



Photos by Lydia Daniller

Complete streets allow people to get around safely on foot, bicycle, or public transportation. By providing safe and convenient travel for everyone—including children, families, older adults, and people with disabilities—complete streets not only help people stay active and healthy but also reduce traffic and pollution.

What Are Complete Streets?

A Fact Sheet for Advocates and Community Members

Streets are key public spaces that often make up much of the land in a town or city. But across America, streets are frequently built for cars, with few features like sidewalks to make them safe and pleasant places to walk or bike. Conventional street design promotes traffic congestion, pollution, and collision injuries,^{1,2,3} and discourages physical activity.

Regular physical activity is critical to preventing obesity and its related illnesses, such as diabetes and heart disease. But American youth fail to get the recommended levels of daily exercise.^{4,5} Many schools have eliminated or reduced physical education, and in the last 30 years, the number of children walking or biking to school has dropped from 42 percent to a mere 16 percent. Young people living in low-income communities and youth of color get even less physical activity and have higher rates of obesity.⁶

Complete Streets Encourage Physical Activity

Research shows that the way streets, sidewalks, and transportation networks are designed affects the amount of regular physical activity that children and adults get.

Complete streets promote:

- **Lower obesity rates.** A study of Atlanta residents found that people who lived in the most walkable neighborhoods were 35 percent less likely to be obese than those living in the least walkable areas.⁷
- **Physical activity for children.** In a review of 33 studies, researchers found that sidewalks and destinations within walking distance were linked with greater physical activity among children, while traffic hazards and unsafe intersections were linked with lower levels of physical activity.⁸
- **Physical activity for teens.** A study of teenagers in San Diego found that for both Mexican American and white teens, those who lived in walkable neighborhoods were more physically active than those in less walkable neighborhoods.⁹
- **Active travel.** More children walk to school when there are sidewalks along main roads.¹⁰

Policies to Create Complete Streets

Local and state governments have the power to make communities healthier by implementing laws and policies that support complete streets. Complete streets policies change how streets are designed and built, so that residents of all ages and abilities can travel easily and safely along community streets, whether they are walking, biking, or riding the bus.

Each street doesn't require the same features to be safe for active travel. A low design speed may be enough to make some streets safe; other streets may require elements such as frequent crosswalks, accessible transit stops and pedestrian signals, median islands, sidewalks, and bicycle lanes. Because complete streets features are only required when streets are newly built or reconstructed, their cost is incorporated into budgeted transportation projects.

To date, more than 100 jurisdictions – state, local, and regional – have adopted complete streets policies. For example:

- In Columbia, Missouri, the city enacted an ordinance providing for new street design standards along with narrower streets, wider sidewalks, and bike lanes or wide shared-use travel lanes.¹¹
- Seattle's complete streets ordinance requires new transportation projects to accommodate all users.¹²
- A resolution by the South Carolina Department of Transportation affirmed that provisions for biking and walking should be a routine part of the department's planning and programming.¹³
- Oregon's "Bike Bill," enacted in 1971, requires local governments to include walkways and bikeways whenever a road, street, or highway is built or rebuilt.¹⁴

Complete streets policies provide the infrastructure to make streets more child-friendly and increase opportunities for children and families to lead more active lives. By implementing complete streets policies, communities can make it safer for residents to get regular exercise through daily activities.

For NPLAN's products on complete streets, visit www.nplan.org:

- Model Local Resolutions on Complete Streets - Introductory & Advanced
- Model State/Regional Resolutions on Complete Streets - Introductory & Advanced
- Model Local Ordinance on Complete Streets
- Model State Statute on Complete Streets
- Model Comprehensive Plan Language on Complete Streets
- Findings for Complete Streets Laws and Resolutions

The National Policy & Legal Analysis Network to Prevent Childhood Obesity (NPLAN) is a project of Public Health Law & Policy (PHLP). PHLP is a nonprofit organization that provides legal information on matters relating to public health. The legal information provided in this document does not constitute legal advice or legal representation. For legal advice, readers should consult a lawyer in their state.

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¹ See *Complete Streets Improve Safety for Everyone*. Washington DC: The National Complete Streets Coalition. Available at: www.completestreets.org/webdocs/factsheets/cs-safety.pdf.

² See *Complete Streets Fight Climate Change!* Washington DC: The National Complete Streets Coalition. Available at: www.completestreets.org/webdocs/factsheets/cs-climate.pdf.

³ See *Costs of Complete Streets*. Washington DC: The National Complete Streets Coalition. Available at: www.completestreets.org/webdocs/factsheets/cs-costs.pdf.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. *Physical Activity for Everyone*. Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008. Available at: www.cdc.gov/physicalactivity/everyone/guidelines/children.html.

⁵ Levi J, Vinter S, Richardson L, et al. *F as in Fat: How Obesity Policies are Failing in America 2009*. Trust for America's Health, 2009, p 24. Available at: <http://healthyamericans.org/reports/obesity2009/Obesity2009Report.pdf>.

⁶ Kerr J. *Designing for Active Living Among Children*. Active Living Research. 2007.

⁷ Frank LD, Andresen MA, Schmid TL. Obesity relationships with Community design, physical activity, and time spent in cars. *American Journal of Preventative Medicine*, 27:87-96, 2004.

⁸ *The Surgeon General's call to action to prevent and decrease overweight and obesity*. Rockville, MD: US Department of Health and Human Services, Public Health Service, Office of the Surgeon General, 2001.

⁹ Kligerman M, Salis JF, Ryan S, et al. "Association of neighborhood design and recreation environment variables with physical activity and body mass index in adolescents." *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 21(4): 274-277, 2007.

¹⁰ Ewing R, Schroer W, and Greene W. "School Location and Student Travel: Analysis of Factors Affecting mode Choice." *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board*, 1895:55-63, 2004.

¹¹ Columbia, MO Code §105-247. Available at: www.gocolumbiamo.com/Council/Code_of_Ordinances_PDF/Street_Standards.

¹² Seattle, WA Ordinance No. 122386.

¹³ Available at: www.scdot.org/getting/pdfs/bike_resolution.pdf.

¹⁴ Oregon Rev. Stat. §366.514.