

We want to walk: Report finds strong preference for walkable neighbourhoods

BY YVONNE ZACHARIAS, VANCOUVER SUN SEPTEMBER 30, 2014 8:52 AM

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Pedestrian-friendly communities are much healthier than car-dependent ones, according to a new study.

Photograph by: NICK PROCAYLO, PNG

A new UBC study of Metro Vancouver residents has provided more evidence that pedestrian-friendly communities are much healthier than car-dependent ones.

The study led by Larry Frank, a UBC professor who is considered a world leader in this field, has refuted the notion that people in places like Kitsilano and the West End are fitter than those in the suburbs because they naturally gravitate toward these areas while people in suburbs tend to be more sedentary because they are naturally drawn to cars to get around.

People who love being in the car walk more when they live in communities that promote walking and people who love to walk drive more when they move to places like the suburbs, said Dr. John Carsley, medical health officer for Vancouver Coastal Health.

“It’s not just an element of people who are more active or less active choosing an environment that reinforces their preferences,” Carsley said. “It reinforces the importance that your local environment has on your health.”

The study found people who live in pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods walk five times a week for transportation compared with one or two times per week for those in auto-oriented neighborhoods.

“This is an impressive finding for everyone who wants residents to reduce their risk of chronic diseases by being more physically active,” Carsley said.

He also noted that people in pedestrian-oriented and car-oriented communities didn't differ in the amount of recreational exercise. "The big difference was in the utilitarian walking." In other words, it was the walks to stores, the doctor's office, the drycleaners, the community centre, to visit a friend and to transit stops that added up to big health benefits.

He pointed out that if you want to increase utilitarian activity, you have to have useful places to get to.

And the study came up with the finding that people who prefer to walk and who live in pedestrian-oriented communities reported significantly lower incidence of high blood pressure (10 per cent) than those who prefer to walk but do not live in areas that make it easy to travel on foot (21 per cent).

The survey, which polled 1,223 Metro Vancouver adults 25 years and older in 2011, found that nearly two-thirds of City of Vancouver residents and 40 per cent of residents living in other areas of Metro Vancouver reported a strong desire to live in neighbourhoods that encourage foot traffic.

"We now have a study that shows us that people with similar preferences have different health outcomes," said Frank, professor and director of the health and community design lab based at UBC's school of population and public health.

By choosing from a variety of images that forced them to make tradeoffs, he said people chose a more walking-friendly urban environment even if it meant more noise and living close to strangers.

They also demonstrated a willingness to live on smaller lots if it meant travel distances of less than five kilometres. They preferred living within walking distance of a wide range of smaller food stores than living where there are few in walking distance but several very large supermarkets accessible by car.

He said in an interview it is clear to him that there is a significant undersupply of affordable housing in areas that encourage walking.

"That's why walkable neighborhoods are so expensive here. There are not enough."

He added that even today, housing is being built in areas that do not encourage walking. "The proportion of supply that is coming on line is still out of balance relative to the demand."

He added, "There's a latent demand." People want to walk more and be healthier; they just aren't living in communities that encourage it.

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