

# 5 Reasons America Needs Walkable Neighborhoods

Source: [strongtowns.org](http://strongtowns.org)

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*Photo courtesy of NACTO*

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The RPA [report](#) we're covering this week highlights the need for more housing in walkable neighborhoods. Now, walkability isn't just something that we believe is "good for you" like broccoli or flossing. In fact, as the report explains, walkability is something that people have time and again demanded, and that demand is simply not being met. What is the true value of walkable neighborhoods? Why do we need them and why has demand for them increased? Here are five key reasons why walkability is valuable to communities and should be prioritized:

## 1. AFFORDABILITY

Between purchase, insurance, gas and repairs, car ownership can cost a person thousands of dollars a year. [WalkScore reports](#) that cars are "the second largest household expense in the US." Imagine if you could get rid of that expense and instead use your own two feet to get to work, school, the grocery store, and more. Think of what else you could spend those thousands of dollars on.

In addition, for the millions of Americans who live near or below the poverty line, for whom automobile costs suck up a huge portion of an already small budget, a walkable neighborhood can mean the difference between food, clothing and shelter, or being out on the street. Walkable neighborhoods make getting around far more affordable for every member of a community, with a particularly significant impact on low-income populations.

## 2. ACCESSIBILITY

When transportation is limited to cars, that means many people are shut out of the transportation system: the elderly, the disabled, and children. In a car-centric environment, anyone who cannot drive for physical, mental or age-related reasons is forced to rely on others to transport them around. In a walkable neighborhood, however, travel is much more accessible. Children can walk to school. Seniors can walk to the grocery store. Wheelchair users are able to wheel to work instead of having to wait for a special bus or a ride from a friend. Walkability means access for a much wider swath of the population.

## 3. ECONOMIC PRODUCTIVITY

We've written about this [before](#), but walkable environments usually lead to higher economic productivity. In a concentrated, walkable neighborhood with shops and restaurants, passersby are far more likely to frequent multiple businesses than if they were just driving to a specific store in an auto-oriented area. Walkable neighborhoods with local businesses also help keep economic gains in the community when compared with strip and big box developments on the edge of town. Finally, walkable neighborhoods in [city after city](#) across the country demonstrate far greater tax revenue per square foot than any other type of development.

## 4. HEALTH

The benefits of walkable neighborhoods for physical health are myriad. [Active Living Research](#) recently released a research review on this topic entitled, "[Moving Toward Active Transportation: How Policies Can Encourage Walking and Bicycling](#)." Here are a few key findings and recommendations revealed in that review:

- *Physical activity has been associated with a risk reduction for premature death and a number of chronic diseases. Estimated risk reductions between the most active and the least active groups are substantial, i.e., about 30 percent for all causes of death.*
- *Areas with more amenities for biking and walking, such as sidewalks, bicycle lanes, or paths are associated with more active commuting to school.*
- *Traffic volume, highway density, and traffic speeds are negatively associated with levels of active travel, while smaller block size, access to public transport, retail, neighborhood shops, and street connectivity are positively associated with levels of bicycle ridership.*
- *Walking and cycling can be increased by community-scale urban design and land use policies. These include zoning regulations and building codes [...] higher street connectivity, higher density of development, and having more stores, jobs and schools within walking distance of where people live.*

The evidence is clear: people in walkable neighborhoods tend to be healthier than those in auto-oriented areas. Minority communities are particularly negatively affected by a lack of walkability in their neighborhoods and thus, less access to physical exercise (see the above graphic).



Graphic from [Active Living Research](http://www.activelivingresearch.org)

## 5. ENVIRONMENT

Walking is naturally better for the environment than driving. It uses no fossil fuels and creates no pollution, which is healthier for the earth and healthier for our lungs. The environmental benefits of walkable environments are pretty obvious so I'm not going to go into much detail beyond that. But suffice it to say, if you care about the environment, you should support improvements in walkability.

As the [RPA report](#) we've been discussing this week explains, the demand clearly exists for walkable places. Baby boomers want them. Millennials want them. Here's some telling data from the report: "In a recent survey by Urban Land Institute, 50 percent of people said that walkability is either the top or a high priority in where they would choose to live." If half the population would prefer to live in a walkable place, that's an indication that we need to start building more of these places and transforming existing places into walkable neighborhoods.

By not meeting this demand for walkable neighborhoods, we're hurting both affordability and economic productivity. We're also cheating our communities out of the chance to be healthier, more environmentally-friendly and more accessible. As walkable neighborhoods become more and more desirable, the cost of housing in those neighborhoods increases beyond the reach of so many people who could truly benefit from walkability. We need to change federal financing rules so that walkable living is more affordable.

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