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# Walk On:

STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE  
WALKABLE COMMUNITIES

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A PREVENTION INSTITUTE BRIEF

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## INTRODUCTION



Walking is gaining momentum in communities across the country. Michelle Obama, business leaders and healthcare providers like Kaiser Permanente are making the case that regular walking is a great way to improve health and that communities can play a big role in creating the conditions that encourage people to stroll. There's plenty of evidence that regular walking:

- Prevents the development of chronic diseases, such as coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, breast and colon cancer and type-2 diabetes.<sup>1,2</sup>
- Reduces unhealthy weight. For each 6/10 of a mile that an individual walks per day, their risk of obesity is decreased by 5 percent.<sup>3,4</sup>
- Reduces rates of depression and improves cognition, especially in children, by improving concentration, enhancing memory, creativity and learning.<sup>5</sup>

Increasing walking can also be a strategy for achieving equity both by reducing unequal burdens of disease and reducing transportation costs. Low-income people are more likely to live in communities where walking infrastructure is either unsafe or absent all together. Families in the lowest economic quartile spend 42 percent of their total annual income on transportation, while middle-income households spend only 22 percent.\* People who live in low-income communities have been found to have higher rates of chronic disease.<sup>6</sup>

Walkable communities also bring an economic benefit to community members. Walking, biking and trail infrastructure is cheaper to build than roads and reduces the need for new highways. Active transportation infrastructure creates more jobs per dollar than highway projects, attracts business investments, and increases revenue for small businesses as local residents and tourist explore their community on foot.<sup>7</sup>

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\* Sierra Club. Transit in the United States. 2003. [http://www.sierraclub.org/sprawl/reports/transit\\_factsheet.pdf](http://www.sierraclub.org/sprawl/reports/transit_factsheet.pdf)



## ELEMENTS OF A WALKABLE COMMUNITY

On the surface, walking also seems to present few barriers to participation. If we want more people to walk, we need to first create community conditions that make it easy and pleasant for people to do so. Research shows there are several key factors that make communities more walkable. They include:

**Design and Destinations:** Land use and community design decisions that consider pedestrian use can increase levels of physical activity, according to reviews by the Institute of Medicine and the Task Force for Community Preventive Services<sup>8,9</sup>. In particular, land use patterns that integrate street and pathway connectivity and ensure the proximity of housing, schools, transportation hubs, jobs, and community resources to one another have been shown to positively impact how much community members walk.

**Infrastructure:** By creating, improving and promoting places to be physically active, it is possible to increase the number of residents who exercise at least three times per week.<sup>10</sup> In particular, evidence highlights the important role that adequate sidewalks, access to well-maintained parks, and mixed development can have in facilitating increased exercise and physical activity.<sup>11,12</sup>

**Safety:** People are less likely to walk in their communities if they experience them as unsafe.

Low rates of crime, low measures of perceived violence, and high levels of neighborhood trust are all correlated with high rates of walking and physical activity.<sup>13,14</sup> Decreased rates of pedestrian injury from vehicle crashes and the use of crosswalks, signal lights, traffic calming and other kinds of pedestrian safety infrastructure are also strongly associated with increased walking.<sup>15</sup>

**Programs and social supports:** People are much more likely to engage in recreational walking if it's done in tandem or with a group.<sup>16</sup> Structured programs, such as walking groups, can positively influence walking behavior. When people perceive their neighbors as being active, and when they're exposed to positive messages about walking, it provides encouragement.<sup>17</sup>

## PLANNING AND POLICIES THAT PROMOTE WALKING

There are a number of approaches that can help ensure that community design plans promote pedestrian use. The following should be central to efforts to increase walking:

### • Complete Streets Policies

“COMPLETE STREETS ARE STREETS FOR EVERYONE. THEY ARE DESIGNED AND OPERATED TO ENABLE SAFE ACCESS FOR ALL USERS, INCLUDING PEDESTRIANS, BICYCLISTS, MOTORISTS AND TRANSIT RIDERS OF ALL AGES AND ABILITIES.”

— National Complete Streets Coalition

State or municipal policies can guide transportation planners and engineers on how to design, maintain, upgrade and operate streets that enable safe and equal access for all users, regardless of age, ability, income or mode of transportation. There is no singular design prescription for complete streets; rather there is a set of principles that can be applied to any local context.

- **General/Comprehensive Plans**

General plans outline acceptable land uses in specific jurisdictions in order to guide growth and land development in communities. By incorporating walking policies into general plans, cities and counties can lay out a broad vision and be accountable for investing in walking infrastructure.



- **Pedestrian Master Plans**

Many cities have adopted Pedestrian Master Plans with the goal of creating quality pedestrian environments. Plans can guide and mandate the creation of public spaces and insure that streets and paths offer a level of convenience, safety, and attractiveness that encourage pedestrians to walk.<sup>18</sup>

- **Safe Routes to School (SRTS) Policies and Programs**

SRTS is focused on creating safe and convenient ways for children to walk or ride bikes to and from school by improving pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure and managing auto traffic in

areas near schools. SRTS is growing to encompass the variety of destinations students must go on their way to and from school such as libraries and recreation centers. Increasingly, SRTS policies and programs incorporate strategies to address both traffic and violence concerns. Children who actively commute to and from school obtain more physical activity than those who ride in a car or a bus.<sup>19</sup>

- **Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED)**

CPTED is a multi-disciplinary approach to creating safer environments that includes a focus on both community design (adequate lighting, “eyes on the street”), neighborhood aesthetics (graffiti removal, attractive streetscapes) and community identity and cohesion (defined gathering places, community signage) which has demonstrated positive impacts on pedestrian and bike activity.<sup>20</sup>

- **Transit-oriented Development (TOD) and Mixed-Use Zoning**

TOD and mixed-use zoning are approaches that integrate affordable housing, retail, quality employment, educational, service, recreational, and transportation resources in comprehensive neighborhood design. Neighborhoods that employ TOD and mixed-use zoning principles have been shown to increase the likelihood that residents will engage in recommended levels of physical activity.<sup>21,22</sup> Additionally, increasing the number of retail destinations, parks, and recreation facilities within walking distance of public transit and housing encourages walking, just as increased walking also leads to economic growth.<sup>23</sup> TOD can happen along light rail and bus corridors where pedestrians need good connections, quality health-promoting infrastructure and affordability.

## CASE STUDIES: COMMUNITIES THAT WALK THE TALK

*There are many ways to change community environments and support walking. Below are brief sketches of several innovative efforts that have had a significant impact.*

### Urban Communities

*Evergreen Cemetery Jogging Path  
Boyle Heights, CA*



Residents of the Boyle Heights neighborhood in Los Angeles collaborated with The Latino Urban Forum (LUF)

to find ways to encourage physical activity in their community. With open space limited, the community

formed the Evergreen Jogging Path Coalition and transformed a cracked sidewalk around the cemetery into a 1.5 mile rubberized jogging path. Since its inception, daily use of the path has increased. Not only does the path increase physical activity, it also creates a stronger sense of identity for residents and the community as a whole.

#### ADDITIONAL COMMUNITY EXAMPLES:

[Active Transportation Alliance](#)

Chicago, Illinois

[CALTrans Community Planning Project](#)

Cutler/Orosi, California

### Rural Communities

*Get Moving Kern and Greenfield Walking Group  
Kern County, CA*

The Greenfield Walking Group is an active group of parents who identify barriers to safe physical activity and discuss solutions as they walk through their neighborhood in Kern County, California. In conjunction with the Central California Regional Obesity Prevention Program (CCROPP), the Greenfield Walking Group set up a task force for the community to gather and discuss meaningful ways to improve the health and safety of their community. Walking Group members conducted a walkability assessment of their neighborhood and then recommended steps to improving the walking environment. The group also provides support and technical assistance to residents and organizations throughout Kern County on how to transform their communities. They group produced a fotonovela—an illustrated pamphlet with photographs and



dialogue bubbles—that offers guidance to community members on ways to work with politicians to discuss the issues, develop solutions and create change.

#### ADDITIONAL COMMUNITY EXAMPLES:

[Active Living by Design — Slavic Village Development](#)

Cleveland, Ohio

[Teton Valley Trails and Path Ways](#)

Grant Teton, Teton Valley, Idaho

## CASE STUDIES: COMMUNITIES THAT WALK THE TALK

### Walking School Buses

*Cities and Towns in MA, FL, NJ, OR, PA, WA, AL, SD*



Two decades ago, parents in Australia recognized that fewer children were walking and biking to school

due to safety concerns and developed the concept of walking school buses. Since then, the idea has spread around the world and to communities across the U.S. A walking school bus uses one or more adults to accompany groups of children as they walk to and from school. It promotes walking for children and for parents as well. High-visibility walking activity such as walking school buses also build the perception that physical activity is encouraged and helps it become a shared value within a community.

### Engaged Business

*The Fenway Alliance  
Boston, MA*

The Fenway Alliance is a coalition of Boston cultural institutions focused on “achieving an improved physical environment, sense of community, and quality of life for members, residents and constituent patrons of the Fenway Cultural District.” The Alliance has been working to improve the walkability of the community by pushing for pedestrian and bike infrastructure in

the Muddy River restoration and Riverway Park. The group has also lobbied for pedestrian enhancements to major roadways by widening sidewalks, adding stop signs, planting trees, and installing streetlights, public art, and outdoor furniture for pedestrians to enjoy the outdoors.

#### ADDITIONAL COMMUNITY EXAMPLE:

[Creating the Will and the Way: Expanding Access to Healthy Eating and Active Living](#)

New York City, New York

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

### Health Care

1. Locate health care institutions, such as hospitals and clinics, in walkable areas that are transit-oriented. Waive minimum parking requirements when they act as a barrier to placing health care institutions in walkable, transit-rich neighborhoods.
2. Encourage doctors to supply patients who would benefit with “walking prescriptions” as a legitimate way to promote their health and prevent disease. Accompany this with advocacy and planning to enhance the walkability of neighborhoods where patients live.

### Community

1. Promote the steps described in the section on building blocks of community walkability above.

2. Increase access to trails and pathways as a way to help people commute between connecting neighborhoods, parks, schools, and workplaces and incorporate physical activity into daily routines. Encourage states and municipalities to finance new trail and pathway infrastructure and maintenance costs.

### Schools

1. Increase joint-use agreements in communities that lack access to parks, trails, and other physical activity facilities. School facilities that are open to the public will increase access to open green spaces and walking tracks.
2. Invest in making schools and surrounding areas walkable and bike-friendly to encourage students and faculty to travel to school by foot or bicycle. This is especially important for schools in low-income communities.

## **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES: Articles on Walkability**

### [The Economic Benefits of Walkable Communities](#)

Published by the Local Government Commission Center for Livable Communities

### [Walk this Way: The Economic Promise of Walkable Places in Metropolitan Washington, D.C.](#)

Published by Brookings

### [The Case for Walkability as an Economic Development Tool](#)

Published by the Atlantic Cities, Kaid Benfield

**Contributors:** Cindy Phan, Manal J. Aboelata, Jeremy Cantor, Sandra Viera and Rob Waters.

**Prevention Institute** would like to thank The California Endowment for its support. Prevention Institute is solely responsible for the content.

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