

# Uses of Research Evidence in the State Legislative Process to Promote Active Environments in Minnesota

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# Research Question

How can research evidence about obesity prevention be effectively translated to decision-makers in Minnesota?



Photo credit: Senate Media Services

# Background

- Researchers and policymakers live in “parallel universes” (Brownson et al., 2006).
- Existing work suggests best practices for communicating research evidence for policy impact (Brownson et al., 2009)
  - Format (bullets, tables, short)
  - Content (local, costs, explicit policy recommendations)
  - Source (trusted, personal relationships)

# Study Team

- Co-PIs: Sarah Gollust and Susie Nanney (UMN)
- Investigator Team
  - Sara Benning (Children, Youth, and Family Consortium, UMN Ext.)
  - Susan Weisman (Public Health Law Center)
  - Rachel Callanan (American Heart Association)
  - Bill Burleson (Minnesota Dept. of Health)
  - Susan Bishop (Minnesota Dept. of Health)
  - Rep. Kim Norton (Democrat-Farm-Labor, District 29B)
  - Rep. Bob Dettmer (Republican, District 52A)



# Research Aims

- **Describe the types and sources** of research evidence.
- **Identify the barriers and facilitators** to use of research evidence.
- **Develop a model system** for communicating local childhood-obesity relevant research results to advocacy groups and state government.
- Implement and evaluate a **pilot model communication system**.

# Bills Included as “Policy Events”

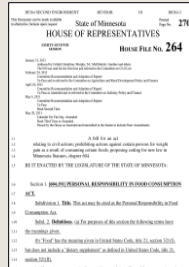
- 2007
  - School meal reimbursement
  - PE standards / wellness policies
- 2008
  - State Health Improvement Program (SHIP community grants)
  - BMI screening / nutrition education
- 2009
  - PE standards
  - School meal reimbursement
  - ARRA Farm 2 School programs
  - School siting
- 2010
  - PE standards
  - Complete Streets
- 2011
  - “Cheeseburger bill”
  - Joint use agreements / reduced liability for schools
  - Safe Routes to School



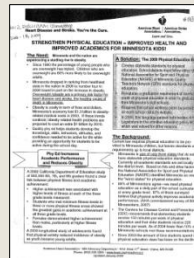
# Document Sample



130 testimony



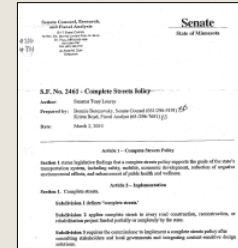
26 bills



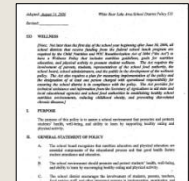
9 briefs & policy briefs



9 news articles



8 House Research & Senate Counsel



18 Other\*

\*e.g., letters, school district policies

- Sampling strategy
  - Exclude bills
  - Include all non-testimony documents
  - 50% random sample of oral testimony
  - Total = 109 documents

# Document Coding

- **Descriptive info**
  - Document type, length, date
  - Policy issue, purpose, author
- **Presence of research evidence**
  - Type of research evidence (prevalence; causes; consequences on health, health care costs; disparities)
  - Sources of research evidence (national or local, peer-reviewed articles, reports)
- **Presence of non-research based information**
  - Political values or principles; stories/anecdotes; mention of other states; mention of public opinion; expert beliefs



# Document Coding

## Obesity and Cancer



- Obese individuals have a 50 percent higher risk of dying from cancer.<sup>2</sup>

# Document Coding



Minnesota Complete Streets  
**Coalition**

Minnesota Case Studies

## Woodland Avenue in Duluth: A missed opportunity

In 2009, the City of Duluth Department of Public Works rebuilt a section of this arterial road adjacent to the University of MN Duluth campus. This section of Woodland, which carries 15,000 to 18,000 vehicles each day, was reconstructed as a four-lane road with 12-foot lanes with a center turn lane and sidewalks directly adjacent to the roadway. As redesigned, traffic on the road is now traveling well above the posted speed of 30 mph, placing pedestrians just feet from fast moving traffic since the grass boulevard has been eliminated. This winter, the new sidewalks are often blocked by snow since there is no longer a place for snow storage. Woodland was designed with few designated pedestrian crossings, even though it serves the University campus, a shopping center, and a middle school.

Public concern and disappointment about the timing of the public process, the lack of openness to consider alternative designs, and the new configuration of Woodland Avenue led the Mayor to create a Complete Streets Task Force. This task force plans to ensure that in the future the needs of all road users are considered and that public involvement happens much earlier. The City Public Works staff said they adhered to State Aid Standards calling for four travel lanes each 12 feet wide.



Woodland before (above) and Woodland after (below)



# Results

- **Research evidence (41%)(n=45)**
  - 51% describe magnitude/prevalence of obesity
  - 47% describe the impact of a policy or program
  - 47% cite data about children
- **Non-research-based information (92%)(n=100)**
  - 48% cite expert beliefs
  - 32% cite political principles
  - 24% cite stories or anecdotes

# Nutrition vs. Active Living

	Overall		Nutrition		Active Living	
	n= 109		n= 40		n= 69	
	n (yes)	% (yes)	n (yes)	% (yes)	n (yes)	% (yes)
Use of Research Evidence	45	<b>41.3%</b>	20	<b>50.0%</b>	25	<b>36.2%</b>
Use of Non-research Based Information	100	<b>91.7%</b>	39	<b>97.5%</b>	61	<b>88.4%</b>

# Physical Activity vs. Built Environment

	Active Living		Physical Activity		Built Environment	
	n=69		n= 30		n= 39	
	n (yes)	% (yes)	n (yes)	% (yes)	n (yes)	% (yes)
Use of Research Evidence*	25	<b>36.2%</b>	15	<b>50.0%</b>	10	<b>25.6%</b>
Use of Non-Research Based Information	61	<b>88.4%</b>	27	<b>90.0%</b>	34	<b>87.2%</b>

\*Significant at  $\alpha \leq 0.05$

# Results: Source of evidence

- Compared to nutrition legislation, documents connected to active living legislation:
  - Do not cite any source
  - More likely to use a generic reference to research, such as “study” or “research”



Photo credit: Senate Media Services

# Implications

- Research evidence is common in policy documents related to obesity—but other types of persuasive information are more common, like anecdotes, beliefs, political principles
- Research evidence on obesity is slightly more common in nutrition-related bills compared to active living bills.
- However, research evidence is much more common in bills related to physical activity than the built environment.



# Limitations and Challenges

- Content analysis only reveals observable use of evidence in policy documents
- Content analysis does not assess the quality of the research evidence cited



Photo credit: Senate Media Services



# Next Steps

- Interviews with legislators, advocates, state-agency staff
  - 16 public agency staff (MDH, MDE, MnDOT)
  - 16 advocates/lobbyists
  - 16 legislators, legislative aides, or legislative staff
- Develop model of evidence translation process

# Thank You

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