

Active Living Research

Using Evidence to Prevent Childhood Obesity
and Create Active Communities

RESEARCH BRIEF

March 2012

Impact of State Laws on Walking and Bicycling to School

Introduction

According to the *Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans*, children should get at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day, and one way for children to meet this goal is through brisk walking or bicycling to school. Yet, active commuting to school has declined over the past four decades. This study is the first to examine the impact of state laws on walking and bicycling to school among a national sample of elementary schools in the United States.

Key Findings

We found that many states have laws to improve student safety when walking and bicycling to school. We also found that some types of state laws, such as those requiring crossing guards, speed zones and traffic calming around schools, were linked with more principals reporting that more students were allowed to walk/bike to school and fewer principals reporting that no students walked/bicycled to school.

Methodology

The study examined the impact of state laws on: (1) barriers to walking and bicycling to school such as traffic danger, lack of crossing guards, distance to school; (2) whether individual schools allowed children to walk and bicycle to school; and (3) the percentage of students who walk and bicycle to school. School data on the number of students who walked or bicycled to school were collected by survey from 1,967 principals of public elementary schools between 2007 and 2009. The state laws for each year were compiled through primary legal research. We analyzed relationships between state laws and active commuting practices reported by school principals.

Other Findings

Laws that require bussing for students living within one mile of school were associated with fewer children actively commuting to school.

We also found that principals reported fewer barriers to active commuting among students when there were state laws that required traffic calming, or

SOURCE

Chriqui, J.F., Taber, D.R., Slater, S.J., Turner, L., McGowan Lowrey, K., Chaloupka, F.J. (2012). The impact of state safe routes to school-related laws on active travel to school policies and practices in U.S. elementary schools. *Health & Place*, 18(1), 8-15.

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when there were other features in place to slow down motorists' speeds around schools.

Implications

State policymakers should consider adopting laws that are associated with increased walking and bicycling to school among students, such as those requiring crossing guards, speed zones and traffic calming around schools.

The findings from this study also highlight the need for school and community leaders to ensure that the areas around schools are designed to make walking and bicycling to school safe and easy. When routes are safe, bussing distance policies should make active commuting the default option for students living closest to school.