

## **TALKING ABOUT: THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND HEALTH**

The way a community is designed affects how healthy its residents can become. Call it our “built environment” or our “food and fitness environment,” it includes the places where we live, work, eat and play, and is one of the most important factors determining our health and fitness.

How easy or difficult our environment makes it for us to be healthy begins with policies governing how land is used. These policies help determine what types of businesses go into our neighborhoods, what kind of housing is constructed, where parks are located, what condition the sidewalks are in, and how well public transit serves our communities. Everything from the location of buildings to the layout of streets can influence our health.

### **How does the built environment affect health?**

Healthy neighborhoods lead to healthy people. Making healthy options more accessible will benefit not just individual health, but the health of the community as a whole. Everyone — including city and transportation planners and policy makers — has a role in protecting the public’s health. Understanding the built environment can help explain why some communities face higher rates of chronic disease.

#### **Availability of safe places to exercise and play:**

- People who have parks nearby exercise 38% more than those who do not live near parks.<sup>1</sup>
- Lower-income communities, including predominantly Latino and African American communities, often have fewer resources to support active lifestyles and public places to play.<sup>2</sup>
- The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) recommends communities have at least six to 10 acres of open space per 1,000 residents. In California, some low-income communities of color have as little as one-sixth that amount.<sup>3</sup>

#### **Availability of healthy food choices:**

- In California, there are four times more fast food outlets and convenience stores than grocery stores and produce markets.<sup>4</sup>
- Quality of food is lower and the cost is higher in low-income communities and communities of color than in those that are mostly White.<sup>5</sup>

#### **Access to public transit and walkable neighborhoods:**

- People are significantly more active in neighborhoods with adequate sidewalks and bike lanes, particularly in low-income communities.<sup>6</sup>

- Street networks that offer direct routes (a grid pattern where the streets interconnect easily, as opposed to having many cul de sacs or dead-end streets) can also increase walking, bicycling and use of public transit.<sup>7, 8</sup>
- Adequate, safe routes to schools increase the number of children walking to school.<sup>9</sup>

## How can we build healthier environments?

Communities across California are mobilizing to address this imbalance and give all families equal opportunities to live a healthy, active life, by supporting sound land-use, transit and zoning policies. Some approaches include:

- Enact policies that restrict where fast food outlets operate, for instance by keeping them away from schools.
- Encourage more healthy options like grocery stores or farmers markets.
- Encourage the joint use of school and community resources to increase the amount of open space available for physical activity.
- Make sure all streets are well lit and have well-maintained sidewalks.
- Require developers to build adequate parks, playgrounds and/or walking trails in new housing developments.
- Stimulate mixed-use developments, which put housing near retail and transit centers and encourage more active living.

*Berkeley Media Studies Group's "Talking About" series provides advocates with straightforward language on how our environment shapes our health, and what we can do to improve both. Supported in part by a grant from The California Endowment. For more information, visit [www.bmsg.org](http://www.bmsg.org).*

## References

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