

A COMPILATION OF RESOURCES, REPORTS, AND STUDIES ABOUT TRAILS AND THEIR RELATION TO HEALTH IMPACTS

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<http://headwaterseconomics.org>

Measuring Trails Benefits: Public Health

How are trails related to public health?
Trails can improve public health by increasing physical activity and providing safer transportation routes for pedestrians and cyclists. In light of increasing chronic disease in the U.S., the Surgeon General has identified physical activity as one of the most effective actions people can take to improve their health.

Trails often encourage inactive people to become active and modestly increase the activity levels of already-active residents. Because they provide a safe environment, trails are the only place where many residents exercise.

The gains in physical activity are most significant in rural places with few parks and narrow road shoulders. Increased physical activity is greatest among people at greatest risk of inactivity, including people with low income, low education attainment, and the elderly.

Research has found that the benefits of reduced health care costs associated with increased physical activity on trails far outweigh the costs of trail construction.

Additional details on each of these topics, as well as other relevant research, are available at <http://headwaterseconomics.org/trail>.

Select Research Highlights

- In Morgantown, West Virginia, 60 percent of trail users report they exercise more regularly since they began using trails, and 47 percent of trail users report getting their recommended physical activity through trail use alone. Twenty-three percent of respondents did not exercise regularly before using the trails.¹

How to use this information:
This research is of interest to public health agencies, hospitals and medical providers, and others advocating for community health, particularly for low income or elderly people.

This research can help to inform strategies to improve public health through increasing physical activity on trails and support public investment in trails programs.

This summary is one of several

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Association between trail use and self-rated wellness and health

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Abstract
Background
Incorporating trail use into daily activity routines could be an important venue to increase a population's physical activity. This study presents important health impacts of trail use.

Methods

IMPACTS OF SHARED USE PATHS

A study of the economic, health, transportation, environmental, safety, and accessibility impacts of four shared use paths in Massachusetts.

Lynnfield Rail Trail

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Health and Wellness Benefits of Trails and Recreational Paths

The proposed Lynnfield Rail Trail will be a great asset to our community. As a greenway / linear park / multi-recreational trail it will provide valuable health and wellness benefits to all ages and abilities. It has been shown that the cost of these types of trails are more than offset through the health benefits and reduced healthcare costs for residents. Good health is everyone's major source of wealth.

From a health and wellness perspective, the following have been documented as benefits of trails:

- Easy access to trails enables citizens to improve their lifestyle and mitigate a wide range of health problems [1]. An increase in chronic diseases caused by an aging population as well as an inactive lifestyle across all age groups has developed to a national public health crisis as well as a burden to the individual.
- In addition, mental health benefits have been widely documented, especially in the young. As little as five minutes of exercise in a "green space" such as a park can lower blood pressure, heart rate, and stress levels [2].
- This finding supports research in the social sciences, which proposes that strong relationships with other people contribute to positive health outcomes. Trails and parks contribute to health in multiple ways. Trail experiences play a role in combating stress and building strong community relationships as it promotes closeness of our ties to our neighbors and strengthens our personal relationships [2].

Improving Public Health through Public Parks and Trails: EIGHT COMMON MEASURES

TRAILS PROMOTE HEALTH

TRAILS SUPPORT WALKING AS A NO COST, EASY ACCESS PHYSICAL ACTIVITY While multi-use trails accommodate many types of physical activity, including for those with mobility impairments, walking is the most common form of exercise for people in the United States and the predominant activity on many multi-use trails. Walking is considered a powerful public health strategy due to its accessibility for people of all ages and incomes (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015).

TRAILS REDUCE BARRIERS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY SUCH AS COST, ACCESS, AND CONVENIENCE (Mang et al., 2004). The presence or use of trails appears to increase physical activity in adults in rural communities (Frost et al., 2010) and proximity to a trail increases the likelihood of use (Troped et al., 2001). The benefits of physical activity for overall health include preventing or decreasing the risk of diabetes, obesity, cancer, cardiovascular disease, preventing risk of injury, increasing muscle tone, flexibility, joint and bone strength as well as immune health (CDC, 2020).

TRAILS INCREASE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AMONG POPULATIONS WHO ARE AT HIGH RISK FOR INACTIVITY Those most likely to report increased activity through the use of a trail are residents who were not regular walkers, those with a high school education or less, or those with incomes of less than \$15,000 (Brownson et al., 2000). Research suggests that users who were new to exercising and new to trail use reported greater improvements in physical activity behavior than habitual trail users. New exercisers were also more dependent on the trail as a principal place to engage in physical activity (Gordon et al., 2004).

TRAILS POSITIVELY IMPACT MENTAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH (Kuo, 2011; Wood et al., 2016; Gladwell et al., 2013). Walking on trails or in parks contributes to enhanced social networking, connectivity and companionship, and an increased appreciation of nature (Barton et al., 2009; Peacock et al., 2007; Pretty et al., 2007). Additionally, exercising for as little as five minutes in green spaces increases self-esteem and mood with greater effects among young people (Harvard Medical School, 2009; Barton & Pretty, 2010; Coon et al., 2011).

HEALTH BENEFITS OF TRAILS ARE NOT EXPERIENCED UNIVERSALLY Barriers such as marginalization, unequal access to opportunity, ethnic or subcultural differences, and discrimination may prevent low-income, people of color, and other communities from reaping the health benefits of trails and trail-based activities (Thomas, 2019). Interest in and use of trails, and the benefits that these users enjoy may be affected by an individual's proximity, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, accessibility and connectivity, perceptions of safety, and programming.

TRAILS THAT ARE SEPARATED FROM MOTOR TRAFFIC CONTRIBUTE TO OVERALL SAFETY OUTCOMES FOR ALL USERS (Marshall & Ferencak, 2019). Pedestrians and bicyclists are safest when they are accommodated in transportation design and complete streets (Smart Growth America, 2016).

Home - Mental Health Benefits of Trails

Mental Health Benefits of Trails

Beyond the physical health benefits of trails, the mental health benefits of trail access is also invaluable.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
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SEARCH

CDC A-Z INDEX

Healthy Places

Healthy Places > Health Topics

Parks, Trails and Health

This website is archived for historical purposes and is no longer being maintained or updated.

The Healthy Community Design Initiative, also known as the Built Environment and Health Initiative, is no longer a funded program and the information on this website is not being reviewed and updated on a regular basis.

Parks and trails are an important part of a community. In a well-designed community, homes, parks, stores, and schools are connected by safe walking and biking routes. Such routes allow all members of the community a chance to enjoy the outdoors and get physical and mental health benefits.

Despite research showing the health benefits of physical activity, most U.S. adults and children are not active enough. CDC recommends that children and adolescents do 60 minutes (1 hour) or more of physical activity each day and adults do 150 minutes (2 and a half hours) of aerobic activity every week. In 2007, only about 35% of students in grades 9-12 met the recommended levels of physical activity, and in 2008 only 44% of adults met the recommended levels.

Having access to places for physical activity, such as parks and trails, encourages community residents to participate in physical activity and do so more often. The closer you live to a park, the more likely you are to walk or bike to those places, and use the park for exercise. However, only a small number of people in the U.S. live within half a mile of a park. People are also more likely to walk when they feel protected from traffic and safe from crime and hazards.

The physical activity you get from walking and biking to parks can have both environmental and personal health benefits. It decreases [air pollution](#) and [car crashes](#) which in turn can reduce chronic disease rates and traffic-related injuries. Physical activity can also help:

- [control your weight](#)
- [reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease](#)
- [reduce your risk for some cancers](#)