

Safe Routes to School

Talking Points



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Creating environments that allow children to walk safely to school will improve health outcomes for children.

For more information and resources on the relationship between the built environment and public health:



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Planning for Healthy Places
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Primary Message:

Promoting walking to children builds lifelong healthy habits, and normalizes walking as part of the family's lifestyle. Creating environments that allow children to walk safely to school will improve health outcomes for children, potentially reducing asthma, obesity, and injury rates.

Health problems include:

Obesity. Obesity rates among children have more than doubled in the past 20 years, according to the National Longitudinal Study of Youth. Today, one in five children and one in three teens is overweight or at risk of becoming overweight.

Asthma. Between 1980 and 1994, the prevalence of asthma in the United States increased 74 percent among children ages 5 to 14.

Injuries. In 2002, 599 children ages 14 and younger died from pedestrian injuries, according to Safe Kids USA. Of these, 77 percent died in motor vehicle-related traffic crashes. In 2003, nearly 38,400 children ages 14 and younger were treated in hospital emergency rooms for pedestrian-related injuries.

Some of these health problems are linked to environmental factors.

- The 1996 Surgeon General's Report on Physical Activity and Health reported that 78 percent of children **fall short of the recommended minimum** of 30 to 60 minutes of physical activity daily and an additional daily recommendation of 20 minutes of vigorous exercise.
- In an October 2002 survey by the Surface Transportation Policy Project, a transportation safety think tank, 71 percent of Americans said they **walked or rode a bike** to school as children, while only 10 to 17 percent of children do so today. Even among kids living within a mile of their school, only 25 percent are regular walkers.

- **Poor air quality** can make it dangerous to walk to school and engage in other outdoor physical activities, especially for children with asthma. In 2002, approximately 52 percent of Americans lived in counties that did not meet Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) air quality standards, according to the American Lung Association.

How does the built environment contribute to these problems?

- **Child pedestrian injuries** occur more often in residential areas and on local roads that are straight, paved, and dry, according to Safe Kids USA.



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- A national survey found that nearly 60 percent of parents and children **walking to school** encountered at least one serious hazard, including a lack of sidewalks or crosswalks. Speeding drivers and wide roads that were difficult to cross were also problems.
- A national observational survey found that 90 percent of **crosswalks** within the vicinity of an elementary or middle school had at least one of four common hazards:
 - Crosswalks were in poor condition or not present
 - Curb ramps were outside the crosswalk or not present
 - Speed limits during school hours were 35 mph or higher
 - Drivers failed to stop, or stopped and made illegal turns
- **Speed kills pedestrians.** According to one study, a pedestrian hit by a car traveling 15 mph has a 4 percent chance of dying, while a pedestrian hit by a car traveling 44 mph has an 83 percent chance of dying.
- **Traffic-calming measures** such as speed humps are associated with an estimated 53 to 60 percent reduction in the risk of injury or death among children struck by an automobile in their neighborhood.

- **Parents driving their kids to school** make up 20 to 25 percent of the morning commute, according to the Local Government Commission. It's a vicious cycle: the more traffic there is, the more parents decide it is unsafe for their children to walk to school and opt to drive them instead.
- **Community design has changed.** The number of schools decreased by about 1,000 between the years 1968 and 2001, while the number of students increased by over two million, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Consequently, fewer students live within a mile of their school.

Effectiveness of Safe Routes to School

The Transportation Authority of Marin County, California, issued a report on the impact of its Safe Routes to School program. Over the program's first two years, the percentage of children walking or biking to school increased from 21 to 38 percent. Adults reported that they appreciated the reduced traffic congestion around schools.

What can decision makers do to improve children's health and support walking to school?

Safe Routes to School puts forth the "Four Es" as the key to a solution: **Engineering, Enforcement, Education, and Encouragement.**

State and local officials can create environments that improve child safety by revising laws, ordinances, and practices to promote the following:

- The construction of **sidewalks**
- Neighborhood **schools**
- **Traffic-calming measures**, such as roundabouts and speed humps
- Requirements that city planners, engineers, real estate developers, and landscape architects consider **pedestrian safety** when designing new communities or modifying existing ones

Closing Message:

Parents are more likely to allow their children to walk or bike to school if there is a safe route. Creating safe routes to school is a children's health issue.