

GET MOVING TO SCHOOL

Comparing Influences on the Potential for Active
School Travel in Four School Neighbourhoods
in a Large Urban Centre in Western Canada

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ABSTRACT

As physical activity among youth declines, various conditions, including overweight, obesity, and related health concerns like diabetes, have become more common among children and adolescents. As a purposeful activity, active school travel (AST) is thought to conveniently provide children with many benefits, including decreasing their chances of developing health problems as adults. Yet, rates of AST in Canada are declining.

Numerous factors that influence AST have been identified for various demographic groups and locations. While distance from home to school is presented as the most influential factor in the prevalence of AST, other individual, community, and environmental characteristics also encourage or restrict youth engagement in, and influence parents' and youths' perceptions of, AST. This study looked at potential influences of features from the built environment and characteristics of neighbourhood socioeconomic status, and compared the presence of absence of these factors with estimated rates of AST in four elementary schools in Calgary, Alberta.

The study captured information through three methods: 1) neighbourhood socio-demographic analyses, 2) built environment observations, and 3) key informant interviews. Findings from the three sources of data showed that rates of AST ranged dramatically between almost 0% to 90%. The lower-income, lower-connectivity school had consistently high rates of AST (90%), and the lower-income, higher-connectivity school and the higher-income, lower-connectivity school had consistently low rates throughout the year (25% and 0-10% respectively). The higher-income, higher-connectivity school, however, had varying rates between seasons (60-90%), although the range of rates was still considered high. Features that appeared to be important in influencing AST included: proximity to streets with higher volumes and speeds of traffic; connectivity of the street network; median household income of the neighbourhood; parent education levels; presence of greenspace; availability of school AST programs; and dominant dwelling types or mixtures.

The findings from this study suggest that neighbourhood-level socioeconomic status (SES) and built environment characteristics do influence the potential for AST, but that it is important to distinguish context-specific features (e.g. proximity to major roads) within these broader categories to fully understand the influence on rates of AST. Given the diversity of neighbourhood characteristics at each school and the range of factors influencing rates of AST, recommendations focused on providing a comprehensive strategy for each individual school, as well as broader recommendations for decision-makers both in planning and at the school board. Ultimately, stronger and more consistent collaboration is needed between municipal officials and the school board, and both bodies must commit to filling the gaps in available information that is necessary for those trying to foster engagement in AST.