

Essential Evidence on a page: No 11 The importance of walkable communities

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There is now strong evidence that social networks and community involvement have positive health consequences. Persons who are socially engaged with others and actively involved in their communities tend to live longer and be healthier physically and mentally. Social capital as a concept has been linked with better health in that the greater engagement and trust within communities the better the health outcomes. In a key text addressing social capital, Putnam noted of American society that:

“The more integrated we are with our community, the less likely we are to experience colds, heart attacks, strokes, cancer, depression, and premature death of all sorts... Over the last 20 years more than a dozen large studies . . . have shown that *people who are socially disconnected are between 2 and 5 times more likely to die from all causes, compared with matched individuals who have close ties with family, friends, and the community.*”¹

This note provides a summary of one paper² which sought to draw on the existing evidence base and then examine whether pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use neighborhoods encourage enhanced levels of social and community engagement. The study investigated the relationship between neighborhood design and individual levels of social capital. Data were obtained from a household survey that measured the social capital of citizens living in neighborhoods that ranged from traditional, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented designs to modern, car-dependent suburban subdivisions in Galway, Ireland.

The analyses indicated that persons living in walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods have higher levels of social capital compared with those living in car-oriented suburbs. Those living in walkable neighbourhoods were more likely to know their neighbours, participate politically, trust others, and be socially engaged. The author concluded that walkable, mixed-use neighborhood designs can encourage the development of social capital.

Most recently a case controlled study from Belgium reported that residents in a high walkable neighbourhood took more steps per day than those in a low walkable neighbourhood and walked more for transport.³ Further analysis showed that living in a high walkable neighbourhood was also associated with taking more steps in adults with a preference for passive transport and/or a low intention to walk or cycle. Other studies have also shown that it is the presence of increased opportunities afforded by the built environment to be more physically active that is most influential and not activity-oriented residents choosing to live in certain neighbourhoods.⁴

¹ Putnam, R., 2000 *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

² Leyden, K. 2005 Social capital and the built environment: The importance of walkable neighbourhoods, *American Journal of Public Health*, 93: (9): 1546-1551.

³ Van Dyck, D., Deforche, B., Cardon, G., Bourdeaudhuij, I. 2009 Neighbourhood walkability and its particular importance for adults with a preference for passive transport, *Health and Place*, 15: 496-504.

⁴ Heath, G., et al 2006 The effectiveness of urban design and land use and transport policies and practices to increase physical activity: A systematic review, *Journal of Physical Activity and Health*, 3, Suppl 1, S55-S76.