Perceptions of Walkability in the West Riverside Neighborhood, Eau Claire, Wisconsin

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**INTRODUCTION**

Residents who live in walkable neighborhoods are more likely to engage in higher levels of walking-related physical activity, report lower safety concerns, and experience higher levels of social engagement compared to those living in less walkable neighborhoods (Mason et al., 2013; Talen and Koschinsky, 2014). In collaboration with the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW) and the Eau Claire City County Health Department (ECCCHD), we surveyed residents in the Eau Claire West Riverside neighborhood to examine resident perceptions of walkability and to identify socio-demographic correlates of walkability perceptions (Fig. 1). This analysis will provide insights about walkability from the residents of this neighborhood, assist in the identification of strategies that may improve walkability and health, and inform on-going efforts to support healthy neighborhood developments.

**METHODS**

We conducted household surveys of adults over the age of 18 in the West Riverside Neighborhood using the abbreviated version of the Neighborhood Environment Walkability Survey (NEWS). In this well-validated survey, participants respond to questions related to proximity to destinations, street, neighborhood, biking and walking environments, and safety. Additional demographic questions were included. The following diagram represents our site selection and data collection processes (Fig. 2).

**SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS**

A total of 66 neighborhood residents participated in the survey. Survey staff approached 334 homes and interacted with 113 (33%) household members. Of those we interacted with, 66 (60%) participated in the survey. Demographic characteristics of respondents:

- 54% female
- 93% of respondents were white
- 60% of respondents have a yearly household income of $49,999 or less
- 56% of those surveyed were renters
- 74% were between the ages of 25-64 (Fig. 3)
- 51% lived in the neighborhood for 5 years or less (Fig. 4)

**RESULTS**

Most respondents indicated that their homes were within 10 minutes of several public services including elementary schools, transit, and parks (Fig. 5). For some commercial services such as pharmacy or clothing stores, most respondents indicated a walking time of 20 minutes or more; while for laundry and bank, a greater proportion indicated a walking time of 10 minutes or less (Fig. 6). Respondents perceived longer walking times to destinations with healthier food options, such as grocery stores and fruit and vegetable markets. However, over 70% indicated a walking time of 10 minutes or less to convenience stores, which typically have fewer healthy food options (Fig. 7). Most residents had positive perceptions about the neighborhood physical and social environments such as the presence of sidewalks, crosswalks, places within easy walking distance, and low crime rates. Chi-squared analyses indicated that compared to males, more females disagreed that streets were well lit at night and agreed that it was unsafe to walk at night.

**CONCLUSIONS**

- Most residents perceived that their neighborhood was relatively walkable. Future development should maintain the walkability features already present in this neighborhood.
- Walking times were shorter for more public services than for commercial services. More commercial businesses within shorter walking distances may benefit this neighborhood.
- Walking time was longer for healthy food destinations, such as grocery stores and fruit and vegetable markets, and shorter for convenience stores which do not offer as many healthy options. Future development efforts should include provision of healthier food destinations, such as grocery stores.
- Compared to males, females were more concerned about street lighting at night and safety while walking at night. Future development efforts need to focus on implementing features that create safe spaces for women.

**LIMITATIONS**

We surveyed a relatively small number of households. Over two-thirds of the homes we contacted, no one answered the door. We may have selected poor times to conduct surveys or due to the election season, individuals may have avoided answering the door. We did not collect objective measures of the physical environment and thus can not compare perceived data with objective data.

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