Creating Built Environments that Promote Walking and Health: Assessing the Current State of Knowledge

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The principle that the built environment should be supportive of walking is generally accepted and a wide range of interventions have been carried out in recent years with the aim of increasing walking. This paper presents the findings from a study conducted for Living Streets that synthesised existing literature on the impacts of the built environment on walking. Two different types of evidence from both academic and grey literature formed the main basis for the findings: before and after studies evaluating effects of interventions and cross-sectional studies identifying built environment characteristics associated with higher walking levels. The evidence from a large number of international, cross-sectional studies shows utility walking levels are greater in places with mixed land uses, greater population density and street connectivity and provision of facilities for pedestrians. Recreational walking is influenced most by aesthetical quality of the walking environment. Evaluations generally demonstrate positive road safety outcomes and positive user perceptions, but lack of rigorous data collection means effects on walking activity are often unclear. Where increases in walking activity have been found, it has not been demonstrated that this has led to increased overall physical activity. High values for money have been estimated for walking interventions compared to other transport interventions. Benefits to health from increased physical activity and benefits to user experience from improved conditions are the main contributors to these high values. Stronger evidence that individuals walk more and are more physically active as a result of interventions would strengthen confidence in value for money estimates. Increased walking activity has been shown to have other benefits (mental health, social interaction, social capital, personal safety, local business activity) and these should be recognised in value for money estimates.

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