

STEP 1 - INTRODUCTION & WHY

What Are Active Communities?

An activity-friendly environment is a place that makes it easy to be physically active on a routine basis. **Active Community Environments (ACEs)** are communities where it is easy for people of all ages and abilities to make the choice to be physically active, through planned exercise or routine daily activity. This means being able to easily walk or bike to nearby destinations such as stores, schools, parks, etc., as well as enjoy recreational opportunities within the community.

Why Do Active Community Environments Matter?

Chronic disease and obesity rates are high and healthcare costs are soaring. Wisconsin rates for several key health indicators are not good, as evidenced by Figure 1:

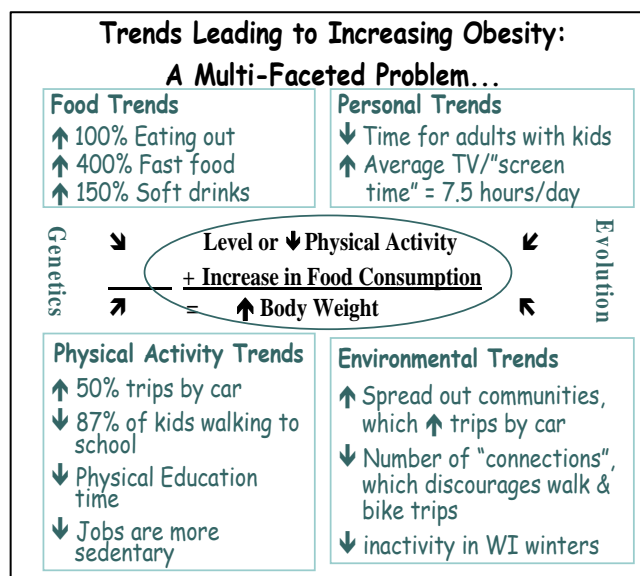
Figure 1: Percent of Adults with Lifestyle Health Risk Factors

Risk Factor	State of Wisconsin
Obese: Body Mass Index (BMI) ≥ 30	25%
Overweight (includes obese)(BMI ≥ 25)	62%
Diabetes	7%
Current smoker	20%
High blood pressure	26%
High cholesterol	35%
Lack of physical activity (Lack of exercise)	45%
Less than 5 servings of fruits or vegetables	76%

Source: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) 2007

In the U.S., physical inactivity is a major contributing factor to the obesity epidemic. There is now a body of evidence that connects higher physical activity levels and health status with key environmental factors such as the design of our cities, neighborhoods and transportation systems. The absence of environmental factors such as parks, trails and other recreational facilities serves as a barrier to physical activity. This is a particularly significant issue for residents of low-income neighborhoods and minorities.¹ Since the recent increase in obesity levels is a complex issue, the number of factors that are needed to fix the problem is also complex. This is illustrated in the figure to the right, showing many of the factors that affect weight gain and obesity.

Figure 2: Obesity Trends & Factors



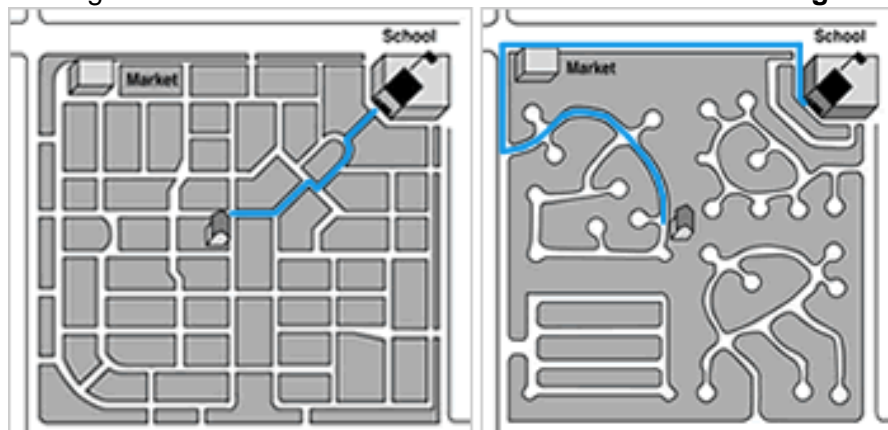
Why Start an Active Community Environments Initiative?

There are a number of reasons to create active community environments. Number one is the growing evidence that environmental change can greatly affect health. A study of 448 metropolitan counties conducted in 2003 found that people who lived in compact, higher-density

counties walked more and were less likely to be obese and hypertensive than people who lived in more sprawling counties.²

Need an example? The diagram below illustrates how planning can make a difference by making it easier to walk and bike.

Figure 3: Neighborhood Example:



(Source: Transportation and Growth Management: Oregon Guide for Reducing Street Widths)

The diagram on the left illustrates a street layout based on a grid system, and the diagram on the right illustrates a layout which consists of many dead end streets with few exits or entrances. The diagram on the left provides a greater street connectivity than the diagram on the right. A trip from home to school for a child who lives in the neighborhood on the left is feasible on foot or by bicycle. It features a short distance using local streets

with no major streets to navigate. For the child who lives in the neighborhood on the right, the trip is longer and takes place mostly on busy streets. As a result, many parents will choose to drive their child to school, which will overburden the arterial street system and create unnecessary traffic congestion at the school.

Many of the risk factors for chronic diseases are both preventable and modifiable. Step 2 will provide information on getting started and lay out what you can do in your community. Based on evidence to-date, the ideas and strategies in this kit will focus on the following important characteristics of the built environment that are critical to supporting physical activity. One research example has been listed with each strategy.

A – Provide Walkable and Bikeable Neighborhoods with a Variety of Destinations

56 percent of residents in traditional neighborhoods walked to nearby commercial areas, versus 33 percent of those living in suburban neighborhoods.³

B – Provide a Variety of Public Transit Options

More children walked to school where there were sidewalks.⁴

C – Provide Community Resources for Physical Activity: Accessible Parks, Recreation Facilities, and Open Spaces

The CDC determined that creating and improving places to be active can result in a 25 percent increase in the percentage of people who exercise at least three times a week.⁵

D – Create and Maintain a Master Land-Use Development Plan

People who live in neighborhoods with a mix of shops and businesses within easy walking distance have a 35 percent lower risk of obesity.⁶

E – Provide a Safe and Pleasant Environment

A Safe Routes to School program in Marin County, California, that included both safety improvements and encouragement, increased the number of children walking to school by 64 percent in two years.⁷

F – Develop Coordinated Partnerships

This resource guide will present information on a six step process to create active community environments Let's Begin!



-
- ¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (1996). *Physical activity and health: A report of the Surgeon General*. US Government Printing Office.
- ² Ewing R, Schmid T, Killingsworth R, Zlot A, Raudensubsh S. Relationship between urban sprawl and physical activity, obesity, and morbidity. *American Journal of Health Promotion* 2003; 18, 47-57.
- ³ Handy, S.L. (1996). Urban form and pedestrian choices: Study of Austin neighborhoods. *Transportation Research Record*, 1552, 135-144.
- ⁴ Ewing, R., Schroeer, W., & Greene, W. (2004) School location and student travel: Analysis of factors affecting mode choice. *Transportation Research Record*, 1895: 55-63.
- ⁵ Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, *Guide to Community Preventive Services*. (2002). *Creating or Improving Access to Places for Physical Activity is Strongly Recommended to Increase Physical Activity*. Retrieved January 10, 2004 from <http://www.thecommunityguide.org/pa/default.htm>.
- ⁶ Frank, L.D., Andresen, M.A., & Schmid, T.L. (2004). Obesity relationships with community design, physical activity, and time spent in cars. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 27, 87-96.
- ⁷ Staunton, C.E., Hubsmith, D., & Kallins, W. (2003). Promoting safe walking and biking to School: The Marin County success story. *American Journal of Public Health*, 93, 1431-1434.