

Background

March 30, 2012

The Walkable City

This is the first study of its kind in Canada.

This study provides unique data and findings for the City of Toronto and the GTA. The findings underline the important role that neighbourhood design plays on travel choices, physical activity and health.

This original research was conducted as part of the *Healthy Canada by Design* collaborative project funded by the Canadian Partnership Against Cancer (CPAC) through the Coalitions Linking Action and Science for Prevention (CLASP) initiative.

Residents in Toronto place a high premium on living in walkable and transit-supportive neighbourhoods.

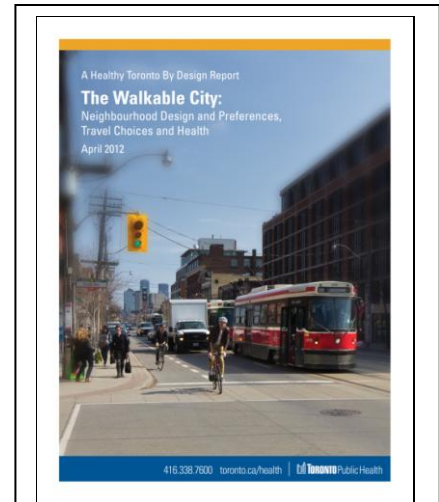
When asked to choose between a highly walkable neighbourhood and an auto-oriented neighbourhood, 74% of Toronto residents surveyed expressed a strong preference for the walkable neighbourhood. Only 6% expressed a strong preference for auto-oriented neighbourhoods. The other 20% did not feel strongly one way or the other.

After affordability, residents rank ease of walking, easy access to work by transit, closeness to shops and services, and closeness to a range of food stores as the top factors considered in choosing where to live.

Public demand for walkable features in their neighbourhood is not being met.

The majority of Toronto residents are willing to trade-off larger houses and larger lot sizes to live within walking distance of commercial areas and public recreation.

They are also willing to accept mixed housing types and streets with greater foot and vehicle traffic if it allows them to walk, cycle and use public transit to reach their common destinations.



The Walkable City: Neighbourhood Design and Preferences, Travel Choices and Health is a new report by Toronto Public Health in its *Healthy Toronto By Design* series. *The Walkable City* report highlights the findings of a unique research study that examined the preferences of residents regarding walkable and transit-supportive neighbourhoods and the specific features of those neighbourhoods which make them more or less walkable. It also examined how neighbourhood design and preferences influence travel choices, physical activity, and the Body Mass Index.

Backgrounder

The study found a strong unmet demand for walkable neighbourhood features. Between 21 and 32% of residents living in auto-oriented neighbourhoods expressed a strong preference for one or more walkable features that were missing from their current neighbourhoods. These residents preferred features such as shorter but connected streets, mixed housing types, nearby shops and food stores, and access to publicly accessible recreation, even if it meant they had smaller homes and yards.

Concerns about walkability in low income neighbourhoods

While the urban core of Toronto is highly walkable, much of the suburbs surrounding this core is not. The growing concentration of low-income neighbourhoods in these suburbs, coupled with low walkability, reduces important opportunities for social interaction, physical activity, and easy access to services, shops, healthy foods and recreational opportunities.

Living in walkable neighbourhoods makes it easier to be healthy

People living in walkable neighbourhoods do more walking, take transit more often, drive less often and less far, and weigh less on average than those who live in auto-oriented neighbourhoods. Living in a walkable neighbourhood makes it easier to adopt healthy behaviours, reduce traffic congestion and improve air quality.

The study found that relative to people in the least walkable neighbourhoods, the people in the most walkable neighbourhoods:

- Walk for utilitarian reasons 2.7 times as often each week
- Use transit 2.6 times as much
- Drive 4 times less often
- Drive 6 times fewer kilometres each week (i.e. 45 km instead of 278 km)
- Have lower body weight on average (i.e. BMI of 25.7 instead of 26.8). BMI of 25 to 29.9 means being overweight and >30 is obese. With a BMI of 27, a 1-point drop is associated with a reduced weight of 6 to 7 pounds, depending on the height and weight of the individual.

The Walkable City report can be downloaded from the Toronto Public Health at http://www.toronto.ca/health/hphe/pdf/walkable_city.pdf.

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