

ANALYSIS BRIEF

WALKABLE COMMUNITIES



Nancy McGuckin
www.travelbehavior.us

Planners and policy makers are studying how the built environment influences people's decisions about travel. According to the 2009 NHTS, density has a marked effect on the amount of walking people do. Because walking is so intimately connected with the physical environment, looking at walking can give us important clues about the quality of the built environment.

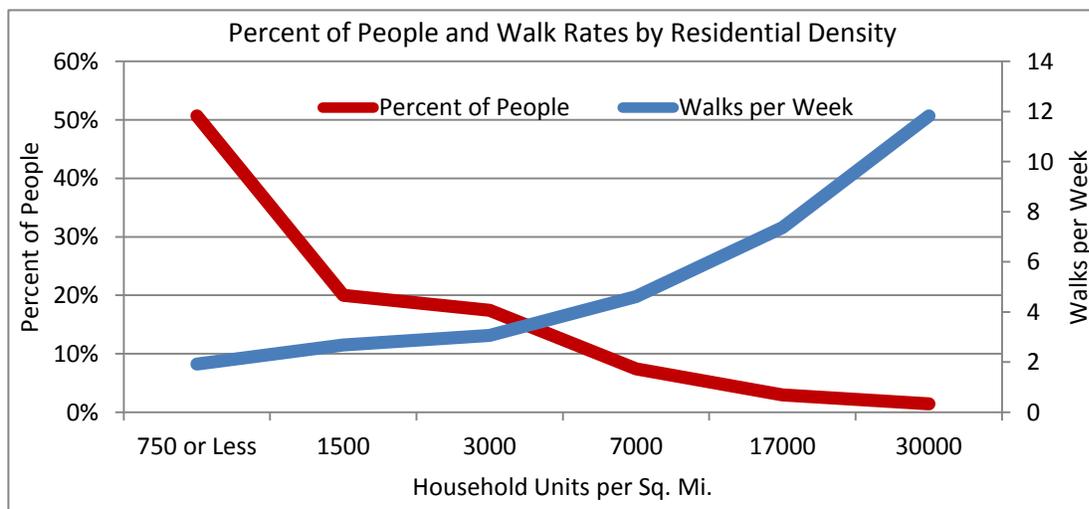
For example, people in denser urban areas, where sidewalks connect and many activities are located within walking distance, walk more often than people in less dense areas (see Exhibit 1). People in the low density areas report the lowest walking rates (shown on the blue line in Exhibit 1) of 87 walks per year or less than two walks per week (across all days and for all purposes).



On the other hand, people who live in the very highest density areas are a small proportion of all residents, but they have the highest rates of walking—615 walks per person per year (including walkers and non-walkers) or almost 12 per week.

In the U.S. the majority of people live in lower density places—over half of the US population lives in areas where there are 750 or fewer households per square mile (the percent of the population is shown on the red line in Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1 – Walk Rates (per Capita) by Residential Density

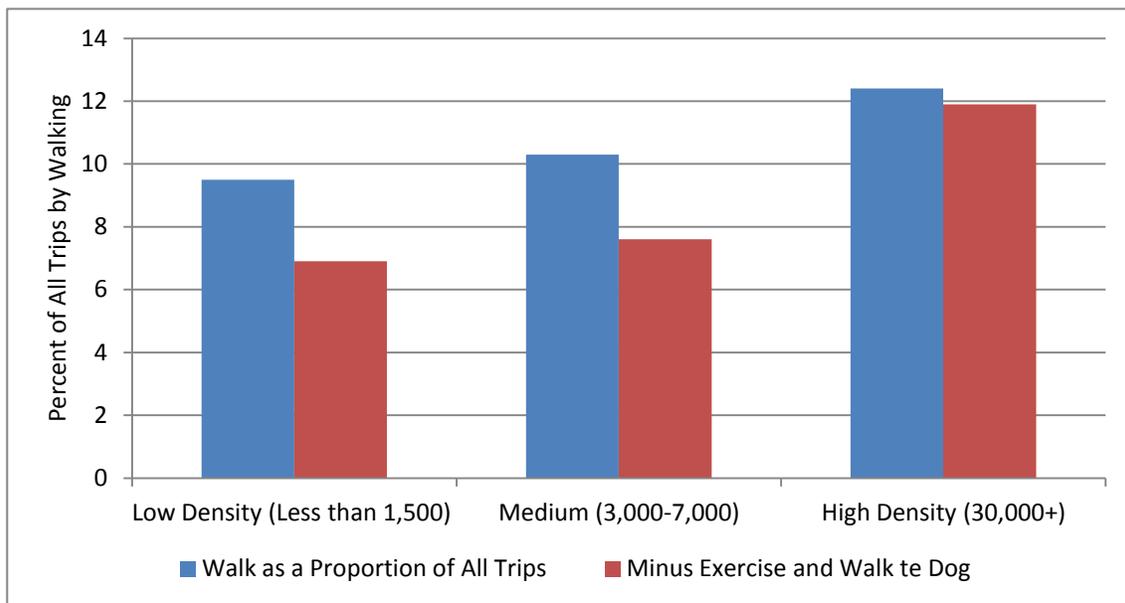


Source: McGuckin analysis of 2009 NHTS

The purpose of walks range from neighborhood rambles like walking the dog, to hurried marches to work. While walking the dog may not be dependent on the availability of sidewalks and destinations, walking for other purposes depends on how safe and pleasurable walking is and the proximity of places to go.

Exhibit 2 shows that 9.5 percent of all trips by people in low density areas are by walking, but nearly a third of those reported walks (38 percent) are walking for exercise or walking the dog. In very high density areas, 12.4 percent of all trips reported are by walking, but very few (only 4 percent) of those are for exercise or walk the dog.

Exhibit 2 – Percent of All Walk Trips Without ‘Walk the Dog’ and ‘Walk for Exercise’



Source: McGuckin analysis of 2009 NHTS

The NHTS data shows that when destinations and activities, like shops and restaurants, are close by people will walk to get there. People in very dense urban areas are more than 30 percent more likely to take a walk on any given day, 70 percent more likely to walk to work, and 1.3 times as likely to walk for shopping and other purposes.

Creating walkable communities means making an accessible and appealing environment for people to choose to walk in, especially walks to work and commercial activities that might replace a car trip. Cities are working hard to create livable urban centers, increase density, encourage a mix of transit options, complete the streets, and renew residential land-use.

Nancy McGuckin

See other publications and analysis at:

www.travelbehavior.us