

Publication: Psy Post Online

Date: 30 April 2022

Headline: Physically fit people are less likely to engage in deviant behaviors, according to new research

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A series of three studies published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* provides evidence that physical fitness is negatively correlated with deviant behaviors that violate organizational and societal norms.

“I got interested in this topic because issues related to physical fitness (e.g., exhaustion, poor nutrition etc.) continue to be on the rise on a global scale and are not actively managed in most organizations,” explained study author Kenneth Tai, an associate professor in the Lee Kong Chian School of Business at Singapore Management University.

“This prompted my coauthors and myself to explore whether physical fitness not only has an impact on oneself, but on others at the workplace as well. We came across early work in criminology which suggests that physically fit individuals are more likely to engage in deviance and this idea remains influential even in contemporary discourse. However, this struck us, as it remains unclear why such individuals would be motivated to engage in deviance simply because of their physical build.”

The researchers first assembled a dataset on 50 metropolitan areas in the United States using fitness data from the American College of Sports Medicine and data on crime rates from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. An analysis of the data found that metropolitan areas with higher levels of physical fitness tended to have lower crime rates. This was true even after controlling for variables such as the proportion of the population below the poverty line, unemployment rates, median age, air pollution, and other factors.

Next, the researchers examined 3,925 military recruits undergoing basic military training in the Singapore military. During the training, each recruit was assigned a “buddy” so that they could assist one another. The researchers had each recruit’s buddy complete a questionnaire regarding six acts of deviance, which included lying, faking to avoid tasks, taking shortcuts, disrespecting others, getting others into trouble, and taking credit for the work of others.

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Tai and his colleagues found that recruits who scored higher on the standardized physical fitness tests used by the military were less likely to engage in deviant behaviors as reported by their peers. "A 1% increase in fitness test scores decreases deviance in the military by 7.8%," they wrote in their study.

Finally, the researchers conducted a longitudinal study of full-time employees residing in India, who completed self-reported measures of physical activity and ego depletion during work hours every Thursday for five weeks. The employees' coworkers also completed weekly assessments of their deviant workplace behaviors. The final sample for analysis consisted of 318 employees.

In line with their previous results, Tai and his colleagues found that physical fitness was negatively related to deviant behavior. Importantly, they also found that this relationship was mediated by ego depletion. In other words, employees with reduced physical activity were more likely to agree with statements such as "I feel drained" and "My mental energy is running low," which in turn was associated with greater deviance.

"The takeaway is that physically fit people are less likely to engage in deviance," Tai told Psy-Post. "In addition, our findings suggest that people who increase their physical fitness over time through physical activities are likely to develop greater self-control, which helps them override their impulses to engage in deviant behaviors."

As for the study's caveats, Tai noted that "our study is correlational and future research may provide stronger evidence of causality. From a practical standpoint, one important question that still needs to be answered is understanding and identifying factors that may strengthen the relationship between physical fitness and deviance so that organizations can work on these actionable solutions."

The study, "Fit to be good: Physical fitness is negatively associated with deviance", was authored by Kenneth Tai, Yuchuan Liu, Marko Pitesa, Sandy Lim, Yew Kwan Tong, and Richard Arvey.