



## bridging the gap

Research Informing Policies & Practices  
for Healthy Youth

Research Brief  
February 2016

# Active Travel to School: Percentage of Students Living in Areas with Supportive Policies

## Introduction

Regular physical activity plays a role in controlling weight, improving mental health and mood, and reducing risks of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and certain cancers.<sup>1</sup> Walking and bicycling to school has been identified as an important strategy for helping children get at least 60 minutes of daily physical activity, which is recommended by the *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*.<sup>2</sup> *Healthy People 2020* specifically recommends that youth ages 5 to 15 walk or bicycle to school more regularly.<sup>3</sup>

[www.pedbikeimages.org/](http://www.pedbikeimages.org/) Dan Burden

Despite these recommendations, the percentage of students ages 5 to 14 who walk or bicycle to school has dropped dramatically, from almost 50 percent in 1969 to 17.4 percent in 2013.<sup>4,5</sup> Leading public health organizations recommend policies that promote active travel to school to help increase physical activity among children and youth. The World Health Organization specifically identified policies related to crossing guards, safe walking and biking trails, and connected pathways and play areas as ways to promote physical activity.<sup>6</sup>

Local governments play an important role in promoting active travel to school. Through local land use policies such as zoning, subdivision, and land development laws, a local government can regulate the location and structural requirements for schools, sidewalks, crosswalks, and trails. One study found that students who live less than one-half mile from school were more likely to walk or bike to school than students who live further from school.<sup>7</sup> Crossing guards also are effective in facilitating active transportation to schools,<sup>8</sup> and children who live closer to school are more likely to walk or bike to school.

This brief examines how likely children and teenagers younger than age 18 live in communities with codified policies (e.g., zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, and other general ordinances) that would promote active travel to school. The codified policies for the current brief 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.

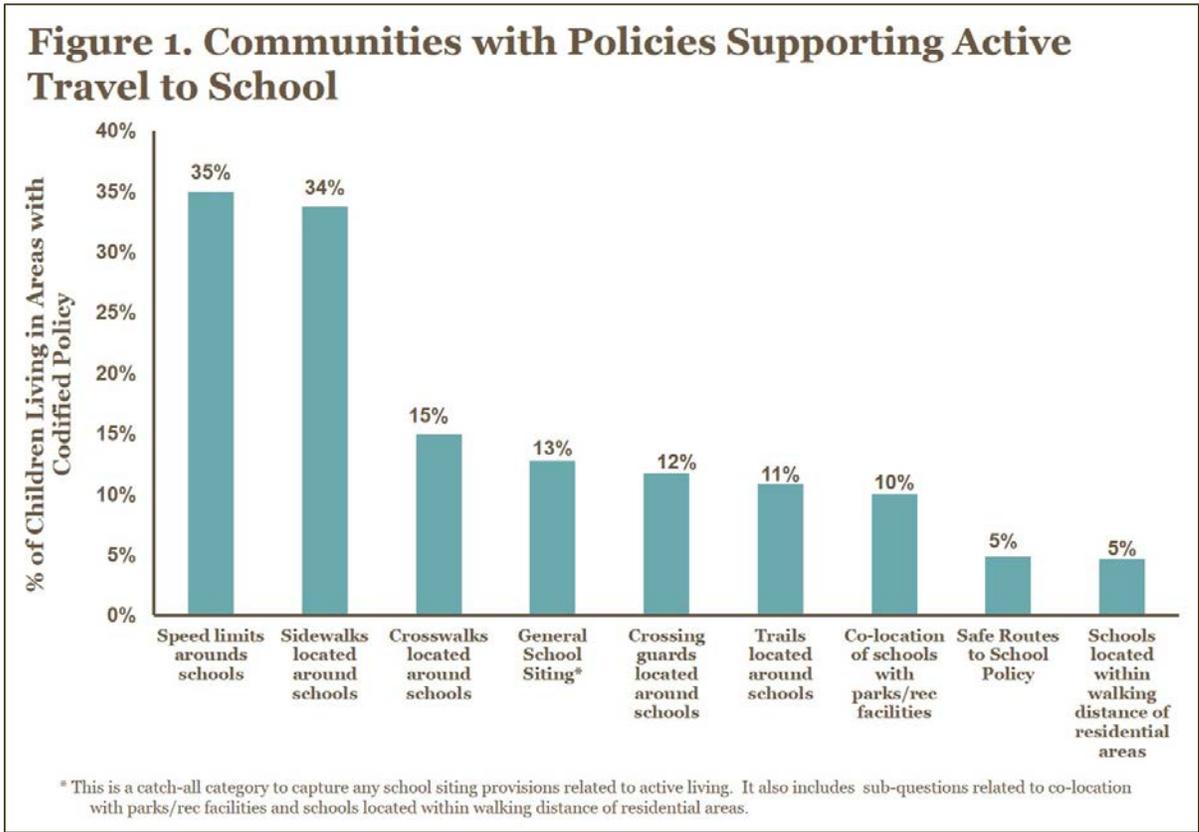
We evaluated policies that addressed school siting (e.g. placing schools within walking distance of residential areas, or near parks and recreation facilities), sidewalk/trail networks around schools, presence of crosswalks around schools, crossing guards within a certain distance around schools, speed limit restrictions around schools, and general safe routes to school policies. We also examined whether such policies vary based on locale and community income.

Because this analysis focused on codified policies enacted by county and municipal governments, other relevant policies in communities, such as school district policies, were outside the scope of this study. However, a related [brief](#) developed by Bridging the Gap has addressed school district-level joint and shared use agreements.

## Key Findings

The likelihood of children living in areas with policies related to active travel to school varied by policy focus area (see Figure 1).

- Children were most likely to live in communities with codified policies that addressed speed limits around schools (35% of children lived in an area with this policy), followed by sidewalks around schools (34%). Children were least likely to live in communities with codified policies that specifically addressed Safe Routes to Schools programs (5%) and siting schools within walking distance of residential areas (5%).



In addition, there were some disparities in children’s exposure to policies related to active travel to school based on locale and family income (see Figures 2 & 3).

- Children residing in rural communities were significantly less likely than those in suburban/urban communities to live in areas with codified policies related to general school siting (5% vs. 16%), crossing guards near schools (6% vs. 14%), and schools near park and recreational areas (3% vs. 13%) (see Figure 2).
- Children residing in low-income communities were significantly less likely than those in mid/high-income communities to be living in areas with codified policies related to sidewalks near schools (29% vs. 37%), general school siting (9% vs. 16%), and schools near park and recreational areas (6% vs. 13%) (see Figure 3)

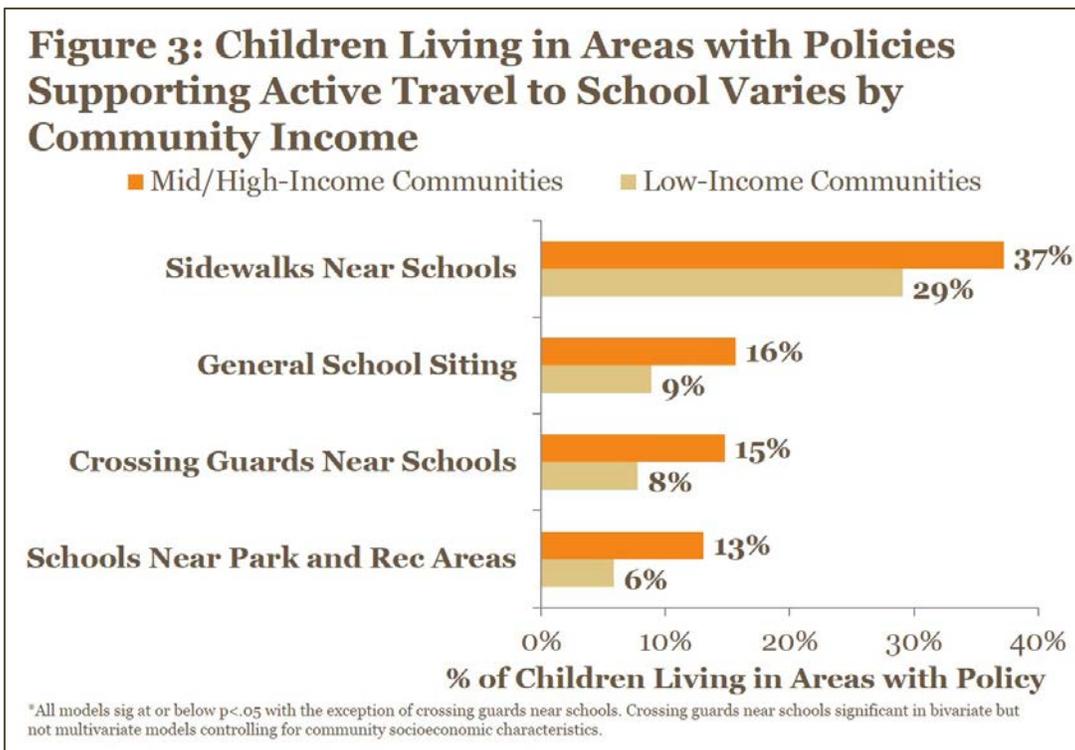
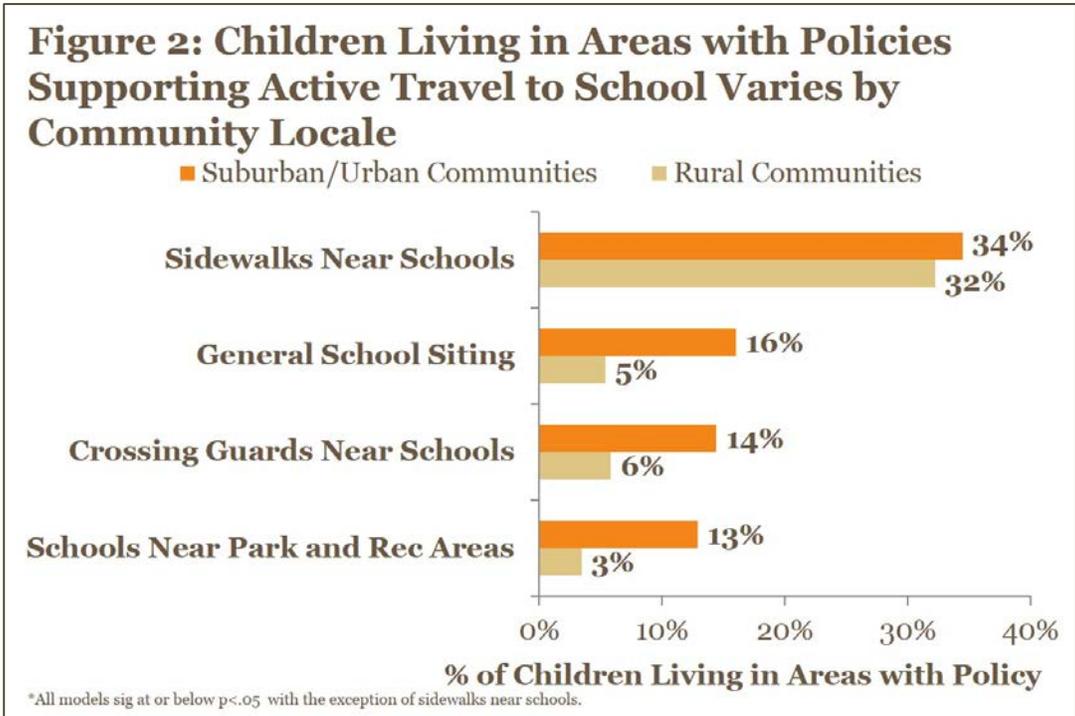
**Conclusions and Policy Implications**

Overall, few children live in areas with codified policies related to active travel to school. But, of all the policies examined in this brief, children were most likely to live in communities with policies related to speed limits around schools. There were also significant locale and income disparities for certain policies related to active travel to school. Children in low-income or rural communities were less likely to live in areas with many supportive policies than those in mid/high-income or suburban/urban areas, respectively. Although the rates of youth who walk or bicycle to school has dropped from the 1960s, it is promising to note that trend is reversing. Since 2009, around the time that the Safe Routes to School initiative gained traction, the rates of children walking or biking to school has increased 4.4 percent.<sup>4,5</sup>

Communities have a number of policy options to increase active travel to school. Local governments can:

- modify their zoning and land use laws to include requirements for structural improvements such as sidewalks, trails, bicycle parking, and crosswalks, to increase opportunities for walking and biking around schools;
- integrate Safe Routes to School policies in community long term development plans to ensure that active travel to school is included in future development and design policies;<sup>9</sup>
- establish speed zone limits and require crossing guards be located around schools to increase safety;
- create a public awareness campaign to alert residents that children are walking and biking to school;<sup>6</sup>

- coordinate with schools to create Safe Routes to School programs or events such as Walk or Bike to School Day;
- develop a remote drop-off or “park and walk” program in rural areas where it would be difficult for children to walk directly from home to school because of long distances;<sup>10</sup> and
- identify sources of funding such as grants, gas or sales taxes, impact fees, or general fund monies to support funding for Safe Routes to Schools programs.<sup>9</sup>



## Endnotes

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For more on this Research Brief, contact:  
Emily Thrun, [ethrun2@uic.edu](mailto:ethrun2@uic.edu)  
[www.bridgingthegapresearch.org](http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org)

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