the social life of physical activity and recreational sports. While locally situated, gyms reflect and reproduce much broader sociocultural discourses about the body, fitness, health/healthism, and related technologies. In this research note, I provide a brief ethnographic description of the field site followed by a discussion of how the COVID-19 pandemic has transformed the space physically and socially. I conclude by reflecting on how these transformations have shaped my plans for research there going forward.

The particular gym where I have been working is a large, two-story facility with multipurpose courts (for playing basketball, tennis, badminton, and other group activities), weight lifting area, open studio (for group classes or individual use), indoor climbing wall, indoor track, areas for stretching, and areas for cardiovascular exercise using equipment (treadmills, elliptical machines, stair climbers, and stationary bikes). So far, I have directed two projects there: a study of individual, social, and environmental factors influencing space use, and a study of the relationship between engagement in physical activities and experiences of seasonality and seasonal depression (Drew et al. 2021).

The gym is open year-round, which makes it an important space for residents in the Subarctic community of Fairbanks. At this northern latitude, we experience dramatic summer/winter shifts in daylight length, temperatures, and precipitation. By winter solstice, we are getting about 3.5 hours of daylight, as compared to near-

ly 22 hours on summer solstice. We usually have snow on the ground from October until the spring melt in March and April. In winter, temperatures often drop to -20°F or colder, making indoor physical activities more appealing.

When the gym closed until further notice in mid-March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself—like so many of my colleagues—cut off from a primary field site that I have come to know intimately. Fortunately, there were no student projects running at the time, so I did not have to worry about students feeling pressure to get back into the gym when it reopened in mid-June 2020.

The reopening entailed many new health and safety policies that the gym admitted could only reduce risks of viral infection—not remove them. It advised those who were part of a vulnerable population as per CDC guidelines to stay away. Indoor fitness classes were suspended. The gym also started an equipment rental program (treadmills, ellipticals, stationary bikes, and strength training equipment) and grew their online “Virtual Fitness” options with numerous streaming videos and fitness challenges (such as virtual races).

The new health and safety policies included completing a health screening questionnaire before each visit, wearing a face mask, wiping down equipment before and after use, and maintaining at least six feet of distance from other users at all times—10 feet while engaging in any physical activity. Signs were posted with recommendations to “avoid touching your face” and to “wash your hands before and after touching equipment.”

The gym also implemented key changes to direct the movement of people throughout the different spaces (Fig. 1), posting signs with the maximum number of people allowed within different spaces at one time, and spacing gym equipment 10 feet apart (Fig. 2). The three stairwells were also marked with one for going up and two

for going down. Of course, humans are creatures of habit, and it takes conscious effort to learn and adapt routine behaviors, especially for regulars who have maneuvered within the space in the same way for many years.

In the early months of the reopening, the gym was nearly empty except for a few regulars and one or two staff. This was not a surprise. Even in prepandemic summers, general daily use drops significantly, with many people preferring to do physical activities and recreational sports outdoors. As expected, the numbers increased somewhat with the onset of winter and, as in the years before, during early January in tandem with New Year's resolutions.

One of the most profound social transformations since the reopening involves the interactions between staff and gym patrons. Staff must now reinforce the new health and safety policies, leading to brief but stressful confrontations with patrons who are out of compliance. During the second week of the reopening, one staff member described how stressful it was having to constantly approach people—of all ages—about keeping their face

mask on at all times and staying at least six feet apart from others (except for people from their same household). Fortunately, such experiences have diminished over time as patrons have learned and adapted their behaviors.

Recently, one regular in his early 20s, a college student, told me how grateful he was that the gym had reopened. "With all of my classes online and being alone most days, the gym is where I come to get some exercise and to be around other people, even if I'm not directly interacting with them." I asked another regular, a widow in her 60s, why she decided to return to the gym, and she shared a similar sentiment. "I'm alone with my cat all day, every day. I mean, I love him, don't get me wrong—but I need to be with people sometimes too."

Undoubtedly, the pandemic continues to transform everyday social spaces, like community gyms, and to reveal emergent topics for medical anthropology research. While future research in the gym will build on prior studies conducted with my students, I am now turning my attention to how this gym, as well as other gyms



Figure 1. Signs and tape indicate the new flow of traffic for using the gym under pandemic safety guidelines. Photograph by author.



Figure 2. Gym equipment was repositioned to be spaced 10 feet apart. Photograph by author.

and recreational spaces throughout the community, may serve as important sites for studying the impacts of the pandemic on physical activity behaviors, engagement in outdoor activities, and lived experiences of well-being in the time of COVID-19.

REFERENCE

- Drew, Elaine M., Bridget L. Hanson, and Kevin Huo
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