



Understanding the rural physical activity environment for better health outcomes

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In urban areas, we know that people who live in environments that support physical activity have more active lifestyles. In rural adults, this link is unclear.

In 2016, 447 people from rural areas of Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia completed an online survey as part of the Snakes, Streetlights and Swimming Pools study. This study aimed to improve the measurement and understanding of physical activity environments in rural settings. Here are some findings from the survey.

Pubs and supermarkets accessible by walking but not work or school: Walking to work or school would take more than 30 minutes for 72% of people, but 43% could walk to a pub and 40% to a supermarket within 20 minutes.



Ample opportunity for outdoor activities: Parks, beaches, lakes, rivers, creeks and walking or cycling pathways could be accessed within a 20-minute walk by most participants.

Limited public transport and walkable destinations: For about half of participants (51%), a bus or train stop was not within walking distance, and 51% could not walk to many places in their local area.

Walkways lack accessibility for all: Around two thirds of participants felt that walkways lacked accessibility for all mobility levels, which may relate to the maintenance of walkways, with 56% indicating that walkways were not well maintained.



Pretty, but not much to do: Most (79%) considered their local area attractive, but only 47% felt that their local area offered interesting things to do. Around half of participants (48%) indicated that there was inadequate seating in parks along walkways.

Traffic safety concerns: Over a third (39%) believed that drivers commonly exceeded the speed limit in their local area. Most considered street lighting (67%) or access to pedestrian crossings (63%) inadequate, and 56% felt that many trucks drove through their local area.

Crime not a major problem, but natural hazards are: Not everyone felt safe to walk in their local area, day or night (21%), with 18% attributing the crime rate as a reason for feeling unsafe to walk at night. Many participants (74%) said that they had to be careful of natural hazards (e.g. snakes, falling branches, swooping magpies/plovers) when walking or cycling in their local area.



Summary

This survey identified many possible factors that may act as barriers to engaging in physical activity, some of which appear unique to rural settings. Government bodies, planners, developers and local councils can use these findings to inform policies and programs to better support active living in rural areas.

Where to next

Now that we know how to better measure the physical activity environment in rural settings, further work will aim to understand which features of this environment hinder or support physical activity, and what we can do to create environments that support active living.

