

# FAST FACTS ABOUT CANADA'S NEIGHBOURHOODS AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

## DATA COMPILED FROM THE 2011 CANADIAN COMMUNITY HEALTH SURVEY RAPID RESPONSE MODULE ON NEIGHBOURHOOD ENVIRONMENTS

### INTRODUCTION

The neighbourhoods in which Canadians live can have an impact on behaviour, health, and well-being. Certain community features such as recreational facilities, sidewalks, parks, and stores within walking distance from home have a strong potential to contribute to increased physical activity.

In particular, physical activity plays an important role in promoting health and preventing disease among Canadians. People who are physically active live longer, healthier lives and are more likely to avoid illness and injury.

In 2011, the Public Health Agency of Canada sponsored a module on neighbourhood environments as part of Statistics Canada's *Canadian Community Health Survey*. This module provides new information on the number of Canadians who live in neighbourhoods that promote leisure-time physical activity and active transportation (walking or biking to work or school). A nationally representative sample of 8,316 people age 12 years and older were interviewed in July and August 2011; 44% of this sample was male, and the average age of the sample was 49 years.

### The majority of Canadians age 12 and older reported being physically active:

- 62% were active or moderately active, based on the energy they expended on a variety of leisure-time physical activities.
- 27% reported engaging in active transport in the three months prior to being surveyed.

### NEIGHBOURHOOD CHARACTERISTICS ACROSS CANADA

#### In general, Canadians live in neighbourhoods that support and promote physical activity:

- 78% reported living in neighbourhoods that had several free or low-cost recreational facilities such as parks, walking trails or recreation centres.
- 73% had sidewalks on most of the streets in their neighbourhood.
- 72% could walk to a transit stop (such as bus, train, subway or streetcar) from their home within 15 minutes.
- 70% reported that their neighbourhood had many interesting things to look at while walking.
- 62% had stores, shops, markets or other places to buy necessities within easy walking distance of their home.



**Few Canadians reported that their neighbourhoods had characteristics that deter physical activity, such as:**

- a crime rate that discourages walking at night (19%).
- traffic levels that make walking or biking unpleasant or difficult (20% and 25%, respectively).

**Neighbourhood characteristics are related to leisure-time physical activity. In this survey, people were significantly more likely to report being physically active in their leisure time if they lived in neighbourhoods with:**

- Several free or low-cost recreation facilities, such as parks, walking trails, bike paths, recreation centres, playgrounds, and public swimming pools;
  - 65% were physically active, compared to
  - 55% in neighbourhoods without these facilities.
- Interesting things to look at while walking;
  - 66% were physically active, compared to
  - 54% in neighbourhoods without interesting things to look at.
- Levels of street traffic that did not make it unpleasant to either walk or ride a bike;
  - 64 & 65% (respectively) were physically active, compared to
  - 56 & 57% (respectively) in neighbourhoods with excessive amounts of traffic.
- Designated areas for bicycling;
  - 65% were active, compared to
  - 60% in neighbourhoods without designated areas for bicycling.
- Well-maintained sidewalks;
  - 64% were active, compared to
  - 59% in neighbourhoods without well-maintained sidewalks.
- A higher level of safety at night;
  - 64% were active, compared to
  - 58% in neighbourhoods where the crime rate makes it unsafe to walk at night.

- Places to buy necessities within easy walking distance from home;
  - 64% were active, compared to
  - 59% in neighbourhoods with few of these amenities.

*Two elements of the neighbourhood environment were not associated with leisure-time physical activity: having transit stops nearby and sidewalks on most streets.*

**Neighbourhood characteristics related to active transportation. Active transportation is an important way that adults can achieve the recommended amount of physical activity.<sup>1</sup> Canadians were significantly more likely to report walking or biking to work or school if their neighbourhoods had:**

- A transit stop less than a 15-minute walk from their home;<sup>2</sup>
  - 32% engaged in active transport, compared to
  - 15% in neighbourhoods without a transit stop nearby.
- Sidewalks on most of the streets;
  - 33% engaged in active transport, compared to
  - 12% in neighbourhoods without sidewalks on most streets.
- Designated areas for bicycling;
  - 32% engaged in active transport, compared to
  - 22% in neighbourhoods without designated areas for bicycling.
- Several free or low-cost recreation facilities;
  - 31% engaged in active transport, compared to
  - 15% in neighbourhoods without these facilities.
- Well-maintained sidewalks in their neighbourhood;
  - 32% engaged in active transport, compared to
  - 16% in neighbourhoods without well-maintained sidewalks.

<sup>1</sup> Adults aged 18–64 years should accumulate at least 150 minutes of moderate-to vigorous-intensity aerobic physical activity per week, in bouts of 10 minutes or more.

<sup>2</sup> Transit trips typically start and end with some type of active transport, such as walking or biking.

- Levels of street traffic that did not make it difficult or unpleasant to walk;
  - 28% engaged in active transport, compared to
  - 23% in neighbourhoods where the traffic made it difficult or unpleasant to walk.

*Three elements did not appear to be associated with the decision to engage in active transport: having a neighbourhood where the crime rate made it unsafe to walk at night, having levels of street traffic that made it difficult or unpleasant to bike, and having a visually interesting neighbourhood.*

## SUMMARY

This survey showed that the majority of Canadians live in communities with features that promote physical activity. More importantly, those Canadians who did live in such activity-promoting communities were more physically active, both in their leisure time and active transport (walking or bicycling to work or school). There is a possibility that those who are more physically active will preferentially reside in neighbourhoods with characteristics that promote physical activity, in comparison to neighbourhoods without these features. However, this survey was able to show the specific features that may have encouraged either leisure-time physical activity or active transport. There are a number of factors that influence the decision to engage in physical activity and these data provide preliminary evidence that the built environment could influence this decision in Canada. These data suggest that the built environment is another modifiable risk factor that could influence health outcomes on a population level.

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND THE NEIGHBOURHOOD ENVIRONMENT CAN BE FOUND ONLINE AT THE PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY OF CANADA:

- Supportive Environments for Physical Activity: How the Built Environment Affects Our Health
- Age-Friendly Communities Initiative

## RESOURCES EXTERNAL TO THE PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY OF CANADA:

- The National Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health: Built environment resources
- The Heart and Stroke Foundation: Shaping Healthy, Active Communities Toolkit

**MORE INFORMATION ABOUT THE 2011 CANADIAN COMMUNITY HEALTH SURVEY RAPID RESPONSE MODULE ON NEIGHBOURHOOD ENVIRONMENTS CAN BE FOUND ONLINE AT STATISTICS CANADA**

[www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca)