

Built Environment Assessment and Interventions for Obesity Prevention

Moving the Field Forward



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Overview

The Built Environment Assessment Training (BEAT) Institute (www.med.upenn.edu/beat/) was developed to prepare and encourage investigators and practitioners to use observational and self-reported measures of nutrition and activity environments and related behavioral assessments. This focused training Institute integrated the disciplinary foci of nutrition, physical activity, obesity prevention, urban planning, and transportation.

Each summer from 2008 to 2012, a week-long training BEAT Institute was conducted. The Institutes were held in Atlanta, San Diego, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Boston. Each Institute involved 30–35 trainees, selected from as many as 106 applicants per year. The faculty and trainers were drawn from top experts across the country. Extensions to the BEAT Institute have included follow-up with alumni across Institute years and online training programs that are available for free to alumni and others.

The 2013, the BEAT Think Tank brought together thought leaders across the spectrum of disciplines addressed in the previous BEAT Institutes to discuss the state of the science and practice and identify priorities for future research, intervention development, and training. The Think Tank was a culmination of 5 years of training, research, and collaboration through the BEAT Institute.

The 2-day invitation-only meeting, held in the summer of 2013 in Philadelphia, brought together 29 nationally recognized faculty, experts, and exceptional BEAT Institute alumni. The meeting was designed to be engaging and interactive, set an agenda for the future of the field, and identify concrete products to be developed and disseminated.

The Think Tank was structured around four key issues: (1) tools for measuring food and activity environments; (2) advancing technology use in built environment assessment research and practice; (3) making measurement instruments more feasible to disseminate for community use and advocacy; and (4) enhancing use of built environment measures for policy change and surveillance. Each session began with brief introductory talks followed by a discussion on the state of the science, recommendations, and priorities. Each session was facilitated by an expert in the field assisted by the conference moderator. The sessions were documented by an assigned reporter, who was one of the attendees, a staff note taker, and an audio recorder. After the Think Tank, the notes were compiled and summarized by Think Tank staff.

To ensure that the deliberations from the Think Tank would lead to action and reach a wider audience, time was allocated specifically to discuss plans for follow-up, reporting, and publications. From these sessions, the four papers in this Theme Issue emerged. The first article summarizes highlights of the BEAT Think Tank and describes the participants' top priority recommendations for developing tools for measuring food and activity environments and applying them in research and public health practice. The second paper explores the potential of using an "energy balance" approach in which both food environments and activity environments are considered together within a given community or neighborhood.

The third article highlights some potentially transformative current and emerging trends in the technology arena applicable to environmental context-based assessment and intervention relevant to physical activity and dietary behaviors. The fourth and final article in the Theme Issue tackles the important challenge of moving built environment assessment beyond the hands of researchers and into the practice community to impact local change.

This themed collection from participants of the 2013 BEAT Think Tank takes stock of the progress to date in built environment assessment and interventions for

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obesity prevention, and helps readers to look ahead at important and fertile areas for future research, intervention development, and training. We hope readers will be moved to think critically and inspired to take action in their own work as this exciting area on inquiry continues to advance.

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