



Promoting Safe, Active Transportation

Background

Walking and biking for transportation, collectively known as “active transportation,” have significant benefits. Regular active travel is associated with a decrease in chronic disease and improved physical and mental health outcomes. Active travel to work is associated with improved employee health and greater productivity while walking and biking to school are associated with improved health outcomes for students and better focus. More active transportation also has benefits for communities, with decreased pollution and congestion from traffic as well as positive economic outcomes such as increased spending at businesses and greater property values in communities that support walking and biking.

Despite these known benefits, rates of participation in active travel remain quite low in the United States, especially in comparison with other countries. Less than 20% of all trips in the U.S. are made via walking or bicycling, despite the fact that nearly 60% of all trips made are less than three miles one way.

There are many things that can influence active travel, though two of the most influential factors include the environment to support walking and bicycling and policies that address safety and access to pedestrian and cycling infrastructure. A supportive environment for walking and biking can include adequate sidewalks, crosswalks, lighting, off-street trails/paths, on-street bike lanes, bicycle parking or traffic-calming strategies. Policies that support active travel may include laws addressing safety (e.g., safe passing, distracted drivers, sharing the road) or infrastructure policy to ensure that provisions are made for all modes of travel (e.g., Complete Streets, Safe Routes to School).

Rates of fatalities for bicyclists and pedestrians are much higher in the United States compared with other countries that have greater rates of active travel. These deaths are not evenly distributed either – pedestrians and cyclists living in low-income or ethnically diverse neighborhoods are more likely to be injured or killed compared with those

living in predominately white and middle- or high-income neighborhoods. Many of these injuries and deaths can be attributed to a poor environment for walking or biking.

The safety of pedestrians and cyclists is very closely tied to the physical environment where individuals are engaging in these behaviors. Concerns about safety from traffic is one of the leading barriers to engaging in active transportation for all groups of the population, though is of special concern for women and people in middle or older age groups. These concerns lead to lower participation rates in active travel for these populations.

ACSM Position

As an organization dedicated to advancing health through science, education and medicine, the American College of Sports Medicine® (ACSM) recognizes the profound impact that active transportation – such as walking, cycling and other forms of nonmotorized transport – can have on public health, environmental sustainability and community well-being. ACSM is committed to advocating for policies that foster healthier, more active communities. By prioritizing active transportation, we can make significant strides toward a healthier future for all.