

Health & Fitness Journal of Canada

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Volume 12

June 30, 2019

Number 2

EXPERT OPINION

Disconnected: The Multiculturalism Act, the Healthy Living policy, and Canadian physical activity guidelines.

Erin M. Shellington^{1*}

1 School of Kinesiology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T1Z3

*Corresponding Author: erin.shellington@ubc.ca

Abstract

Canadian immigrants are a large proportion of the Canadian population, who experience disparate health status. In 2018, a federal policy on healthy living was created that recommended the use of currently existing physical activity guidelines. However, the guidelines do not represent the diversity of the Canada's multicultural population. Recommendations to change the guidelines to are presented to better represent the values of Canada's multicultural population and align with the Multiculturalism Act and the Healthy Living Policy that embrace differences and culture, worldviews, and ways of participating in physical activity. **Health & Fitness Journal of Canada 2019;12(2):97-101.**

<https://doi.org/10.14288/hfjc.v12i2.277>

Keywords: Physical Activity Guidelines, Policy, Multiculturalism

Introduction

Approximately 22% of the Canadian population is comprised of immigrants; the majority of which are from Asian, African, and European countries (StatsCan, 2017). Immigrants experience worse health status, compared to non-immigrants resulting from a variety of factors (Newbold & Danforth, 2003). In 1985, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau introduced the Canadian Multiculturalism Act, ensuring that Canada is a place that reflects and embodies diversity (Canadian Multiculturalism Act Loi sur le multiculturalisme canadien, 2014). In 2018, Health Canada published a national policy on increasing physical activity and reducing sedentary behaviour for Canadians (Canada, 2018). The Healthy Living policy represents the values of multiculturalism and diversity of

Canadians; further, it references and states that the recommended physical activity guidelines that should be followed are published by the independent organization Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP) ("Canadian Physical Activity Guideline for Adults," 2011). However, the CSEP guidelines do not represent cultural or linguistic diversity that reflects the Multiculturalism Act and the Healthy Living policy. Thus, there is a disconnect between the Multiculturalism Act and Healthy Living policy, which is not translated into the guidelines and messaging that reaches Canadians (i.e., the CSEP Physical Activity Guidelines). The government has considerable influence through writing policies that endorse organizational guidelines on physical activity. The messaging of the guidelines and the inconsistent nature between

legislation, policy, and physical activity guidelines may contribute to the poor health status of Canadian immigrants.

Approach

In the following paragraphs the relationship between the Multiculturalism Act, the Healthy Living policy, and the recommended use of CSEP's physical activity guidelines are discussed through relevant literature, scholarship, and the author's expert knowledge on the topic area.

The value of the CSEP guidelines is controversial at best, as only 15% of Canadian adults report getting sufficient physical activity per week (Statistics Canada, 2013), and only 13% of Canadians reported being aware of the Canadian Physical Activity guidelines (Dale et al., 2016). To improve the volume of physical activity that Canadians achieve, it is imperative to ensure that the policies are being implemented appropriately. The recommendations and guidelines chosen should reflect the values, multicultural mosaic, and diversity of Canadians. In turn, this may be more easily translated to Canadians, including immigrants and result in increased physical activity.

The following have been identified as problems with current physical activity guidelines published by CSEP, which will be further discussed in the brief: 1) Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines are only available in English and French languages and 2) Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines represent individualistic approach to physical activity, rather than a community-based approach, which many worldviews hold, and thus do not represent a diverse, multicultural perspective to physical activity as described in the Healthy Living policy and Multiculturalism Act.

Language

The Canadian Physical Activity Guidelines have been streamlined to recommend 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity for (almost) everyone. Most importantly, the guidelines are only published in English and French. In 2011, 63.5% of Canadians reported their first language to be a language other than English or French (Statistics Canada, 2011). Therefore, a vast majority of Canadians are not able to access physical activity guidelines in their first language. This is a barrier to the appropriate implementation of the Multiculturalism Act and Healthy Living Policy. Furthermore, it is a poor representation of set governmental values of diversity and multiculturalism. Reducing barriers to immigrant participation in physical activity and recreation was found to be improved through consultation with immigrants and reducing barriers through local policy changes and improved access (Frisby, 2011).

Community Approach

It has been identified that the physical activity guidelines are represented individualistically, which does not resonate with many groups, including immigrants; this is another cited barrier to participation in physical activity for adult immigrants (Olliffe et al., 2009; Shea & Beausoleil, 2012). In school aged children who are immigrants, it has been identified that afterschool programs are a key place for recreational activities, which has been an identified need by teachers as an area for increased support. To improve participation and reduce barriers to recreational activities with immigrant children, the children need to experience a sense of belonging, identify, and feel that their voice is heard (Syeda, 2017).

Acculturation

Immigrants experience a rapid change in culture and identity (acculturation) as they adjust to their new home, which often includes experiences of a change of climate, built environment, and culture. Nutrition research demonstrates that immigrants eat less healthfully as they go through this transition and as a result have worse health status (Sanou et al., 2014). There is likely overlap with physical activity that parallels the research stream of nutrition health status of immigrants, and thus, a similar pattern of behaviour likely results with physical activity and cultural norms of recreational and physical activities. Therefore, it stands to reason as a result of acculturation, immigrants would similarly result in adopting Canadian patterns of physical activity behaviours (i.e., low levels of physical activity and high levels of sedentary behaviour); however, this has only been demonstrated cross sectionally (Kukaswadia, Pickett, & Janssen, 2014). An interesting paradigm during acculturation is the reduction of healthy lifestyle behaviours the longer an immigrant has been in Canada (Yu & Teschke, 2018). The Multiculturalism Act and Healthy Living policy support multiculturalism and diversity; however, there should be more support for the continued cultural physical activities of immigrants to counteract this phenomenon of increasingly poor lifestyle habits as immigrants settle into their new life in Canada. The knowledge translation of physical activity through national guidelines which ultimately reaches Canadians needs to better support acculturation, diversity, and multiculturalism for immigrants.

Messaging

Finally, the messaging of the CSEP physical activity guidelines is not evidenced-based. A systematic review and expert panel consensus were funded and completed to develop and create evidenced based messaging for physical activity guidelines; however, due to a dissolution of the relationships between key stakeholders, this government funded research initiative was not included the guideline creation (Latimer-Cheung et al., 2013). This is problematic as messaging and knowledge translation is critical to ensure that the general public receives messages that promote appropriate motivations and understanding of physical activity guidelines. Without appropriate knowledge translation the Healthy Living policy cannot be properly implemented and change health status for everyone, including immigrants.

Recommendations

The following recommendations to the physical activity guidelines are designed to align with the Multiculturalism Act and to follow the Healthy Living policy document as it relates to diversity and multiculturalism in healthy living.

1. All physical activity guidelines should be available in languages that represent the diversity of the Canadians and immigrants.
2. Physical activity guidelines should address acculturation and promote local governments to enhance/change policies to aid in maintaining cultural identities and relationships with physical activity.
3. The Canadian physical activity guidelines messaging should reflect:
 - a. A multicultural representation of worldviews to include community-based activities to provide sense of belonging and identity.

b. Evidenced-based messaging to enhance motivations and understanding of guidelines.

Conclusion

The Canadian physical activity guidelines do not appropriately reflect the Multiculturalism Act, nor do they appropriately represent the new federal policy on Healthy Living. The current guidelines do not resonate with a large proportion of the Canadian population, immigrants, and first-generation Canadians, thus, the health disparities and rate of engagement of physical activity between immigrants and non-immigrants is likely to go unchanged unless the guidelines are revised to reflect the multicultural mosaic of the Canadian population and the diversity of worldviews represented by the people.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the financial support of Mitacs Elevate for contributions to professional development that allowed this work to be undertaken.

Author's Qualifications

The author's qualifications are as follows: Erin M. Shellington MSc., PhD.

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