



**BUILT
ENVIRONMENT
EDMONTON
PROJECT**

Exploring Residents' Perceptions of Neighbourhood Environments

Background

In recent years, more attention has been given to the relationship between the neighbourhood environment and health. Important factors to consider include:

- how neighbourhoods are built, including how “walkable” they are (how pleasant and easy it is to walk in a neighbourhood);
- how the “walkability” of a neighbourhood, can influence how active people are; and
- how the design and walkability of a neighbourhood influences access to healthy, reasonably priced food.

Given these factors, the general public, city leaders and planners (among others) are paying closer attention to how communities are designed.

It's vital to better understand how residents perceive their neighbourhoods for walking, physical activity and food choices or access, and the reasons or factors which influence where they choose to live. With more understanding, we can better determine how built environments influence behaviour, which, in turn, can help to inform the creation of built environments that promote healthy living.

Our Study

In 2010, we held 11 discussion groups with Edmonton residents living in various neighbourhoods across the city. The research team classified the neighbourhoods as either “higher walkability” or “lower walkability.”

Our goal was to gain a deeper understanding of how neighbourhoods influence health, from the perspective of residents.

We asked residents to:

- define walkability from their perspective;
- state how walkable their neighbourhood is;
- state how they think their neighbourhood influences their choices for physical activity and food;
- state what factors influence their choice of neighbourhood; and
- make suggestions for improvement, to improve opportunities for physical activity and healthy food choices in their neighbourhood.



What We Heard

Defining Walkability

- Residents felt the following features were important for walking: being close to services; having good paths (including sidewalks and crosswalks); having natural or green spaces; having a safe atmosphere and surroundings.
- Other features mentioned were: visibility; weather; having nice things to look at while walking; and having neighbourhoods designed for different groups, e.g., seniors, mothers with strollers.

Walking & Physical Activity

- Most people talked about walking as an exercise or leisure activity, not for transportation.
- Many said they regularly saw others out and active in their area.
- Almost all felt their areas were reasonably walkable or very walkable.

Venues for Activity & Social Interaction

- The river valley, walking trails and health venues (e.g., city of Edmonton leisure centres) were popular spots for physical activity, though some felt that facility costs were sometimes a barrier.
- Community leagues, playing fields, courts and rinks were a positive influence, especially for children. However, two challenges were identified in relation to such facilities: a lack of volunteers, and in some cases, a mismatch between the facility/venue and community needs.
- Social contact with neighbours was also important to walking and physical activity. Many supported the idea of community gathering spaces to bring people together.

Connectivity & Quality of Pathways

- Well-connected pathways and quality of pathways were also important to walking and physical activity.
- Many were not satisfied with sidewalk quality, including incomplete or poorly-planned sidewalks, and cracking, uneven pavement.
- In contrast, many praised the quality of City of Edmonton trails, including river valley trails, as well as connections within the network of trails.

Weather

- Cold and snowy winter conditions were key barriers to activity.
- Weather and sidewalks were often mentioned together. Many said snow and ice made walking unpleasant, especially on sidewalks already in need of repair.
- Many described city-cleared trails and stairways as very well-maintained in the winter months, encouraging walking.

Safety

- A number of participants mentioned traffic-related safety as a concern, especially in relation to busy roadways, excessive speed and unsafe crossings.
- Less often mentioned were crime-related safety concerns, including fear of youth “gangs,” drunks, and drug activity.

Car Culture & Individual Choice

- Car-dependency was identified as an important factor that influenced behaviour. This included roadways that are part of urban sprawl, the increase in multi-car families, and frequent car-use for short trips.
- Many believed that even in built environments that have lots of opportunities for physical activity and healthy eating, it is still a matter of individual choice to be active and eat healthy foods.

Food Choice

- Almost all participants indicated they had high food choice, with many food outlets nearby, though few accessed them by walking.
- Important factors influencing food choices were price, food quality, time, convenience, specialty items, and the influence of children.
- Other factors were also mentioned, such as competition between larger box stores, supermarkets and corner stores.

Neighbourhood Choice

- Key reasons for choosing a neighbourhood were location, nearby schools, recreation opportunities, the residence or lot itself, and affordability.
- Many also indicated they chose based on how easily they were able to drive to other places from their neighbourhood.

Valued Features & Improvement Suggestions

- Many valued “older neighbourhood” planning and development features, such as street and path connectivity, a mix of destinations, green space, and infrastructure for walking and cycling.
- These same features were listed as suggestions to improve neighbourhoods, e.g., better path and crosswalk access and quality.

Key Findings:

- Good path connectivity and infrastructure, a mix of land-uses, and a mix of social spaces for community interaction may encourage leisure, exercise, walking and physical activity.
- Car dependency, unsafe roadways and crossings, and winter conditions may negatively influence behaviour, regardless of these features.
- Strategies that encourage active and alternate transportation, improve traffic safety, and support opportunities for indoor and outdoor physical activity are needed.





Conclusions & Recommendations

Edmonton residents identified specific factors that influenced how active they were in their neighbourhoods. Factors that positively influenced their behaviour included:

- how connected and well-maintained the paths and walking trails were;
- whether there was a mix of places in their neighbourhood, e.g., schools, gyms, parks; and
- whether there were social gathering places to meet with others.

These features were valued by many and suggestions to improve neighbourhoods were in line with these values.

Factors that negatively influenced behaviour (reducing likelihood of walking or other physical activity in the neighbourhood) were:

- poor street and path connections and quality;
- car dependency;
- busy roadways, speeding cars and unsafe crossings; and
- seasonal (especially winter) conditions.

Many participants identified the ability to drive easily to multiple destinations as an important factor influencing their choice of neighbourhood, highlighting the value placed on car travel.

These findings suggest that neighbourhoods which positively influence physical activity and walking are those that are well-connected, have good infrastructure, and include a mix of land-uses and social spaces. The findings also suggest that even with such features, there are other factors which encourage car use over active transportation choices such as walking, biking or public transportation. Examples of such factors or influences include car dependency, perceptions about traffic, and the impact of cold winter weather.

All of these findings suggest that strategies are needed to encourage active and alternate transportation, improve traffic safety, and support opportunities for outdoor and indoor physical activity (especially during winter months).

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The overall aim of our project is to influence the creation of healthier neighbourhood environments. By sharing information about our project and creating connections we hope to reach this goal.

If you have any questions or would like to know more about our project, please contact:

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