



Urban Pathways to Healthy Neighborhoods

Promising Strategies for Encouraging Trail Use in Urban Communities



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This report and related issue summaries are part of a series that explores best practices and lessons learned from urban pathways across the United States. **Entire series available at www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways/lessons.**

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Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's mission is to create a nationwide network of trails from former rail lines and connecting corridors to build healthier places for healthier people. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy is a national non-profit with more than 100,000 members and supporters, providing trail-building education, research, advocacy and technical assistance since 1986. To learn more about Rails-to-Trails Conservancy and its Urban Pathways Initiative visit www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways.

What are Urban Pathways?



Urban Pathways

For the purpose of this report, “urban pathways” are used to describe shared-use paths in urbanized areas; the terms “pathways” and “trails” are often used interchangeably.

Shared-Use Path

A multi-use path designed for both transportation and recreation purposes that is typically separated from motorized vehicular traffic by an open space or barrier, either within a highway right-of-way or within an independent right-of-way. Shared-use paths are used by pedestrians and bicyclists, runners, inline skaters, wheelchair users (both non-motorized and motorized), equestrians and other non-motorized users.¹

Urbanized Area

Defined by the United States Census Bureau as places with more than 50,000 people, with a core census tract population density of at least 1,000 persons per square mile.²

Urban pathways go by many names, including bikeways, trails and greenways. Some pathways take on myriad forms; one “trail” can actually be a combination of shared-use paths, connecting sidewalks and on-road bicycle facilities that compose one linear route. A full range of healthy recreation and active transportation benefits are provided when these trails are seamlessly interconnected with other pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure. A growing body of research emphasizes that urban neighborhoods with more African-American, Hispanic and lower-income residents generally lack key walkability features, and that these populations have limited access to high-quality parks and recreational space. At the same time, lower-income and racial and ethnic minority youth are more likely to be overweight or obese. Urban pathways are a potent tool for addressing this inequality. These paths can be a catalyst for positive change—bringing safe, accessible places to be physically active to populations that need them most.³

The phrase “build it and they will come” is often used to describe the immediate popularity and use of new rail-trails and greenways. During the past 25 years, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) has seen this notion affirmed in countless suburban and rural communities, where more than 20,000 miles of rail-trails now cross the landscape. However, trails in urban areas present unique challenges that affect trail use. As pathways weave through existing built-up urban landscapes and complex street networks, they can become hidden from nearby residents and other potential users. Additionally, pathways are often in constrained rights-of-way, presenting unique challenges to creating neighborhood



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connections and crossing existing street grids. Finally, in order to be a safe and effective place for travel and physical activity, trails need to be attractive, clean and well-lit. However, available rights-of-way are often in neglected, isolated or edge locations in urbanized areas, such as stream culverts and active rail corridors.

Despite these challenges, urban pathways can provide an array of opportunities for nearby residents, especially those who live within short walking or biking distance. There is a special need for separate facilities for walking and biking in urban areas, which contain 80 percent

of the United States population. This population is at much greater risk of serious traffic injury, with 96 percent of pedestrian fatalities happening in or within 10 miles of an urban area.⁴ Urban pathways offer an experience separate from real and perceived dangers of walking and biking in urbanized areas, providing a critical entry to outdoor physical activity and non-motorized travel for residents who choose to use them. For these trails to be successful, strategies to connect people and pathways must address the variety of individual, social and environmental factors that contribute to trail use.

Urban Pathways in Low-Income Communities and Communities of Color

It is well-documented that people in low-income communities and communities of color suffer disproportionately from the effects of physical inactivity.⁵ Recent research has identified higher rates of crime and violence⁶, lack of access to play areas and parks⁷ and greater traffic-related risks due to busy streets and poor bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure⁸ as key factors influencing physical activity levels in these communities.

Applying the ecological model—a comprehensive, multi-dimensional approach to exploring the relationship between variables affecting physical activity—helps us explore the combination of individual, social and environmental factors that will best explain why, how and when people choose to engage in physical activity.⁹ For example, Day (2006) argues the importance of viewing individual-level characteristics as they compose social-level constructs; strategies for promoting physical activity in underserved populations might include providing more facilities and creating policies that could accommodate walking as a mode of transportation for essential activities like grocery shopping.¹⁰ Also, data from a study exploring perceptions of accessible and safe physical activity as related to socio-economic status (SES) report that low-SES participants experienced an increase in physical activity when facilities like trails were available.¹¹ This finding led to recommendations for increasing awareness of trail facilities in underserved populations as an important strategy for community-based physical activity interventions.

Providing activities and events on the trail and promoting programs to nearby residents may be one way to increase awareness of the trail among target communities.

Crime and the perception of crime-related safety are both individual and social-level factors affecting physical activity.^{12,13,14} In an examination of the relationship between walkable, safe environments and indicators of health in urban areas, researchers found that participants in areas with higher crime rates walked less often, with crime-related safety more adversely affecting walking rates among women than men.¹⁵ Efforts to increase perceived safety, accessibility and awareness of a trail may result in increased and more frequent trail use.¹⁶ This accumulated evidence is a compelling case for targeting real and perceived exposure to crime and violence on trails as a core component of building successful urban pathways.

Strategies to prevent crime and violence can address safety concerns that might discourage trail use.





Research has consistently shown that a variety of built environment factors, even beyond the fundamental presence or absence of infrastructure, influence travel behavior. Variables such as aesthetic quality and connectivity are strongly correlated with walking and must not be overlooked by planners seeking positive active transportation and exercise outcomes. In a review of studies examining the built environment correlates of walking, factors such as aesthetic quality, or attractiveness of the surrounding environment, and connectivity of pedestrian networks were shown to be correlated with walking.¹⁷ For urban pathways, trail characteristics like openness of viewsheds, greenness (relative to surrounding neighborhoods) and the incorporation of art should not be optional amenities or afterthoughts. They are key factors influencing trail use and powerful strategies for overcoming the unique challenges facing pathways in the urban landscape. For example, residents in Compton, Calif., questioned why anyone would go back to the Compton Creek Bike Path when it is hidden and cut off from much of the community. Without addressing these concerns, the pathway cannot come to life.

Trail quality is a key factor influencing trail use.

Awareness, safety and infrastructure quality are all potential barriers to trail use. However, understanding positive motivational factors is an important component of effective physical activity promotion. Some research suggests it may be useful to promote the health and exercise benefits of recreational trail use to increase trail activity.¹⁸

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's Active Living by Design (ALbD) grant program and community partnerships have yielded

some key preliminary lessons about promoting physical activity among disadvantaged populations.¹⁹ The built environment and human behavior are equally challenging to change, and best practices are still scarce. However, some common hallmarks of ALbD community programs include: baseline assessment to inform future planning, programs targeting sub-demographics like seniors or children, bicycle refurbishment or giveaway programs, community events and social marketing. The strongest outcome from these programs has been the platform to influence policy change created through community engagement and raised awareness, rather than measurable physical activity changes. This high-level urgency is a reflection of the magnitude of the challenge and the probable timeframe required before the effects of these interventions, if sustained, will be quantifiable.

The obesity crisis and American dependence on motorized travel are complex, large-scale problems with broad environmental and market influences that are beyond the control of planners. Yet urban pathways are a unique opportunity to impact communities with visible, profound change that penetrates the margins of these issues. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, through its Urban Pathways Initiative, is responding to this opportunity by exploring practical, cost-effective ways to change community landscapes and encourage physical activity.



Photo: Gregory Aycock



RTC's Urban Pathways Initiative

With leadership funding from The Kresge Foundation, RTC's Urban Pathways Initiative (UPI) advocates for equitable investment in underserved communities while promoting the health, transportation and environmental benefits of trail use by focusing on programs and improvements that enhance access to and encourage use of trails in urban areas. Increasing awareness and encouraging frequent use of trails requires thought and action beyond the pathways and into nearby communities. RTC began implementing a place-based component of UPI in 2009, providing technical assistance, community outreach services and programmatic support to trail-focused community groups in seven cities: Cleveland, Ohio, Compton, Calif., New Orleans, La., Springfield, Mass., Camden, N.J., Jacksonville, Fla., and Washington, D.C. UPI efforts in these seven communities include: the installation of trail amenities, bicycle helmet giveaways, facilitating trail connections with nearby schools, and working with local partners to develop and host activities and events on the trail and in nearby neighborhoods.



Providing In-Depth Technical Assistance

Factors that affect public health and influence physical activity levels are multi-dimensional. Encouraging trail use for healthy recreation and active transportation requires an understanding of the relationship between individual, social and environmental variables that affect healthy behaviors like physical activity on trails. To that end, RTC staff worked closely with local partners in Cleveland, Ohio, Compton, Calif., New Orleans, La., and Springfield, Mass., to develop a set of tools—including a community assessment and action plan—that would help local groups encourage trail use among nearby residents and advocate for equitable investment in trail development.

The first phase of in-depth technical assistance consisted of a thorough assessment of the physical, or built, environment and social conditions of the neighborhoods adjacent to the trails. Each community assessment presented a comprehensive set of resources for trail advocates and professionals, community leaders and local elected officials to examine how current conditions facilitate or prevent trail use and development. Assessments included overviews of existing local and regional planning documents that inform how planned and proposed changes may affect trail accessibility, while examining existing connectedness of bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure—including sidewalks, intersections and bike lanes—to determine high priority improvements to better integrate trails into the current built environment. By conducting community outreach in combination with an extensive inventory of neighborhood destinations like schools, churches, local businesses and parks, RTC and its local partners developed recommendations for encouraging trail use and an action plan for implementing physical improvements, trail programs, events and outreach strategies. These steps are all designed to increase awareness and use of urban pathways for healthy recreation and as active transportation corridors.

Learn more about conducting assessments and RTC's in-depth technical assistance through UPI:
www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways/lessons.





Creating a National Learning Network

UPI also connects bicycle and pedestrian professionals and community advocates from across the country involved in trail development, management, maintenance and programming. RTC convened UPI conferences in 2010 and 2011 to explore best practices for encouraging physical activity on shared-use pathways in urban neighborhoods, and to engage around the issues unique to urban pathways. More than 200 cross-sector advocates of urban pathways from more than 25 cities gathered in New Orleans, La., in 2010 and Cleveland, Ohio, in 2011 to share lessons learned and highlight successful strategies for encouraging trail use and stewardship.

Presentations, panel discussions and virtual trail tours are available online: www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways/NLN

Using RTC's Urban Pathways Resources

This report shares lessons learned from UPI and focuses on strategies to encourage trail use in urban neighborhoods. Although trail design and planning are considered, the report emphasizes trail enhancements, programming and promotion. Examples of innovative programs and best practices are drawn from RTC's experience developing UPI in seven urban communities, as well as knowledge shared among our national network partners of trail and planning professionals and community-based organizations working to promote and improve urban pathways across the country. We hope this report will be a useful resource to community groups and coalitions addressing urban trail challenges, active transportation advocates working to increase trail use among nearby residents, and public sector employees navigating myriad issues that impact a trail after it has opened.

Prevailing themes of community engagement and partnerships are woven through key focus topics of:

- **Personal Safety**
- **Promotion and Programs**
- **Bicycle, Pedestrian and Park Connections**
- **Gardens**
- **Art**

Focus topics showcase many different urban pathways and describe how a variety of programs, amenities and partnerships contribute to creating safe, desirable community facilities that are well-used and cared for.

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