

Active Living Research

Using Evidence to Prevent Childhood Obesity
and Create Active Communities

RESEARCH BRIEF

March 2012

States Vary in Safe Routes to School Spending

Introduction

The federal Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program provides funds to support programs in each state to ensure that it is safe and easy for children to walk and bicycle to school. Walking and bicycling to school can help children be more active, and active children are less likely to be obese. The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) oversees the SRTS program and provides states with program goals, but states choose how to run their programs. Congress sets aside money for SRTS programs in every state, but there is significant variation in the amount of available federal SRTS funding that states actually spend. We assessed how states spent these funds between 2005 and 2009, as well as how effective states were at meeting FHWA's goals for SRTS programs.

Key Findings

Many states are using their SRTS funds, but spending varied from state to state. From 2005 to 2009, states spent less than half of available SRTS federal funds. However, during that time, the amount of SRTS funds that states spent increased each year. Most states met some or all of the FHWA goals for SRTS programs.

Methodology

This study looked at federal "obligations" from FHWA to each state to fund SRTS projects from 2005 to 2009. To assess the success of each state's SRTS programs, we measured how many FHWA program goals each of the states met. These goals included whether: (1) state programs had projects at both state and local levels, (2) states had projects in rural areas and areas with high levels of child poverty, and (3) state projects included both physical projects, such as installing crosswalks near schools, as well as other programmatic activities, such as instructing students on bicycle safety. We compared states' SRTS spending with how many FHWA goals they met. We compared total spending for each state with the number of years each state spent funds, as well as the number of students and level of child poverty in each state. We also compared spending among counties, to see if there was a relationship between local SRTS spending and local child poverty levels,

SOURCE

Cradock, A.L., Fields, B., Barrett, J.L., Melly, S. (2012). Program practices and demographic factors associated with federal funding for the Safe Routes to School program in the United States. *Health & Place*, 18(1), 16-23.

Open access to the full text article is available at:

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1353829211001559>

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR

Angie L. Cradock

Harvard School of Public Health

401 Park Drive, 4th Floor West
Boston, MA 02215

Email: acradock@hsph.harvard.edu

Phone: 617-384-8933

For more information on *Active Living Research*, visit: www.activelivingresearch.org/



urban or rural status, and/or history of spending on walking and bicycling projects.

Other Findings

States that met more FHWA goals spent more SRTS funds and states that funded projects in more years spent more funds. States that spent more funds on physical projects, like walkways and crosswalks, spent more total funds. States with more students and states with high child poverty rates spent less. Rural counties and counties with high child poverty rates were less likely to have spent any SRTS funds. Counties with a history of spending on walking and bicycling projects were more likely to have spent SRTS funds.

Implications

Many states are using the SRTS program to make important changes that support safe, physically active trips to school. However, the program is not likely to impact active commuting to school if the funds do not reach the local level. By 2009, spending within states was uneven, and several states had not yet spent most of their funds. Areas with high rates of child poverty or little history with walking and bicycling projects spent less of the available funding.

National and state leaders can help states track their SRTS spending and identify local areas that could benefit from SRTS programs. State program staff can actively solicit applications for funding from local areas each year and link local groups, which may not have the resources to apply for funds or plan projects, with regional partners who can help schools or communities with the application and planning processes. To make the best use of the funds available through the federal SRTS program, states should work to ensure that the money benefits the communities that need it most, such as those with high rates of poverty or obesity among children.