

# POLICY INTERVENTION BRIEFS › PHYSICAL ACTIVITY INTERVENTION: ACCESS TO PHYSICAL ACTIVITY SPACES

- The following brief reports the effects of policies that increase access to physical activity spaces on the reduction of childhood obesity prevalence in the state of Louisiana, from an evidence-based modeling program.
- This intervention represents policies that increase and improve access to spaces that provide adults and kids with opportunities for safe and affordable options for walking, biking, social, and green space physical activity in community, school, and in work settings.
- This intervention also represents changes to the built environment, including renovating or redesigning existing facilities, or creating new infrastructure that supports physical activity.



Children and adults living in neighborhoods with greater availability and accessibility of parks and recreation centers have higher physical activity levels.<sup>149,150,157,158</sup>

Children from low-income and minority households have disproportionately less access to recreational facilities.<sup>53</sup>

## Policy Goals

- Increase levels of physical activity for all residents.
- Reduce the amount of sedentary time for all residents.
- Provide safe, affordable, well-designed spaces where all residents can participate in physical activity.

## What Does the Research Tell Us?

- An evaluation of Louisiana's children's access to physical activity spaces gave the state a "D" for the Built Environment and Community Design. Only 62.0% of children have access to sidewalks or walking paths, and 65.5% of children have parks/playgrounds in their neighborhoods.<sup>144</sup>
- There is **irrefutable evidence** of the effectiveness of regular physical activity to prevent chronic diseases (e.g. cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, hypertension, obesity, depression and osteoporosis) and premature death.<sup>145</sup> Physical activity promotes better general health and well-being, improves health-related quality of life, helps control weight, reduces the risk of some forms of cancer, and improves mental health and mood.<sup>146-149</sup>
- Physical activity levels decline as young people age.<sup>111</sup>
- Many studies have shown an association between the built environment, physical activity, and obesity.<sup>14,150-152</sup>
- Strong evidence supports enhancing access to physical activity spaces in conjunction with promotions to increase physical activity.<sup>153</sup>

## Current Policy Environment in Louisiana

- The Louisiana House of Representatives signed a bill in 2011 that encourages schools to enter into joint-use agreements by limiting the liability of school boards. This can inspire community groups to use school facilities for recreation and physical activity.<sup>154</sup>
- A House Concurrent Resolution (HCR) creating a Complete Streets work group was passed in 2010 that recognizes the need for Louisiana transportation authorities to assume responsibility for creating safer, more accessible roadways for pedestrians and cyclists.<sup>155</sup> This workgroup published a detailed report with recommendations in 2010<sup>156</sup> and was re-created by a HCR in 2012.<sup>157</sup> By creating and continuing a state-endorsed Complete Streets Workgroup, Louisiana has taken a significant step in recognizing the need to improve the built environment to promote biking and walking.<sup>155</sup>

## WAYS TO SUPPORT

### Access to Physical Activity Spaces

- Promote Safe Routes to School, Complete Streets, and active transportation to ensure pedestrian/cyclist safety and accessibility to roads and paths.
- Create joint-use agreements that allow residents to use school facilities during non-school hours.
- Support land use incentives that promote physical activity opportunities.
- Initiate a subsidy program for low-income residents wanting to use pay-for-use facilities.
- Form worksite, school, church, or neighborhood physical activity groups.

## Achieving Maximum Intervention Results

- Initial conditions (42%) reflect:
  - Low scores on [www.walkscore.com](http://www.walkscore.com), a public access website that created an index of walkability, bikeability, based on amenities available within walking distance (one mile) from most locations nationwide. This means that Louisiana, with the exception of the largest urban areas such as New Orleans, is generally not suited for walking or biking for transportation or physical activity.<sup>160</sup>
  - Large disparities between rural and urban areas in terms of the number of recreational facilities available to residents. Many rural parishes have no facilities while East Baton Rouge Parish has over 50 facilities.<sup>127</sup> Overall, only 23% of Louisiana residents live within half a mile of a park.<sup>126</sup>
  - At least 56% of adults in Louisiana participate in regular physical activity.<sup>161</sup>
- Maximum intervention (100%) would represent ideal conditions where all residents, regardless of income or geographic region, have reasonable access to places where they could participate in individual physical activity opportunities or social recreation (e.g. gyms, basketball and tennis courts, soccer fields).



## Projected Effect on Louisiana's Childhood Obesity Prevalence

PRISM Results: Can a Policy Intervention to Improve Access to Physical Activity Spaces Reduce the Prevalence of Childhood Obesity?				
Policy Strength	Maximum (100%)	Maximum (100%)	Moderate (50%)	Moderate (50%)
Year Implemented	2013	2016	2013	2016
% Change [ROU <sup>^</sup> ]	↓ 5% [3-8%]	↓ 4% [2-8%]	↓ 1% [0-1%]	↓ 1% [0-1%]

<sup>^</sup> ROU refers to the Range of Uncertainty determined by the PRISM sensitivity analysis

Note: The symbol ↓ signifies that the percent change is negative, and the percent represents a decrease.

- Implementing policies that increase access to physical activity places and opportunities may slightly reduce the level of childhood obesity.
- Greater potential for effectiveness is seen if policies are set to the maximum level, which would mean that all residents have access to safe, affordable places to exercise and participate in physical activity.

## Implementing the Policy

Because there is current movement in Louisiana to build bike paths, improve playgrounds, and increase the acreage of green space available to residents across the state, it appears that obtaining statewide support for this policy intervention is plausible and should be pursued. There are 40 State Parks and Historical Sites managed by the Louisiana Office of State Parks; 5 National Parks; Tammany Trace, a beautiful rail-to-trail project on the North Shore of Lake Pontchartrain; and numerous city-parish and neighborhood parks and open green spaces. Many new projects are underway to create and improve biking and walking trails, and build playgrounds and sports facilities. Ensuring access to these spaces is a critical component of this policy intervention. Special attention should be paid to physical activity opportunities in rural communities, many of which do not have access to safe, well-maintained recreation facilities. Capitalizing on the state's endorsement of joint-use agreements with schools may be a critical way to close gaps in access for rural residents. A statewide policy that aims to increase access to recreational and physical activity opportunities could leverage funds to create new infrastructure or enhance existing recreational areas in rural communities.

! "Individuals may have the necessary knowledge, skills, attitudes, and motivation to be physically active; however, if they do not have access to the necessary opportunities, they may be restricted or prohibited from being active. Having access to places and opportunities for physical activity and knowing these opportunities exist is important in order to increase physical activity. Efforts to increase access may not lead to increased use, unless the community is involved and aware of the efforts. With community support and involvement, it is likely that increased access to physical activity opportunities will result in increased use."<sup>162</sup>  
 ~The CDC Guide to Strategies for Increasing Physical Activity in the Community, 2010

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