

# Complete Streets

## Talking Points



www.pedbikeimages.org / Dan Burden

*Complete streets are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users. Pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists, and transit riders of all ages and abilities must be able to safely move along and across a complete street.*

**For more information and resources on the relationship between the built environment and public health:**



Planning for Healthy Places  
A program of Public Health Law & Policy  
2201 Broadway, Suite 502  
Oakland, CA 94612  
(510) 302-3308  
www.healthyplanning.org

### Primary message:

*Complete streets provide people with a range of safe choices for moving around their communities, including walking and biking. Complete streets are people-friendly and support good health.*

### Health problems include:

**Obesity.** According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 30 percent of U.S. adults age 20 and older are obese, and approximately 65 percent of Americans weigh more than is healthful. Today, one in five children and one in three teens is overweight or at risk of becoming overweight.

**Heart Disease.** The leading cause of death for women and men in the United States is heart disease, according to the American Heart Association. In 2003, a total of 685,089 people died of heart disease, accounting for 28 percent of all U.S. deaths.

**Diabetes.** One of every ten health care dollars spent in the United States goes toward diabetes and its complications. Between 1994 and 2004, the prevalence of diabetes increased more than 50 percent.

### All of these health problems are linked to environmental factors.

- Research conducted by UCLA has correlated **the walkability of a neighborhood** with increased walking by residents and found that the neighborhood environment – including the availability of parks – influences individual health behaviors. In California’s San Joaquin and San Bernadino counties (regions characterized by sprawl development), 34 percent of residents reported that they do not walk at least once for ten minutes in a week, while only 13 percent of San Franciscans (who reside in a dense, walkable environment) walk that little.
- **Fear of crime** also can be a significant impediment to walking: One survey found that 13 percent of respondents would walk more if crime were not such a problem in their neighborhood.

### How does street design contribute to these problems?

- Conventional street design—which relies on local streets leading to collector arterials—present an environment that is inhospitable, unattractive, and often dangerous to pedestrians. Traditional streets—which feature shorter, connected blocks and more gridlike patterns—offer a **friendlier environment for pedestrians.**

- Research indicates that **narrower streets slow traffic**, and a study of traffic accident reports in Longmont, Colorado, found that street width had the highest correlation to accidents. The safest streets were 24 feet wide, while the most dangerous were 36 feet wide (which is typical of new subdivisions).
- **Speed kills pedestrians.** According to one study, a pedestrian hit by a car traveling 15 mph has a 4 percent chance of dying, while a pedestrian hit by a car traveling 44 mph has an 83 percent chance of dying.
- **Automobile-oriented infrastructure** imposes many costs to people other than the driver. These costs, known as “external costs” or “externalities,” include deaths and illnesses due to air pollution caused by vehicles, and deaths and damages due to accidents.

### How can complete streets improve health?

**Complete streets reduce injuries.** One study found that designing for pedestrian travel by installing raised medians and redesigning intersections and sidewalks reduced pedestrian risk by 28 percent.

**More people are encouraged to bike and walk on complete streets.** Residents are 65 percent more likely to walk in a neighborhood with sidewalks. In Portland, Oregon, a complete streets approach resulted in a 74 percent increase in bicycle commuting in the 1990s. Complete streets also improve safety indirectly by increasing the number of people bicycling and walking: One study found that as the number of people bicycling and walking increases, deaths and injuries decline.

**Complete streets are child-friendly.** Streets that provide safe opportunities for bicycling and walking encourage children to get physical activity and gain independence. More children walk to school where there are sidewalks. Safe Routes to School programs will also benefit from complete streets policies that help turn all routes into safe routes.

**Complete streets can improve air quality** by providing alternatives to car trips. If each resident of an American community of 100,000 replaced one car trip with one bike trip just once a month, it would cut carbon dioxide emissions by 3,764 tons of per year in the community.



www.pedbikemages.org / ITE Pedestrian Bicycle Council

### STREET DESIGN: A Tale of Two Cities



Irvine, CA



Philadelphia, PA

These illustrations depict one square mile of two very different street designs. Irvine’s *conventional* street design (top) lacks connectivity and relies on local streets leading to collector arterials. Contrast the points of connectivity to those in Philadelphia (below), where *traditional* street design offers a safer and friendlier environment for pedestrians.

Illustrations reprinted with permission from *Great Streets*, by Allan B. Jacobs (MIT Press, 1993)

### What can decision makers do to promote complete streets?

State and local officials can create environments that improve the built environment by revising laws, ordinances, and practices in the following ways:

- **Promote street designs** that incorporate such features as narrow vehicular travel lanes, sidewalks, bike lanes, wide shoulders, medians, bus pullouts, special bus lanes, raised crosswalks, audible pedestrian signals, and sidewalk bulb-outs
- Require that **transportation agencies change** their orientation toward building primarily for cars, and instead design and operate the entire right of way to enable safe access for all users
- Ensure that their **streets and roads work** for drivers, transit users, pedestrians, and bicyclists, as well as for older people, children, and people with disabilities
- **Integrate sidewalks, bike lanes, transit amenities, and safe crossings** into the initial design of a project (and spare the expense of retrofits later)

### Closing Message:

*Complete streets mean that an eight-year-old and an 80-year-old can move around our community as easily and safely as anyone else. Complete streets allow everyone to make healthier choices.*

Complete the Streets ([www.completestreets.org](http://www.completestreets.org)) was a primary source for the information in this fact sheet.