

PERCEPTIONS, ATTITUDES, AND BEHAVIORS OF ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION AMONG KEY STAKEHOLDERS IN NORWALK, CT

Courtney Choy, Luis E. Maldonado, MPH; Wilhelmenia Ross, Rui Ye, Alycia Santilli, MSW; Jennifer Grasso, MPH; Timothy Callahan, MPH, RS; Theresa Argondezzi, MPH, CHES, CPH; Kaitlin Latham, Debbie Humphries, PhD

A collaborative project between the Yale School of Public Health and the Norwalk Health Department
Spring 2015 Report

Background

Overweight and obesity have become a major concern in the United States. In Norwalk, CT, 16.6% of adults are obese, and the number of children who are overweight or obese has reached 40%, a rate that surpasses the current national average.^{1,2} Therefore, the Norwalk Health Department has supported ongoing community-wide efforts that promote more active lifestyles and ensure residents live in an environment that is conducive to physical activity. One way the Health Department strives to do so is by increasing community access to different forms of active transportation, which includes any form of human-powered mobility, such as walking and biking.

By increasing the walkability and bikeability of Norwalk, the Health Department hopes to provide more opportunities for residents to engage in physical activity, which can help to reduce the obesity burden and have a positive impact on residents' overall health. To support its efforts, the Health Department desired feedback from residents and other community stakeholders regarding their attitudes towards active transportation and the idea of expanding opportunities in Norwalk.

Objectives

To characterize the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors surrounding active transportation among key stakeholders in Norwalk.

Specifically, the project aimed to identify:

1. Social, physical, and financial barriers to walking and biking
2. Perceived importance and utility of bike lanes and sidewalks
3. Priority improvements to make the city more conducive to active transportation
4. The most important areas on which to educate the general public about active transportation



Methods

- A quantitative survey was adapted from the Nashville Metropolitan Planning Organization to gauge Norwalk stakeholders' current walking and biking behaviors.³
- Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including local residents (n=7), parent-teacher organization (PTO) representatives (n=5), business leaders (n=7), and public officials (n=10), to assess the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors around active transportation in Norwalk.
- Data were analyzed to identify major themes pertaining to active transportation and the expansion of such efforts across key stakeholder groups in Norwalk.

Key Findings

1. Individuals reported health, exercise, recreation, and enjoyment as major reasons for walking and biking in Norwalk. Often the “nice places to walk and bike” were identified by stakeholders based on the amount of traffic flow, the destination point of travel, aesthetics, and natural beauty of the locations.

“There’s also attractions that the city puts down [at the beach] like in the summer we have open concerts – you bring your blanket and your wine and cheese and it’s just a great environment. That definitely inspires people to walk.” –PTO Representative

2. Personal safety was the most prominent concern among all stakeholders. Individuals did not feel that Norwalk is walk- and bike-friendly. Although stakeholders mentioned that children should be more physically active by walking and biking, child safety was a major concern for many stakeholders. Safety concerns due to traffic and speeding forced parents to limit their children’s physical activity by often driving them everywhere and keeping them inside.

“People want to walk. When the roads are windy with blind curves and cars go fast, you’re afraid of taking small children out.” – PTO Representative

3. There was strong support for more sidewalks and bike lanes and the maintenance of this infrastructure across the surveyed stakeholders.

“Once winter or fall sets in, there are certain portions of the year where you would be biking in the dark. As a cyclist, I would have a responsibility to make sure I am as visible as I can be. I think street lightning would help. It would also help see hazards in the road, especially if you’re walking, you could see hazards in the sidewalk and things like that.” –Business leader

4. A common concern voiced by stakeholders was a lack of law enforcement and regulation for drivers, cyclists, and pedestrians. Education around active transportation is needed to produce an environment that is conducive to physical activity.

“You know [drivers] just go and try to pass you, and I do respect the laws and everything. And I just go and I keep to the right. So it’s not really safe. So they should really enforce the laws and make it a big deal. ” –Resident

Recommendations

- The existence of the Mayor’s Bike/Walk Task Force and other city initiatives, such as the NorWalker Walking Routes, may continue to educate and provide support for environmental and policy changes that promote walking and biking as alternative modes of transportation.
- Multidisciplinary partnerships are encouraged to inform transportation planning processes. Potential partners include, but are not limited to, local and state health organizations; other government agencies, such as schools; Recreation and Parks; the police department; the Public Works Department; others whose work impacts the built environment and health; non-profit organizations, such as bike and pedestrian advocacy groups; and others who share a common vision of making Norwalk a community that is more conducive to walking and biking.
- Coordinating and collaborating with various stakeholder groups may help address issues related to transportation, economic prosperity, and community health and wellness.
- Changing the cultural and social norms around modes of transportation in Norwalk requires an investment in the development and maintenance of active transportation infrastructure, such as sidewalks and bike lanes, to create a sustainable environment for walking and biking.

Conclusions

Stakeholders of the Norwalk community recognize the health and environmental benefits of walking and biking as modes of transportation. While many stakeholders walk and bike at times for convenience, recreation, and health reasons, they remain hesitant to walk and bike as a means to get from one place to another. Safety, connectivity, access to sidewalks and bike lanes, and traffic regulations were reported areas of concern for these participants. If these issues were addressed appropriately, many reported that they would be more inclined to walk and bike more in their city. In Norwalk, there is a unique opportunity to promote active transportation and health, especially among motivated stakeholders. The perceptions and attitudes towards walking and biking are shifting to recognize these activities as modes of transportation. Living in an environment that is conducive to walking and biking encourages individuals to engage in physical activity, tackles obesity, and bolsters the overall health of the community. Given the momentum and interest in walking and biking, the city's current and future efforts to improve walkability and bikeability in Norwalk serve to benefit public health and foster a more eco-friendly, healthy, and vibrant city to live in.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Norwalk residents, parent-teacher organization (PTO) representatives, members of the Norwalk Chamber of Commerce, Norwalk Common Council, and the Board of Health at the Norwalk Health Department, and other individuals who participated in the interview component of this study for their honesty, time, and insight. We appreciate the continuous support and guidance from the Norwalk Health Department, and we especially thank Timothy Callahan, Theresa Argondezzi, and Kaitlin Latham for facilitating our research and for introducing us to the appropriate stakeholders for our project. We would also like to thank our instructor Dr. Debbie Humphries, and our advisors Jennifer Grasso and Alycia Santilli.

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