

Prevention Policy Brief

From the Prevention Research Center at Tulane University



Walkability & Bikeability: Designing communities with legs

The Problem

Obesity is the second leading cause of death. Regular physical activity can prevent or reduce obesity and help maintain health. But our neighborhoods have become more and more dependent upon auto travel, reducing walking and bicycling for everyday errands.

Here are the facts:

- 65% of American adults¹ and 25% of American children are overweight.²
- Obesity is linked to an estimated 112,000 deaths per year.³
- 75% of the U.S. adult population does not achieve 30 minutes of moderate activity per day.⁴

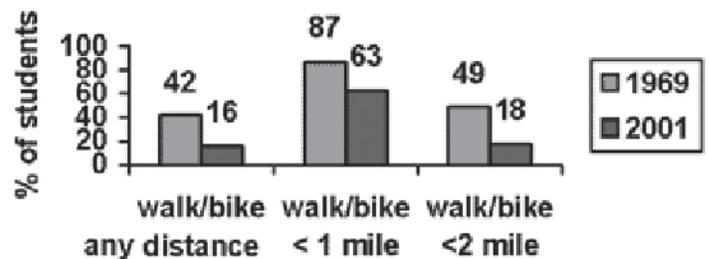
The Causes

There are many causes of obesity, but a lack of physical activity is a key contributing factor. We've become overly dependent on automobiles and have not planned neighborhood development or expansion in ways that consider people and pedestrians. We're paying the cost of such short-sighted thinking, with greater levels of traffic, less social cohesion, and abandoned retail areas that are prime targets for crime and blight.

Here are the facts:

- Each additional hour a person spends in a car is associated with a 6% increase in the risk of obesity⁵
- Strip malls, large-lot parking, dead wall space, lack of crosswalks, and wide, unshaded streets have all been shown to inhibit walking⁶
- People are less willing to walk in their neighborhoods when they have to deal with stresses like traffic congestion, noise, and the threat of violence⁷

- 30 years ago, nearly half of children who lived within two miles of school walked or biked to get there; just 18% of kids within two miles of school do so today.⁸
- Between 1977 and 1995, trips made by walking declined by 40% for both children and adults, while driving trips increased to almost 90% of the total.⁹



Graphic courtesy CDC KidsWalk-to-School

The Solution

Good community design can increase opportunities for physical activity and, at the same time, improve the viability of the community.

Here are the facts:

- People with access to sidewalks are more likely to walk¹⁰ and meet the Surgeon General's recommendations for physical activity.¹¹
- Real estate is expected to grow fastest in areas that are friendly to pedestrian traffic¹² and homebuyers are frequently willing to pay more for homes in pedestrian-friendly communities.¹³
- Restorative or stress-reducing features such as water, foliage, open-space vistas, and other aesthetic elements promote higher levels of physical activity.¹⁴

The Solution, continued

The following cities have successfully incorporated walkability and bikeability into their communities:

- Since July 2000, Salt Lake City has instituted a number of relatively inexpensive pedestrian safety measures; as a result, pedestrian injury accidents have decreased by nearly 31%.
- Mountain View, CA, eliminated one lane each on three major roads, which served to calm traffic without increasing congestion. This restriping also allowed the city to add one foot each to the biking and parking lanes.
- In the 1980s, West Palm Beach, FL, promoted an automobile-oriented community. As a result, cars sped through the downtown area without stopping. On the verge of collapse, the city developed a new vision for West Palm Beach that involved narrowing the streets to slow traffic, widening sidewalks, and adding amenities for pedestrians. As a result, businesses returned, private investment increased, and residents returned to the newly accessible downtown area.

Making it Happen

New Orleans is in a unique position to redesign and redevelop communities to make them more walkable, more bikeable, and more successful. Some recommended strategies:

- Mix land use, with schools, work sites, and shopping near residential areas
- Create commercial centers or districts rather than strip malls
- Require common space in revitalized neighborhoods, such as pocket parks, community centers, and schools
- Initiate traffic calming projects for safer streets
- Encourage windows on the street in commercial areas to create safe and pleasant places to walk
- Cut back on the number of auto lanes and add bike lanes on appropriate streets to give residents better choices and make the streets safer.
- Add crosswalks, which is inexpensive and safer for pedestrians.

Sources

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Finding better ways to protect our health