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Research Brief
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Disparities in Active Living Zoning Nationwide

Introduction

The *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans* recommend that children and adolescents participate in at least 60 minutes of daily physical activity to prevent and/or reduce obesity.¹ However, many families live in neighborhoods that inhibit physical activity—where streets are unsafe for pedestrians and bicyclists because they lack sidewalks, safe crossings or bike lanes. In the United States, more than 47,000 people were killed and another 676,000 were injured while walking from 2003 to 2012.²

The Task Force on Community Preventive Services recommends using community and street-scale design and land use policies to promote physical activity.³ Strategies for local governments include:

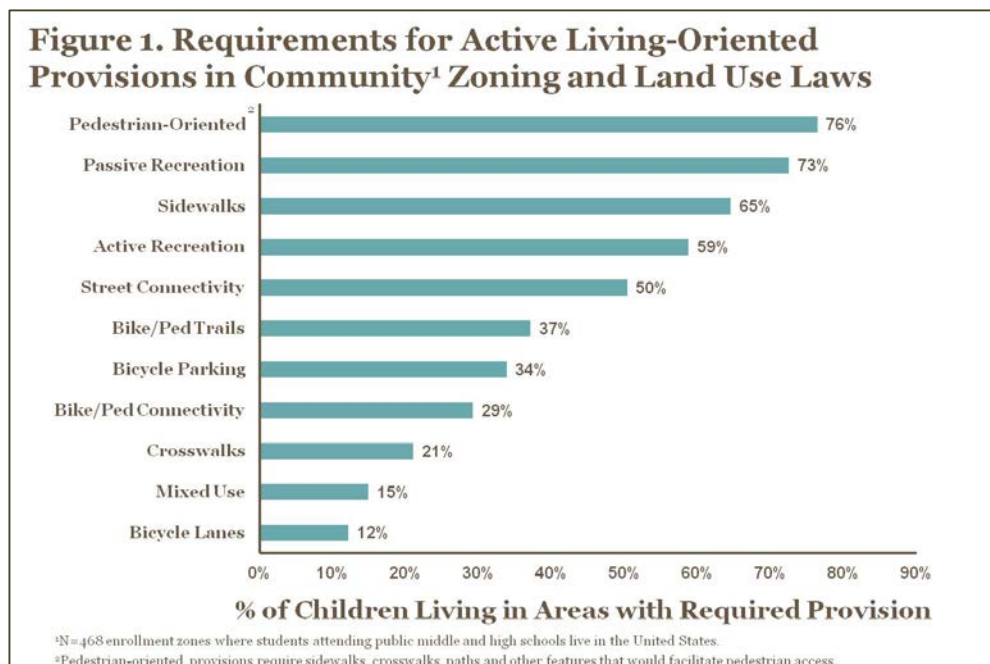
- Using zoning powers to regulate the location of park and recreation facilities, trails and other facilities that promote physical activity; regulate land use patterns (e.g., open space zones); and specify infrastructure requirements, such as sidewalks and open space.
- Using subdivision regulations to control the division of land for development purposes, such as setting design standards for the layout of lots, streets and other public improvements⁴ and requiring sidewalks, bike lanes, trails, or other features that facilitate physical activity in new development.

This brief examines how likely children and teenagers younger than age 18 live in communities with codified policies (zoning ordinances and subdivision regulations) that require infrastructure-related features or improvements to facilitate physical activity. It also examines whether such provisions vary based on locale and community income. Additional analyses examined the prevalence of the provisions based on race/ethnicity and region but we did not find any consistent patterns. The codified policies were collected in 2010, 2011, and 2012 from 468 catchments (hereafter referred to as “communities”) made up of over 900 jurisdictions located in a nationally representative sample of public middle and high school enrollment areas. The areas analyzed were based on middle and high school enrollment areas, but results in this brief are representative of children and teenagers ages 0 to 17. We specifically evaluated policies with provisions that required pedestrian-oriented features, sidewalks, crosswalks, bike/pedestrian connectivity, street connectivity, mixed use, active recreation (e.g. playgrounds, athletic fields), passive recreation (e.g. parks, open space), trails, bike lanes, and bike parking.

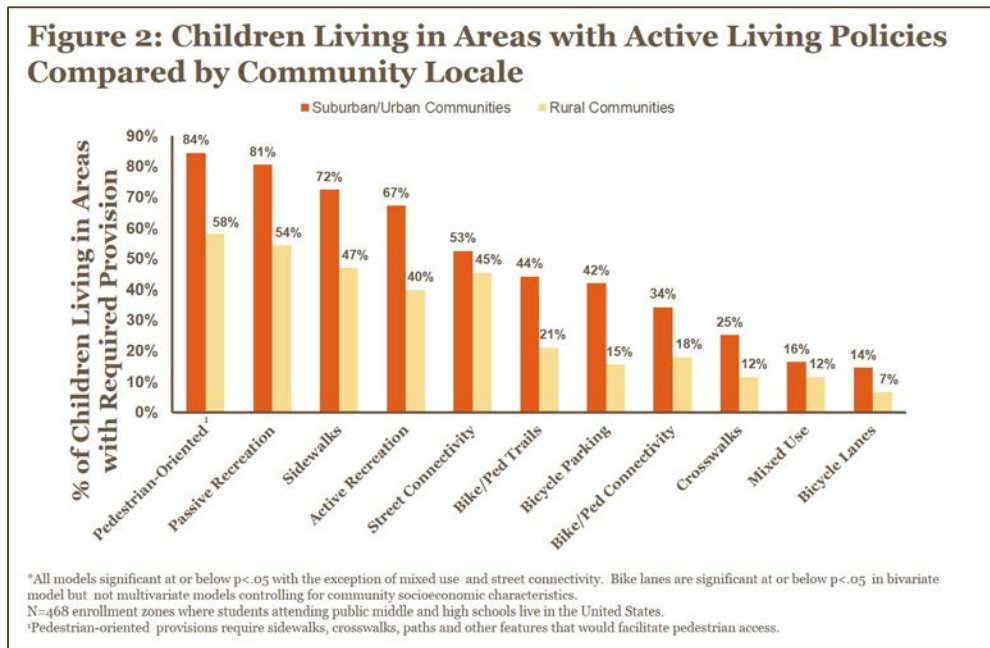
Key Findings

Children were more likely to reside in a community with policies that require pedestrian-friendly structural improvements (76%), such as sidewalks (65%), and passive recreation (73%), than in communities that require bike lanes (12%), mixed use (15%), or crosswalks (21%) (see Figure 1).

Across the board, children living in rural areas were less likely to live in areas with requirements that promote active living than children living in suburban/urban areas (see Figure 2).

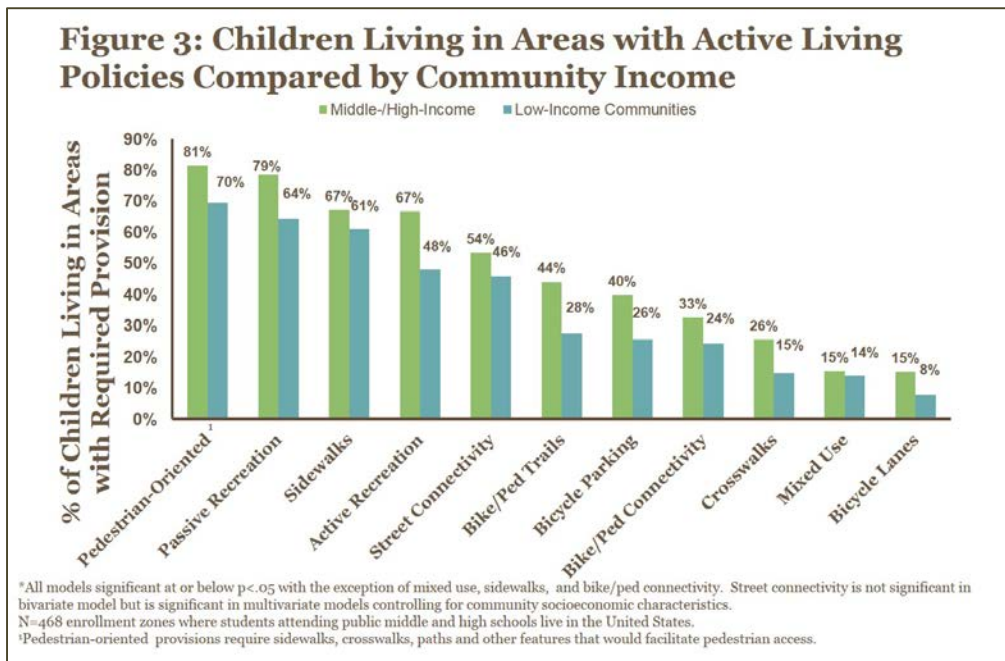


Children living in rural areas were significantly less likely to live in areas with land use requirements for trails (21% vs. 44%) and bike parking (15% vs. 42%), than children living suburban/urban areas (see Figure 2).



Additionally, children living in low-income communities were less likely to live in areas with requirements that promote active living than children living in middle-/high-income communities (see Figure 3).

- Children living in low-income communities were significantly less likely to live in areas with land use requirements that promote walking and biking than children living in middle-/high-income communities [i.e. crosswalks (15% vs. 36%), and bike lanes (8% vs. 15%)].
- Children living in low-income communities were significantly less likely to live in areas with land use requirements for passive recreation areas (64% vs. 79%) and active recreation areas (48% vs. 67%) than children living in middle-/high-income communities.



Conclusions and Policy Implications

Children residing in communities with requirements that promote physical activity varied by each provision. Generally, children living in rural areas and/or low-income communities were less likely to live in areas with requirements that support physical activity. Research shows that people who live in walkable communities are more likely to be physically active and less obese than people who live in less walkable communities.^{5,6,7,8} Local governments have a number of policy options to help increase opportunities for physical activity:

- Local governments can review their existing land use laws and modify them to address infrastructure improvements that could be made to promote physical activity.⁹ For example, a locality can adopt policies that require the construction of sidewalks, crosswalks, trails, or bike lanes in new development.
- Local officials can modify their land use laws to require developers to dedicate land or pay a fee to contribute to land used for parks or recreation facilities to increase opportunities for recreation.¹⁰
- Local governments can modify their zoning code to include zones or districts that facilitate physical activity, such as mixed use, traditional neighborhood, transit-oriented development or pedestrian-oriented districts.¹¹ These areas often are pedestrian-friendly and are characterized by a mixture of residential, commercial and office uses that are located in close proximity to each other and support walking and bicycling as a transportation option.
- Local officials can create incentive policies to support the development of open space, recreation facilities, or sidewalks and trails.⁹ For example, a policy could allow for an increase in dwelling units per acre if a developer dedicates a certain amount of land for public open space or recreation.
- Local policymakers can consider adopting a Complete Streets policy to support infrastructure improvements for creating pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods. Local officials also can adopt complete streets concepts in their policies by incorporating sidewalks and bike lanes in their street design standards or requiring transportation departments to consider safe access for all users as part of roadway projects.^{9,12}
- Local governments and schools can adopt agreements pertaining to joint/shared use of facilities for recreational purposes to increase opportunities for physical activity.⁹ This may be a particularly beneficial strategy for low-income or rural areas where park or recreational facilities may be scarce and they do not have the financial resources to develop new facilities.¹³

Endnotes

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For more on this Research Brief, contact:
Emily Thrun, ethrun2@uic.edu
www.bridgingthegapresearch.org

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