

NORTHERN NEVADA

# Public Health+

*Serving Reno, Sparks & Washoe County*

**Physical Activity  
Engagement and the Built  
Environment Assessment**

October 2023

## INTRODUCTION

The health and wellbeing of those living in our community have been adversely impacted by the rise in sedentary lifestyles and the decline in physical activity outdoors. The ease with which we can walk around our neighborhoods influences our level of outdoor activity and exercise. Neighborhoods characterized by lower socioeconomic status (SES) encounter obstacles in achieving walkability, making it challenging for these residents to engage in physical activity, especially outdoors. This lack of walkability frequently stems from challenges associated with land planning and allocation in these regions. It may be attributed to inadequate funding for proper planning or a lack of comprehensive consideration of the community's future needs.

In addition to these challenges, factors such as infrastructure deficiencies, zoning regulations, and congested streets further compound the difficulties faced by residents in urban and suburban areas when it comes to walking and staying active. The cumulative impact of these factors means that many individuals residing in lower SES neighborhoods have limited opportunities to lead active and healthy lifestyles. Physical activity barriers range from traffic congestion to the deterioration of sidewalks and pedestrian paths. As urban areas become more congested with vehicle traffic and residential areas become more densely packed, finding safe outdoor exercise areas becomes increasingly difficult. Extensive research supports the claim that enhancing the built environment to facilitate outdoor physical activity significantly elevates participation levels. Enhancing physical activity levels involves prioritizing the removal of access barriers and introducing new infrastructure designed to promote activity.

## PROJECT GOAL

The purpose of this project was to collect community input on preferences for receiving physical activity programming and messaging from low-income neighborhoods and identify opportunities where enhancements can be made in the build environment.

To answer the question of how to increase the number of physically active adults in Washoe County, Northern Nevada Public Health's (NNPH) Chronic Disease and Injury Prevention Program team collected feedback from residents to understand, identify, and highlight areas of improvement in these communities. Surveys were administered at eight food distribution events through the Food Bank of Northern Nevada's Mobile Harvest across the Reno/Sparks area. The survey allowed community members to elaborate on their exercise experiences in their communities. In total, 154 participants were surveyed. Twenty unique home zip codes were recorded from the surveys with the most frequent home zip codes being 89502, 89431, and 89506 respectively.

## RESULTS

Understanding the demographics and preferences of our community members is essential for crafting effective strategies to promote physical activity. The data provides a comprehensive snapshot of the survey respondents: 74.7% of participants identify as female, while 24.7% are male, representing a diverse age range from 22 to 88. The top six residential zip codes were 89502 (24.7%), 89431 (13.6%), 89506 (11.0%), 89512 (6.5%), 89508 (5.8%), and 89433 (5.2%). Ethnically, survey respondents were 50.6% White, 31.8% Hispanic or Latino, 7.1% Asian/Pacific Islander, 2.6% Black or African American, 0.6% Native American or American Indian, and 5.2% other.

Regarding preferred physical activity opportunities, survey participants provided valuable insights: an impressive 81.80% feel safe exercising in their preferred setting, with 80% favoring home or independent exercises, and 49.70% preferring exercise at the park.

Furthermore, our survey participants identified areas in need of outdoor improvement. An impactful 49.4% pinpointed sidewalks and streets as essential for enhancement, emphasizing the importance of safe and accessible pathways. Additionally, 46.1% called for improvements in outdoor lighting, recognizing its value for safety and enjoyment and 47.4% emphasized the necessity of better road markings and visible pedestrian signage to enhance navigation and overall outdoor safety.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving the built environment is a core approach to improving community health. The following strategies to enhance the built environment will increase pedestrian safety and accessibility and support active living.

- *Proper sidewalks and pedestrian paths:* The most immediate recommendation is to pave over open drainage ditches with a proper sidewalk with a gutter system. Have a walking path that is up to code and ADA compliant. Create enough buffer room for bikers and pedestrians alike.
- *Adequate signage, lighting, and road markings:* The markings on the road should be regularly maintained to indicate crosswalks and stop lines.
- *Maintain landscaping:* Efforts to maintain overgrown foliage for adequate visibility of roadways, pedestrians and signage should be regularly monitored.

## NEXT STEPS

These initiatives went through a pilot run, with the goal of expanding their benefits to other areas in Reno/Sparks, ultimately improving the overall quality of life for residents in Washoe County. NNPH intends to share the results of this initiative with stakeholders, fostering collaboration on future projects centered around physical activity and urban development.

The data and trends indicate that Washoe County is making steady progress in promoting physical activity and combatting sedentary lifestyles. However, there is ample room for improvement by focusing on enhancing walkability, eliminating access barriers to physical activity, and nurturing environments that encourage active living. As committed stakeholders in Washoe County's health and vitality, it is our responsibility to continue collaborating to ensure that every resident can lead healthier, more active lives. By tailoring our efforts to meet the specific needs and preferences of our diverse community, we can further reduce the risks of cardiovascular disease, obesity, and stroke, ultimately elevating the overall quality of life in our county.



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