

FACTS

Creating Spaces

Changing the Built Environment to Promote Active Living

OVERVIEW

The U.S. is in the grips of a full-blown obesity epidemic. More than 35% of adults and almost 17% of children are obese.¹ In 2011, the adult obesity rate exceeded 30% in 12 states; 27 more states had adult obesity rates >25%.² On its current trajectory, it is estimated that obesity rates for adults could reach or exceed 44% in every state by 2030.³ In light of these dire statistics, it is imperative to find ways to increase physical activity opportunities and recreational spaces where people live, work, learn, and play, and to promote ways to become or stay more physically fit. Fewer than two in ten adults in the U.S. get the recommended amount of physical activity each day, and more than a quarter of adults do not devote any time to physical activity.⁴ More than 62% of children do not get daily vigorous physical activity³, and only 5% report any kind of vigorous activity.⁵

To compound the problem, traditional transportation and community planning often overlooks the effect on health and as a result, we rely too much on cars. Our communities are frequently recreational deserts without green spaces or connected walking and biking routes. Integrating health objectives within transportation and community planning would create more active communities, more balanced transportation systems and a cost-effective opportunity to improve public health.³ It is time to make our communities optimal for healthy living.

HEALTH IMPACT

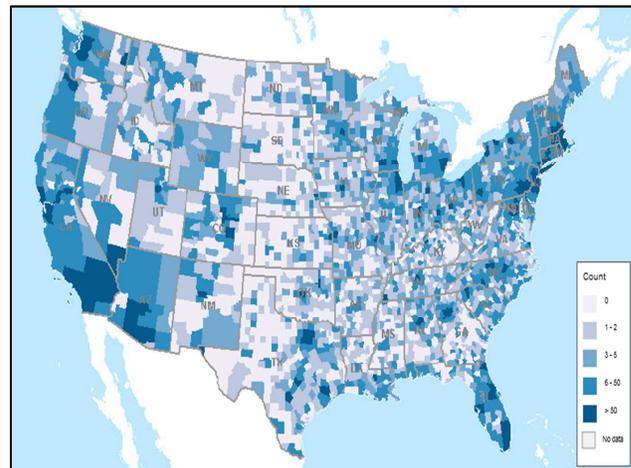
Several studies have found that the way communities are designed and developed can have an effect on physical activity opportunities and obesity rates. Safe sidewalks, green spaces, parks, public transportation, and ready access to fruits and vegetables lower the risk for developing diabetes and other chronic disease as compared with those communities that do not have these resources.⁶

We must make opportunities for physical activity more accessible. People who are sitting throughout their day have roughly twice the risk of having heart attacks, heart surgeries, strokes, or other cardiovascular events compared to those who are more active.⁷

Cities and communities across the U.S. are exploring ways to become vibrant and attractive places to live. One option is to convert vacant lots, or brown fields, to community gardens, small parks, and open green spaces in order to spur economic development. Studies have shown that community gardens and walking/biking trails have a positive impact on surrounding residential properties, by increasing rates of home ownership and spurring economic redevelopment.⁸

Number of Recreation & Fitness facilities, 2009

USDA Economic Research Service – Environment Food Atlas
Source: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-environment-atlas.aspx>



Other studies have found that building bike/pedestrian trails reduces health care costs associated with physical inactivity. For every dollar invested in building these trails, nearly \$3 in medical cost savings may be achieved.⁹ Additionally, linking different parts of the community with trails and walkways opens up the opportunity for community integration, more efficient land use, lower traffic congestion, better quality of life, and increased property values.¹⁰

Additional research indicates that:

- People who have parks or recreational facilities nearby and live in communities with well-connected streets exercise much more than those who do not have easy access.^{11,12}
- Lower-income communities, especially in predominantly Latino or African-American neighborhoods, unfortunately often have fewer resources to support active lifestyles and places to play and exercise.¹³ Programs targeted to low-income, racially and ethnically diverse populations can increase active commuting and are associated with higher overall levels of moderate to vigorous physical activity throughout the day.¹⁴
- Community-based physical activity interventions are cost-effective, reducing new cases of many chronic diseases and improving quality of life.¹⁵

WAYS TO CREATE ACTIVE COMMUNITIES

- **Safe Routes to School** enable more children to safely walk and bike to school. Community leaders prioritize the safety of these routes and are working to reduce traffic congestion and improve health and the environment.
- **Complete Streets** policies consider the needs of all users in all transportation projects incorporating walking, bicycling, public transportation, and driving.
- **Smart Growth Design** communities are designed with active living as the focus. Communities are connected with street patterns that make it easy to walk or bike to destinations. Developers try to locate essential services like schools and stores closer to homes to encourage walking and provide green spaces for recreation.
- **Shared Use of School Facilities** agreements allow schools to share their physical activity facilities (gyms, running/walking tracks, multi-purpose rooms) with the community for recreation and exercise opportunities.
- **Transportation Enhancements** activities offer funding opportunities to help expand transportation choices in communities, including pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure and safety programs as well as conversion of abandoned railway corridors to trails.
- **Recreational Trails Program (RTP)** provides funds to the states to develop and maintain recreational trails and trail-related facilities for both non-motorized and motorized recreational trail uses. Federal transportation funds benefit recreation including hiking, bicycling, in-line skating, equestrian use, and cross-country skiing.

THE ASSOCIATION ADVOCATES

The American Heart Association supports provisions in transportation reauthorization and other initiatives

that create more livable and active communities.

Policy recommendations include:

- Provide robust funding for Safe Routes to School within the Transportation Alternatives program, incorporating significant evaluation and providing technical assistance to communities.
- Support sustained concentrated funding to assist communities in implementing active transportation networks.
- Require state departments of transportation, metropolitan planning organizations, and local municipalities to adopt complete streets policies to consider the needs of all users in all transportation projects — whether walking, bicycling, public transportation, or driving — to reduce the need to retrofit existing roads and paths.
- Provide tax incentives to support school construction and physical activity facilities.
- Incorporate health impact assessments into community planning.
- Integrate shared use agreements into the existing federal and state programs and statewide recreation plans (SCORPs).

¹ Ogden CL, Carroll MD, Kit BK, Flegal KM. Prevalence of Obesity in the United States, 2009-2010. NCHS data brief, no 82. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2012.

² Trust for America's Health/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. *F as in Fat: How Obesity Policies Are Failing in America*. 2012.

³ Litman, T. Transportation and Public Health. *Annual Review of Public Health*, 2013; 34: 22.1 – 22.17. Available online at: <http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/abs/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031912-114502>. In press.

⁴ US Department of Health and Human Services. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Health, United States, 2011: With Special Feature on Socioeconomic Status and Health*. May 2012. Available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/atus/atus11.pdf#073>.

⁵ Johnson WD, Katzmarzyk PT. Frequently Reported Activities by Intensity for U.S. Adults: The American Time Use Survey. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. Volume 39, Issue 4, Pages e13-e20, October 2010.

⁶ Auchincloss, A. H., A. V. Diez Roux, et al., Neighborhood resources for physical activity and healthy foods and incidence of type 2 diabetes mellitus: the Multi-Ethnic study of Atherosclerosis. *Arch Intern Med*. 2009; 169(18): 1698-704.

⁷ Stamatakis E., et al., Screen-based entertainment time, all-cause mortality, and cardiovascular events: population-based study with ongoing mortality and hospital events follow-up. *JACC*. January 2011. 57:292-299.

⁸ Been, V., Voicu, I. (2007). The effect of community gardens on neighboring property values. Law and Economics Research Paper No. 06-09. New York, New York University.

⁹ Wang, G., C. A. Macera, et al. (2005). "A cost-benefit analysis of physical activity using bike/pedestrian trails." *Health Promotion Practice*. 6(2): 174-9.

¹⁰ Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Active Living Research. *The Economic Benefits of Open Space, Recreation Facilities and Walkable Community Design*. May 2010. Available at: <http://atfiles.org/files/pdf/Economic-Benefits-Active.pdf>

¹¹ *Designing for Active Living Among Adults*. Publication. 2008. Active Living Research, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. 21 May 2009. http://www.activelivingresearch.org/files/Active_Adults.pdf

¹² Boone-Heinonen, J. et al., What neighborhood area captures built environment features related to adolescent physical activity? *Health and Place*. November 2010. 16(6):1280-1286.

¹³ Powell, L. M., S. Slater, and F. J. Chaloupka. "The relationship between community physical activity settings and race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status." *Evidenced Based Preventive Medicine*. 135-44. 21 May 2009.

¹⁴ Mendoza, J.A. et al., Ethnic Minority Children's Active Commuting to School and Association with Physical Activity and Pedestrian Safety Behaviors. *Journal of Applied Research on Children*. 2010. 1(1).

¹⁵ Roux L., et al., Cost-effectiveness of community-based physical activity programs. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*. 35(6):578-588. December 2008.