

Healthy Places for Healthy People: Active Transportation and Health

Childhood obesity has become a major problem. The obesity rate has doubled for children and tripled for adolescents since 1980. Obesity contributes to approximately 300,000 deaths a year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001).

The current generation of youth is the first that's predicted to have shorter lifespans than their parents' generation, according to the trends for overweight and obese Americans (National Institute on Aging 2005).

The lack of physical activity is a significant factor in the growing obesity epidemic (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Daily walking and biking used to be an integral part of kid's lives. Today, however, only fourteen percent of children walk to school down from fifty percent in 1969 (STPP 2004).

People who reported using trails at least once a week were twice as likely to meet physical activity recommendations than people who reported rarely or never using trails according to a study published by the American Journal of Preventive Medicine (Librett et al. 2006).

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Rails-to-Trails Conservancy
National Headquarters
2121 Ward Court, NW, 5th Floor
Washington, DC 20037
tel 202.331.9696
fax 202.223.9257

www.railstotrails.org



Out for a hike on the Springwater Corridor in Portland, Ore. © BRYCE HALL / RAILS-TO-TRAILS CONSERVANCY

Trails and Health

To promote healthy lifestyles and combat the rising trend of obesity and inactivity in the United States, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that Americans get 30 minutes of moderate physical activity at least five days a week. This can happen in a number of ways: walking or biking to work, running errands on foot instead of by car, or taking a quick bike ride or stroll through a park. The CDC's emphasis is less on grueling workouts at the gym, and more on encouraging Americans to be active during their everyday lives.

Trails play an important role in achieving the CDC's recommendation. Trails not only provide a designated place to walk and bike; we are also much more likely to exercise and be active when safe, welcoming environments like trails are available.

Alarming Trends

Most Americans make the connection between exercise and health, but many people still lead sedentary lives. According to the Surgeon General's "call to action," less than one-third of Americans meet the CDC's recommendation for physical activity, and 40 percent of adults engage in no leisure-time physical activity at all (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 1996).

The nation's trend of inactivity holds true for children and adolescents as well. Daily walking and biking used to be an integral part of kid's lives. Today, however, only fourteen percent of children walk to school down from fifty percent in 1969 (STPP 2004).

The consequences of Americans' inactivity have been dire. In 2001, the Surgeon General declared that obesity in the United States had reached epidemic proportions (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2001). Nearly two-thirds of the American population is overweight or obese, and today there are nearly twice as many overweight children and almost three times as many overweight adolescents as there were in 1980 (Active Living Network 2007). Obesity is the fastest growing cause of illness and death in America today, and overweight and obesity may soon cause as much preventable disease and death as cigarette smoking. Approximately 300,000 U.S. deaths a year currently are associated with obesity and overweight, and the total direct and indirect costs attributed to these conditions amounted to \$117 billion in 2000 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2001).

An Active Solution: Trails and Active Transportation

A number of factors are contributing to the American obesity crisis, including diet, longer workdays, and the allure of television, computers and video games. One of the main challenges we face, however, is one simple truth: we have designed our communities around the automobile, and we have grown dependent on cars for our daily lives.

Even for short trips under one mile, cars are used for seventy-five percent of these trips (Blomberg et al. 2004). There is a tremendous opportunity, however, for Americans to take more trips by foot or bicycle, and get the daily exercise they need to remain healthy and active. With nearly twenty-eight percent of all trips under one mile and nearly half under three miles, walking and biking trips could easily be used as a healthy alternative for a significant portion of daily trips (FHWA 2006). In order to promote this "active transportation," having a connected network of accessible trails, sidewalks, on-road bike facilities and public transportation is critical.

Trails in particular encourage active transportation in a number of ways:

- Trails create active transportation

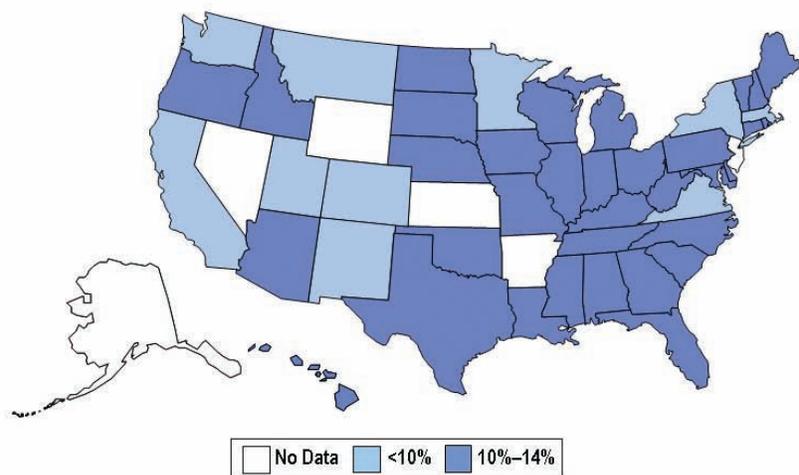
"If (the children) don't grow up walking a half-mile to school, they won't ever want to walk a half-mile anywhere."

—Lisa K. Staten, Ph.D., Director of the Southwest Center for Community Health Promotion. *Tucson Citizen* (Gerdes 2007).

Obesity Trends* Among U.S. Adults

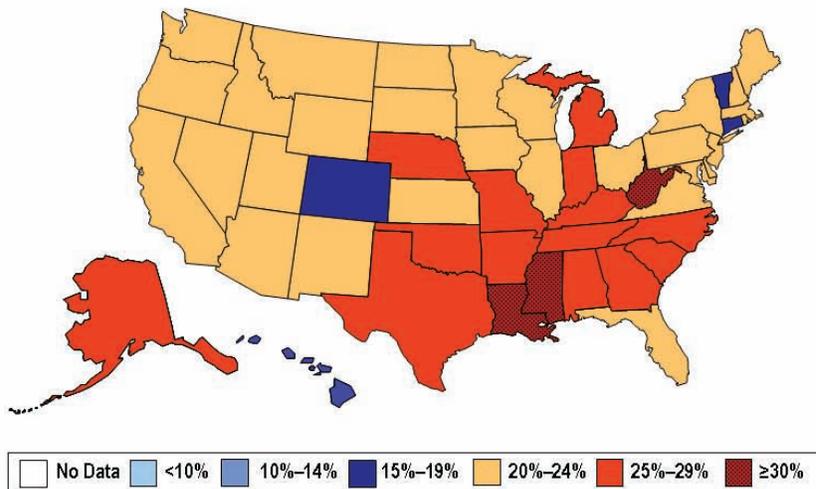
BRFSS, 1990

(*BMI ≥30, or ~ 30 lbs overweight for 5' 4" person)



BRFSS, 2005

(*BMI ≥30, or ~ 30 lbs overweight for 5' 4" person)



Source: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, CDC.

and recreation opportunities by providing people of all ages with attractive, safe, accessible places to bike, walk, hike, jog, skate or ski. In doing so, they make it easier for people to engage in physical activity.

- Trails connect people with places, enabling them to walk or cycle to run errands or commute to work.
- Trails provide natural, scenic areas that cause people to actually want to be outside and be physically active. Cities such as Chattanooga, Tenn., and Providence, R.I., have transformed unsightly urban decay into inviting and popular greenways and walkways that make their communities more livable and walkable. Both cities promote their riverside greenways to attract visitors, businesses and residents.
- Trails connect neighborhoods and schools so children can cycle or walk to their friend's homes or to school, especially in communities that lack sidewalks. In Denver, the Weir Gulch Trail provides a safe neighborhood route for elementary-aged children, the trail's primary users.
- In this age of expensive indoor gyms and health clubs, trails and greenways offer cost-effective places to exercise. Like gyms and health clubs, they also serve as a place where people can see and interact with other people exercising. Researchers have found that a lack of this type of social support is often a barrier to participation in exercise.

The link between healthy people and accessibility to healthy places like trails is strong. If more Americans embrace walking and biking as everyday options, we can create a healthier nation. One step at a time, trails and active transportation are a large part of the solution.

Quick Reference: The Link Between Health and Trails

- Every year, nearly 400,000 people die from conditions associated with overweight and inactive lifestyles. This number will soon eclipse tobacco as the No. 1 preventable cause of death (Dolesh 2004).



A family ride on Wisconsin's Bugline Trail.
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- According to the trends for overweight and obese Americans, the current generation of youth is the first that's predicted not to outlive their parents (National Institute on Aging 2005).
- A number of studies have found that those living within a closer physical proximity of trails have an increased likelihood of being active (Saelens et al. 2003, Lindsey et al. 2006, Owen 2004).
- The U.S. Surgeon General estimates that the economic costs associated with obesity reached \$117 billion in 2000 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2001).
- A report published by the Surgeon General states that 30 minutes of moderate activity every day significantly decreases an individual's risk of contracting diabetes and coronary heart disease (CDC 1996).
- In communities that are considered highly walkable, individuals walk an average of 15 to 30 minutes more every week than those who live in neighborhoods in which there are fewer options to use non-motorized transportation (Saelens et al. 2003).
- According to one CDC-funded study, trails can be beneficial in promoting physical activity among those groups traditionally at highest

risk for inactivity, especially women and individuals in lower socioeconomic groups (Brownson et al. 2000).

- In a study published by the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, people who reported using trails at least once a week were twice as likely to meet physical activity recommendations than people who reported rarely or never using trails (Librett et al. 2006).
- The physical environment has a substantial impact on the activity level of communities. A recent survey found that 43 percent of people with safe places to walk within 10 minutes of their home meet recommended activity levels, while just 27 percent of those without safe places to walk are active enough (Active Living Network. 2007).

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Notes on Public Health



National Headquarters
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Washington, DC 20037
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