

Policy Brief

August 2004

All Central Coast residents practice healthy eating and physical activity in communities that value, support and promote these life-long behaviors.



Taking a Step in the Right Direction! *PLACING A PREMIUM ON HEALTH BY PROMOTING MORE WALKABLE CENTRAL COAST COMMUNITIES*



The nation has seen an unprecedented rise in the level of obesity and overweight. Nationally, nearly two-thirds of adults in the United States are overweight and 30.5 percent are obese – a figure that has more than doubled in the last 40 years! The picture for our children is even more bleak. Twenty years ago, 5 percent of American kids were overweight; today that figure has

spiked to 15 percent, and experts say another 15 percent are headed that way.¹ Unfortunately, the Central Coast region (Santa Cruz, San Benito and Monterey

counties) is not immune to this trend. Despite an ideal climate for regular exercise and ready access to one of the nation's richest agricultural valleys, children of the Central Coast region record some of the highest overweight and unfit figures in California.²

The Nutrition and Fitness Collaborative of the Central Coast (Collaborative), representing more than 50 public health and nutrition organizations, was alarmed by these findings. Research has shown that 50 to 80 percent of overweight teens become obese adults.³ Additionally, chronic diseases such as Type 2 diabetes,

Overweight & Unfit Children		
Assembly District	Percent Overweight	Percent Unfit
27	22.6%	28.4%
28	35%	35%

California Center for Public Health Advocacy

ENERGY IN - ENERGY OUT = ENERGY STORED

To maintain a healthy body weight, the calories taken in through food must equal those expended, or burned, through activity. For healthy bodies, energy in should include a diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables, as they are low calorie and nutritiously dense, promoting the maintenance of a healthy weight. However, energy out is equally important.

On the Central Coast, it is clear that the “energy in (food) – energy out (physical activity) = energy stored” equation is becoming increasingly unbalanced by the lack of exercise. Gains in nutrition education and diet modifications must be supported by increased physical activity or our residents will, literally, tip the scales.



pedestrians, scary dogs, scary people, better freeways and bigger shopping centers that are difficult to access on foot are some

of the factors that prevent Central Coast residents from walking. Even those who identify themselves as walkers point out that in many cases city services actually discourage walking. Respondents said that they would walk more often if communities were pedestrian friendly. An analysis of the findings shows that most barriers to walking can be overcome with simple changes in city planning and better enforcement of existing traffic and civil codes.

IMPLICATIONS

While the health of citizens and the desirability attached to walkable communities is undeniable, there are also concrete economic reasons for promoting and developing walkable

communities. A recently released tool provides an estimate of actual costs that communities face due to physical inactivity (see *Cost of Physical Inactivity* chart).⁵ According to this cost calculator, inactivity costs Salinas over \$61 million a year, Hollister \$19 million a year and Watsonville \$17 million a year. Naturally, if this calculator were used on a countywide basis, numbers would be much higher.

Further, experiences from other communities suggest that improving walkability can enhance the local economy. Increased foot traffic promotes sales at local businesses and stimulates economic growth.

high blood pressure and coronary heart disease that were once seen only in adults are now frequently occurring in overweight children.⁴ In addition, low self-esteem, poor body image and symptoms of depression are associated with childhood overweight and obesity.

The Collaborative sought a solution that would address the needs of the whole community, regardless of income, language or age. Promoting regular physical activity in the form of walking seemed a natural way to improve overall health and quality of life in the region. Walking is free and ideally suited to the Central Coast's year-round moderate climate. However, a new survey by

the Collaborative shows that there are barriers to safe walking in Central Coast communities that contribute to the region's rising obesity epidemic.

FINDINGS

Nearly four out of 10 people in the Central Coast consider themselves non-walkers, according to the Collaborative's survey. Sidewalks in disrepair, light signals timed for vehicle flow rather than



Cost of Physical Inactivity	
Salinas	<p>\$61,497,566 per year</p> <p>Medical Care Costs.....\$11,940,546 Workers' Comp Costs.....\$551,038 Lost Productivity Costs.....\$49,005,982</p> <p><i>If as few as 5 percent of inactive people in Salinas became physically active, it could save an estimated \$3,074,878 per year</i></p>
Watsonville	<p>\$17,460,754 per year</p> <p>Medical Care Costs.....\$3,181,392 Workers' Comp Costs.....\$174,098 Lost Productivity Costs.....\$14,105,264</p> <p><i>If as few as 5 percent of inactive people in Watsonville became physically active, it could save an estimated \$873,038 per year.</i></p>
Hollister	<p>\$19,223,076 per year</p> <p>Medical Care Costs.....\$2,414,124 Workers' Comp Costs.....\$144,039 Lost Productivity Costs.....\$19,223,076</p> <p><i>If as few as 5 percent of inactive people in Hollister became physically active, it could save an estimated \$961,154 per year.</i></p>

What Discourages People from Walking
Drivers drive too fast
Drivers do not yield to pedestrians
Difficulty crossing the streets safely because of poorly timed signals and poorly marked or absent crosswalks
Cars make turns into the paths of pedestrians
Sidewalks are blocked, disconnected or in poor repair
Drivers back up their cars without looking
Scary dogs and scary people



BENEFITS OF A WALKABLE COMMUNITY

Beyond increasing activity levels of residents, there are many other obvious benefits of a walkable community:

- Communities that are pedestrian friendly encourage increased physical activity and enhance the quality of life.
- Walking reduces pollution and congestion, thus providing cleaner air and less reliance on non-renewable fossil fuels.
- Bicycling and walking are indicators of a community's livability – a factor that has a profound impact on attracting businesses and workers as well as tourism.

"Often pedestrians are not even seen as legitimate users of the road. Until recently they were referred to as 'traffic flow interruptions' in the 'Highway Capacity Manual,' the primary road design reference book for traffic engineers."

Caught in the Crosswalk, Surface Transportation Policy Project, 1999

Health Advantages of Walking

Even small increases in light to moderate activity, equivalent to walking for about 30 minutes a day, produce measurable benefits among those who are least active.¹

- Reduces risk of developing coronary heart disease, colon cancer, Type 2 diabetes and stroke
- Lowers blood cholesterol
- Reduces blood pressure levels in persons diagnosed with hypertension, and in all others decreases the risk of developing high blood pressure
- Reduces feelings of depression, anxiety stemming from low self-esteem and poor body image
- Helps build and maintain healthy bones, muscles and joints
- Helps older adults become stronger and better able to move about without falling or becoming fatigued²

- In cities and towns where people can regularly be seen out bicycling and walking, there is a palpable sense that these are safe and friendly places to live and visit.⁶
- When children walk to school, it positively affects their academic

performance, improves their self-image and independence, provides healthier social and emotional development, and increases the likelihood that they will grow into active adults.⁷

In spite of all of these benefits, it was clear to the entire Collaborative that

walking had fallen out of favor. Thirty years ago, over two-thirds of children walked or biked to school. Less than 10 percent do today.⁸ The Collaborative's goal was to discern why this was the case in the Central Coast region and to offer simple, concrete recommendations to reverse this trend.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

To understand why residents do not regularly walk in their communities, the Collaborative conducted a walkability survey in the cities of Hollister, Salinas and

Watsonville. These communities share similar socio-economic levels and ethnicity. The survey, developed and shared by the Community Traffic Safety Coalition of Santa Cruz County, was administered in English and Spanish. It asked people to identify themselves as either a regular walker or non-walker. Those identifying themselves as regular walkers were asked to complete the survey based upon their usual walking routes.

During the period from November 2003 to June 2004, more than 800 surveys were completed, thanks to collaborative efforts with city workers, nurses, students and volunteers. Surveys were distributed in elementary and high schools and enclosed in utility bills to cover a more diverse sampling of residents. One-

on-one interviews were also conducted. A sub-committee ensured that the same approach, probes and recruitment of subjects were employed in all three survey areas.





NEXT STEP: RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations from the Nutrition and Fitness Collaborative of the Central Coast are intended to help create more pedestrian-friendly communities.

CITY PLANNING, PUBLIC WORKS, TRAFFIC SAFETY AND MAINTENANCE

- **Problem:** Walkers report that sidewalks are blocked, start/stop or are in poor repair .

D *Recommendations:* Survey sidewalks and prioritize for repair. Advocate for linking sidewalks and paths to provide safe, uninterrupted walkways separated from traffic by landscape or other buffers. Ensure that there are uninterrupted walkways from neighborhoods to commercial establishments, including grocery stores, to increase access to nutritious foods, such as fruits and vegetables.

- **Problem:** Walkers report that sidewalks in their area are absent entirely, forcing walkers to compete with vehicles for space .

D *Recommendation:* Mandate that new or renovated developments receive approval only if the plans include sidewalks and pedestrian-friendly streets.

- **Problem:** Walkers find streets difficult to cross safely because of signals that aren't timed for walkers and poorly marked or absent crosswalks.

D *Recommendation:* Research intersections and make necessary improvements to signals and sidewalks to ensure that they promote pedestrian safety. Also, increased numbers of walkers naturally increases driver's awareness.

- **Problem:** Driver behavior endangers pedestrians. Walkers reported that drivers back up without looking, do not yield to pedestrians and drive too fast.

D *Recommendations:* Increase enforcement of existing traffic laws, publicize pedestrian rights and penalize drivers who disobey the laws.

- **Problem:** City planning focuses on increasing vehicular flow, parking and services.

D *Recommendations:* Plan for pedestrian-friendly communities and make pedestrian routes safe, efficient and accessible. Direct city/county planners to mandate that transportation routes provide a safe space for pedestrians and bicyclists.

PERSONAL SECURITY

- **Problem:** Nearly 25 percent of people surveyed are intimidated by both "scary people and scary dogs."

D *Recommendations:* Increase enforcement of laws aimed at reducing gang and nuisance activity in commercial and residential areas. Promote Neighborhood Watch, walking groups/clubs and access to park and school areas. Support enforcement of leash and animal licensing regulations. Publicize "walkability" of neighborhood parks and paths, and promote perception of walking as a safe and beneficial activity. Again, increased volume of walkers and families on streets naturally decreases illegal activities and increases perceived safety.

COMMUNITY PERCEPTION/QUALITY OF LIFE

- **Problem:** Nearly two-thirds of respondents automatically head to the car when they need to run an errand, connect to carpool or public transportation, take children to school or visit friends.

D *Recommendations:* Advocate for pedestrian-friendly neighborhoods with walkable access to stores, services and recreation. Build on the positive and promote walking as the *first* resort for trips of a mile or less.



RESOURCES

- **Problem:** Not enough resources are allocated to creating walkable communities.

D **Recommendations:** Allocate a portion of transportation revenues to building a walking-friendly infrastructure, not just for road repair. Feet are transportation, too! Use Air Quality dollars to reduce emissions by facilitating walking over driving. Dedicate a percentage of licensing fees, i.e. animal licensing, to pedestrian support. Many people who walk do so with their dogs. Work with Collaborative members to find alternate sources of support and funding to ensure that Central Coast communities are pedestrian friendly.

The Nutrition and Fitness Collaborative of the Central Coast hopes that by presenting this policy brief we are raising awareness of the importance of walkable communities and their contribution to obesity prevention and good health. We also hope that decisionmakers throughout the Central Coast will engage in conversations with the Collaborative about ways we can work together to improve the quality of life in the region.

CITY-BY-CITY SNAPSHOT

Salinas, Hollister and Watsonville are all communities located in the "salad bowl" of California. Although agriculture is the major employer in the Central Coast region, and fresh fruits and vegetables should be

readily available to all, the percentages of overweight and unfit children are among the highest in the state.¹⁰

SALINAS (MONTEREY COUNTY)

Salinas currently has a population of 151,060 residents and is characterized by an international agribusiness



Nutrition and Fitness Collaborative of the Central Coast Members

The following organizations share a vision in which everyone in the North Coast communities enjoys an environment that supports healthful eating and physical activity:

5 A Day Power Play! Campaign/LMCR · ABC/African-American Community Health Group · ACTION Council · Advanced Nutrition & Wellness Consulting · Ag Against Hunger · Alisal Union School District · American Cancer Society · American Heart Association · American Lung Association of the Central Coast · Bardin Elementary School · Boys & Girls Clubs of Monterey County · California Center For Advocacy · California Department of Health Services · Cancer Detection - EWC · CCA · Central Coast Alliance for Health · Central Coast Independent Living Program · Central Coast Women's Cancer Consortium · CHDP-Monterey County Health Department · Community Alliance of Family Farmers · Community Bridges, La Manana Center · County of Santa Cruz Health Services Agency · CSUMB – Monterey County Farm to School Partnership · Diabetes Health Center · Family and Community Nutrition Program · First 5 Monterey County · Food & Nutrition Services, Inc. · Food Bank for Monterey County · Gabilan Conservation Camp (CTF) · Girls Scouts Monterey Bay Council · Latino 5-a-Day/LMCR · LMCR/Community Bridges · Mee Memorial Hospital · Migrant Education Region 16 · Monterey County AIDS Project · Monterey County Area Agency on Aging · Monterey County Farm to School Partnership-CSU Monterey · Monterey County Health Consortium · Monterey County Health Department · Monterey County Office of Education - Head Start · Monterey County Office of Education, Curriculum and Instruction · Monterey Peninsula USD · Pajaro Valley Unified School District · Pajaro Valley Unified School District, Dept. of Special Services · Project LEAN/Nutrition Network - MCHD · Salinas Adult School · Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital · San Benito County Health and Human Services Agency · San Benito Health Foundation · Santa Cruz City Schools - Branciforte Elementary · Santa Cruz County CHDP · Santa Cruz County Health Care Outreach Coalition · Santa Cruz County Health Start · Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz and San Benito Counties · Seniors Council of Santa Cruz & San Benito Counties · South County Regional Health Partners · U.C. Cooperative Extension · United Way of Monterey County · United Way of Santa Cruz County · Watsonville Community Hospital · We Write Corporation · YMCA

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industry, manufacturing facilities, retail and wholesale trade, and blue collar and farm workers.

- Forty percent of walkers report Salinas streets are not easy to cross for the following reasons: crosswalks need better striping, crosswalks are too long to cross streets safely, signals are not timed properly and parked cars block the pedestrians' view of oncoming traffic.
- Nearly 40 percent of non-walkers say that fear of scary people and scary dogs keeps them from walking.

HOLLISTER (SAN BENITO COUNTY)

The city of Hollister is the San Benito County seat and principal population and business center. Covering six square miles, Hollister has 34,413 residents (64 percent of the county's population).

- One out of two walkers report that absent or broken sidewalks impede on the quality of their walks.
- One in four Hollister residents complain about dangerous driver behavior, including drivers who drive too fast, drivers who do not yield to pedestrians and drivers who turn into the paths of pedestrians.
- Nearly half of walkers report that it is not easy for pedestrians to cross the streets because crosswalks need striping (46 percent), crosswalks are too long to cross safely (29 percent), and signals are not timed for safe crossing (22 percent).

WATSONVILLE (SANTA CRUZ COUNTY)

Situated in the heart of the Monterey Bay area in the lush Pajaro Valley, Watsonville covers 6.6 square miles and has a population of over 44,265. Watsonville is a rich agricultural community (the Pajaro Valley is one of the world's largest agricultural centers) famous for its strawberries, apples and cut flowers, and for its ethnic diversity.

- Three out of 10 walkers report that the streets are not easy to cross, primarily because of absent crosswalks or signal lights that are badly timed.
- More than half of walkers report that driver behavior is an immediate threat to them for the following reasons: excessive speed and not yielding to pedestrians.

¹ Lemonick, Michael D. "How We Grew So Big." *Time*, June 7, 2004.

² "Percentage of Overweight and Unfit Children by Assembly District." California Center for Public Health Advocacy. <http://www.publichealthadvocacy.org/policy_briefs/overweight_and_unfit.html>.

³ Lissau, I. Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine. January 2004; vol. 158: pp 27-35. News release. Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine.

⁴ California Department of Health Services. 1998 California Teen Eating, Exercise, and Nutrition Survey. CalTeens 1998.

⁵ Findings are calculated through the Physical Inactivity Calculator from the Active Living Partnership, a project supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. Their site is at www.activelivingleadership.org. Statistics for the calculations were taken from the 2000 Census data at www.factfinder.census.gov.

⁶ "Benefits of Walking." WalkingInfo.org. <<http://www.walkinginfo.org/pp/benefits/>>.

⁷ Kids Walk to School. Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

⁸ California Department of Health Services. 1999.

⁹ "Why Should I Be Active?" Centers for Disease Control. <<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/physical/importance/why.htm>>.

¹⁰ "Percentage of Overweight and Unfit Children by Assembly District." California Center for Public Advocacy. <http://www.publichealthadvocacy.org/policy_briefs/overweight_and_unfit.html>.