

Growing Demand for Communities that Promote Health

Research suggests that the design of cities and neighborhoods can make it difficult for children and adults to be physically active.^{1,2} Suburban streets often lack sidewalks and many schools are located in close proximity to multi-lane highways and other traffic hazards. These and other environmental factors contribute to low physical activity levels among Americans. According to a recent analysis of data from the 2003–2004 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, fewer than 5 percent of adults meet the minimum guideline set by health officials of 30 minutes per day of physical activity.³

Many health and planning officials believe that traditionally designed neighborhoods, those with shops and schools within walking distance of homes, plus a network of bike paths and sidewalks, can help children and adults get more daily physical activity. These communities are often called walkable neighborhoods because residents can walk to nearby destinations like shops and schools. Research shows that people living in traditional communities are more physically active^{4,5} and less likely to be overweight or obese.⁶ Traditionally designed neighborhoods are recommended by the Surgeon General⁷ and Institute of Medicine⁸ for curbing the obesity epidemic, but many zoning laws, development regulations and transportation policies make it challenging to create communities that facilitate walking and biking.

Key Research Results

America needs a solution for health problems linked to suburban living

Due to long commutes and an increasing dependence on cars for daily errands, people living in urban sprawl are facing serious health consequences. A study of 33 communities in California in 2006 found that the obesity rate for adults who drove the most was 27 percent, three times higher than the rate for people who spent less time in the car.⁹

There also is a connection between the suburban lifestyle and smog. Environmentalists found that traditionally designed neighborhoods help keep pollution down by allowing people to commute by foot or by using public transportation.¹⁰

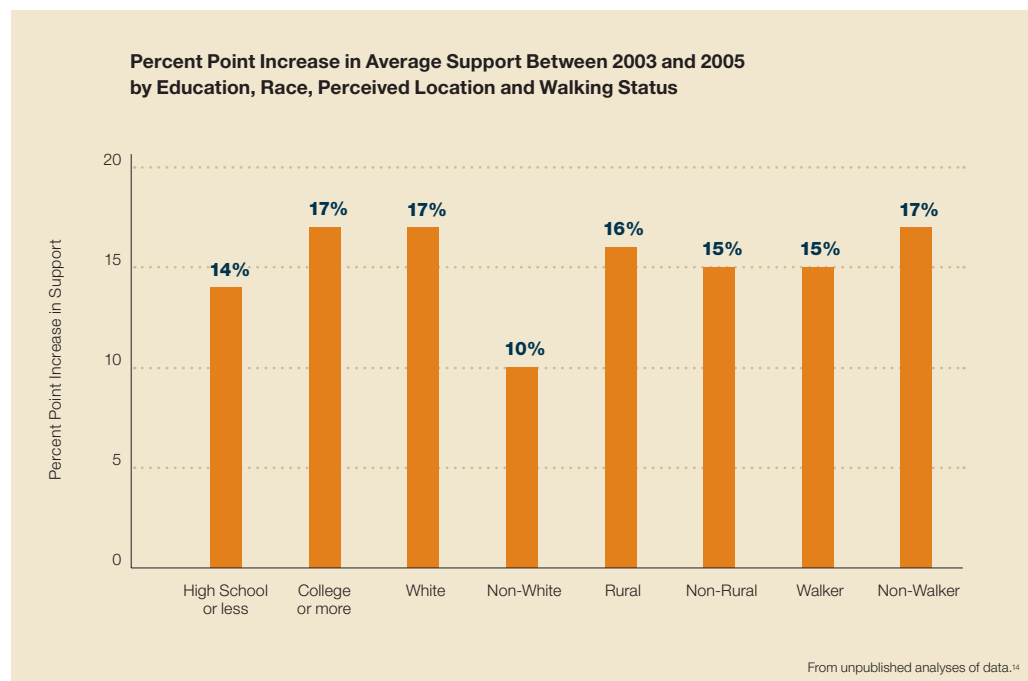


Neighborhoods can be designed to promote active living

Residents of pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods are more likely to meet physical activity guidelines and exercise regularly.^{11, 12} For example, results from a 2006 survey conducted in the southeastern U.S. showed that the number of adults who met physical activity guidelines was 15 percent higher in neighborhoods with sidewalks.¹³

Public support for walkable neighborhoods has risen dramatically

According to national survey data reported by Susan Handy and co-authors at the University of California, Davis, public support for traditionally designed communities increased from 44 percent in 2003 to nearly 60 percent in 2005.¹⁴ Survey participants were asked how much they would encourage the development of a traditionally designed community—defined by the survey as one with walking and biking trails, easy access to public transportation and a town center where homes are clustered around shops and office buildings—in their area.



Almost all groups support traditionally designed neighborhoods

Handy's study showed that Americans—across ethnic, gender and even political lines—like the idea of living in a traditionally designed neighborhood—as illustrated in the graph. The study also found that Americans as a whole like specific characteristics associated with those communities, including living in a neighborhood that allows seniors to age in place; preserves green space; and allows for more family time. Rural residents were the only group with a majority who did not support traditionally designed neighborhoods. This finding might reflect the fact that people living in such areas reject any kind of development that may spoil the rural beauty.

Americans believe traditionally designed communities offer many valuable benefits

Survey participants indicated that the biggest advantages of traditionally designed communities were the benefits they present to both children and seniors. On average, respondents thought it very likely that traditionally designed communities offer many of these attributes, such as safe places for kids to play; pedestrian-friendly features that allow residents to walk or bike to public transportation; an environment that encourages independent living among the elderly; and land set aside for parks and open spaces.

Top Five Expectations about Traditionally Designed Communities, 2005¹⁴

- Allow kids to walk to school
- Be safe for kids to play in neighborhood
- Enable people to walk/bike to public transit
- Enable people to walk/bike to shopping
- Enable older adults to live independently

Characteristics with Biggest Increases in “Importance” of Living in Traditionally Designed Communities from 2003 to 2005¹⁴

- Be able to walk or bike to shopping
- Be able to walk or bike to work
- Be able to walk or bike to public transportation

Conclusion

Handy’s study and other evidence¹⁵ suggest that consumer demand for traditionally designed communities likely will continue to rise. Health concerns, a growing desire to decrease dependence on cars and grueling commutes that take time away from our families may continue to push many Americans out of the suburbs—and into more traditionally designed neighborhoods.¹⁶

- Traditionally designed neighborhoods offer Americans a lifestyle that encourages daily walking and biking, activities that can help keep many in a healthy weight range. The weight-control aspect of traditional neighborhoods may help curb the nation’s obesity epidemic.
- Community designs with houses located near shops and office parks mean that commuters can walk to work or take public transport, which gives people more transportation options and cuts down on auto emissions and pollution.
- Consumer support for and interest in traditionally designed communities is rising.
- Americans believe traditionally designed neighborhoods offer many important benefits to children. This could be attributed to the close proximity of homes to schools, which allows children to walk and bike to school more easily.¹⁷
- A traditionally designed community allows residents to walk easily to nearby shops. Regular physical activity contributes to overall health—and may help some seniors maintain a more independent lifestyle.

- ¹ Davidson KK and Lawson C. "Do attributes of the physical environment influence children's level of physical activity?" *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, (3):1–17, 2006.
- ² Heath GW, Brownson RC, Kruger J, et al. and the Task Force on Community Preventive Services. "The effectiveness of urban design and land use and transport policies and practices to increase physical activity: a systematic review." *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, (3):55–76, 2006.
- ³ Troiano RP, Berrigan D, Dodd KW, et al. "Physical activity in the United States measured by accelerometer." *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, (40):181–188, 2008.
- ⁴ Heath GW, Brownson RC, Kruger J, et al. and the Task Force on Community Preventive Services. "The effectiveness of urban design and land use and transport policies and practices to increase physical activity: a systematic review." *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, (3):55–76, 2006.
- ⁵ Saelens BE and Handy S. "Built environment correlates of walking: a review." *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, (40):550–566, 2008.
- ⁶ Papas MA, Alberg AJ, Ewing R, Helzlsouer KJ, Gary TL and Klassen AC. "The built environment and obesity." *Epidemiologic Reviews*, (29):129–143, 2007.
- ⁷ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *The Surgeon General's Call to Action to Prevent and Decrease Overweight and Obesity*, 2001, available at www.surgeongeneral.gov/topics/obesity.
- ⁸ Koplan J, Liverman C and Kraak V. *Preventing Childhood Obesity: Health in the Balance*. Washington, DC: National Academies Press; 2004, available at www.iom.edu/?id=22623.
- ⁹ Lopez-Zetina J, Lee H and Friis R. "The link between obesity and the built environment. Evidence from an ecological analysis of obesity and vehicle miles of travel in California." *Health & Place*, (12):656–664, 2006.
- ¹⁰ Goldberg D. *Covering Urban Sprawl: Rethinking the American Dream*, 1999, available at www.smartgrowth.org.
- ¹¹ Heath GW, Brownson RC, Kruger J, et al. and the Task Force on Community Preventive Services. "The effectiveness of urban design and land use and transport policies and practices to increase physical activity: a systematic review." *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, (3):55–76, 2006.
- ¹² Frank LD, Schmid TL, Sallis JF, Chapman J and Saelens BE. "Linking objectively measured physical activity with objectively measured urban form. Findings from SMARTRAQ." *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 28(2S2):117–125, 2005.
- ¹³ Reed JA, Wilson DK, Ainsworth BE, Bowles H and Mixon G. "Perceptions of neighborhood sidewalks on walking and physical activity patterns in a southeastern community in the U.S." *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, (3):243–253, 2006.
- ¹⁴ Handy S, Sallis J, Weber D, Maibach E and Hollander M. "Is Support for Traditionally Designed Communities Growing? Evidence From Two National Surveys." *Journal of the American Planning Association*, (74):209–221, Spring 2008.
- ¹⁵ Cortright J. *How the Gas Price Spike Popped the Housing Bubble and Devalued the Suburbs*, 2008, available at www.ceosforcities.org.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Kerr J, Rosenberg D, Sallis JF, Saelens BE, Frank LD and Conway TL. "Active commuting to school: Associations with built environment and parental concerns." *Medicine and Science in Sports and Exercise*, (38):787–794, 2006.

Active Living Research, a national program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, stimulates and supports research to identify environmental factors and policies that influence physical activity for children and families to inform effective childhood obesity prevention strategies, particularly in low-income and racial/ethnic communities at highest risk. Active Living Research wants solid research to be part of the public debate about active living.

Visit www.activelivingresearch.org for a Web-based version and other updates.

Active Living Research

San Diego State University
3900 Fifth Avenue, Suite 310
San Diego, CA 92103-3138

www.activelivingresearch.org