

National Center for Environmental Health
Division of Emergency and Environmental Health Services

Impact of the Built Environment on Health

What Is the Public Health Issue?

The built environment includes all of the physical parts of where we live and work (e.g., homes, buildings, streets, open spaces, and infrastructure). The built environment influences a person's level of physical activity. For example, inaccessible or nonexistent sidewalks and bicycle or walking paths contribute to sedentary habits. These habits lead to poor health outcomes such as obesity, cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and some types of cancer. Today, approximately two thirds of Americans are overweight.



What Has CDC Accomplished?

CDC's activities promoting healthy community design include the following:

- Co-sponsored and edited the September 2003 special issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*, which focused on topics related to health and the built environment.
- Sponsored a workshop to focus research on areas needing further work to promote health in built environments.
- Co-sponsored a workshop on using health impact assessments (HIA) to examine the consequences of projects and policies outside of the health sector (e.g., transportation planning) that affect health and an HIA training for public health and planning practitioners in February 2006.
- Co-sponsored work by the American Planning Association to develop model zoning codes that promote development of healthy, walkable communities.
- Developed a walkability audit for workplace settings and conducting such an audit on CDC campuses.
- Co-sponsoring the development of a certification process for healthy communities modeled on the national certification for energy-efficient buildings.
- Co-sponsored with the National Institutes of Health and CDC's National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion the request for research proposals on obesity and the built environment.
- Provided supplemental funding to two Prevention Research Centers to examine differences in objectively-measured physical activity levels in individuals who move from neighborhoods with one level of walkability to neighborhoods with a different level of walkability.

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What Are the Next Steps?

To encourage healthy community designs, CDC is building collaborations across multiple disciplines such as transportation, urban planning, architecture, and public health law. Next steps include building on these interactions to develop guidelines, support pilot projects, and educate current and future planners and public health professionals about designing healthier communities.

For further information about designing and building healthy places, go to <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyplaces>.

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