

Active Living Research

Promoting activity-friendly communities

Making the Case for Designing Active Cities

Executive Summary

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For a Web-based version of the full report, visit:

<http://activelivingresearch.org/making-case-designing-active-cities>

A peer-reviewed paper based on this report is available online through open access:

Sallis, JF, et al. (2015). Co-benefits of designing communities for active living: an exploration of literature. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 12:30. DOI 10.1186/s12966-015-0188-2. Available at: <http://www.ijbnpa.org/content/pdf/s12966-015-0188-2.pdf>.

INTRODUCTION

Creating "activity-friendly environments" is recommended to promote physical activity, but potential co-benefits of such environments have not been well described. An extensive but non-systematic review of scientific and "gray" literature was conducted to explore a wide range of literature to understand the co-benefits of activity-friendly environments on physical health, mental health, social benefits, safety/injury prevention, environmental sustainability, and economics. Five physical activity settings were defined: parks/trails, urban design, transportation, schools, and workplaces/buildings.

KEY FINDINGS

- A total of 221 sources were identified, yielding 521 relevant findings. 418 higher-quality findings were summarized based on direction of association and quality of source.
- Each built environment setting had features with strong evidence of multiple benefits.



- All five physical activity settings could be designed so they have positive effects on economic outcomes, including increased home value, greater retail activity, reduced health care costs, and improved productivity.
- Activity-friendly design in all settings had strong evidence of environmental co-benefits based on reduced pollution and carbon emissions.
- There were many gaps in evidence of co-benefits in the schools and workplace settings as well the health consequences of environments that support active travel.
- Overall, there was little evidence of negative consequences of activity-friendly environments.
- Specific environmental features with the strongest evidence of multiple co-benefits were: park proximity; mixed land use; trees/greenery; accessibility and street connectivity; building design; and workplace physical activity policies/programs.

IMPLICATIONS

The most important conclusion of this review is that creating communities, transportation systems, schools, and buildings that make physical activity attractive and convenient also produces a wide range of other benefits for communities. Rather than thinking that designing one feature of a transportation system or school is sufficient, we encourage decision-makers and designers to consider how features in all settings can be optimized for physical activity and multiple other benefits. We urge mayors, other city officials, and staff in multiple departments to consult these findings as an aid in decision-making.

Summary of Co-Benefits of Designing Activity-Friendly Environments						
Built Environment Attribute	Physical Health	Mental Health	Social Benefits	Environmental Sustainability	Safety / Injury Prevention	Economic Benefits
Open spaces / Parks / Trails	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++	+++
Urban design / Land use	+++	+++	+++	+++	---	+++
Transportation systems			+++	+++	+++	+++
Schools	+++	+++	++	+++		+++
Workplaces / Buildings	+++	++		+++		+++

Green indicates positive benefits; red indicates negative impacts; white indicates insufficient evidence.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Active Living Research, a program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, stimulates and supports research to identify environmental factors and policies that influence physical activity for children and families to inform effective childhood obesity prevention strategies, particularly in low-income and racial/ethnic communities at highest risk. Active Living Research wants solid research to be part of the public debate about active living.

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