



Safe Routes  
to School  
National  
Partnership

# Safe Routes to Healthy Food



Everyone has to eat; it's not an option to go without food. Whether people shop at a supermarket or corner store, access food at a food pantry, eat at a local restaurant, order takeout, or pick up produce at a farmers market or community garden, everyone needs a safe and reliable way to get to the places where they obtain foods – ideally healthy foods. Not everyone has a car, and many people rely on walking, bicycling, or public transportation to access food. Everyone deserves a transportation system that can conveniently, safely, and affordably link them to the places they need to go, especially to healthy food.

Increasing access to healthy food can be achieved not only by bringing healthy foods closer to people, but also by making walking, biking, and transit a safer and more viable option to link people to where they get or shop for food. The work of overcoming the transportation challenges to getting healthy food is called Safe Routes to Healthy Food. Safe Routes to Healthy Food aims to strengthen policies and practices that make it safer and more convenient to walk, bike, and use transit to healthy foods.

## What's the Problem?

In many neighborhoods, local stores may not sell fresh produce or other healthy options, and unsafe conditions for walking or biking, inaccessible or unaffordable public transit service, and lack of access to cars can make getting to healthy foods dangerous, time-consuming, and expensive.<sup>1</sup>

## Who Needs Safe Routes to Healthy Food?

Everyone needs Safe Routes to Healthy Food. But the need and challenge is more acute in low-income communities, rural communities, and communities of color, where residents are less likely to have a grocery store close to home, and less likely to own a vehicle. Without a car, people in these communities rely on alternate modes of transportation, like walking, bicycling, and transit. Low-income people and people of color in urban and suburban areas are often getting around on streets that lack sidewalks, crosswalks, bike lanes, and other elements that make it safe to walk or bike, resulting in high rates of injury and fatality.<sup>2</sup> In rural areas, 1.6 million people do not have cars, making alternative transportation options sorely needed to reach healthy food stores.<sup>3</sup>

- Many studies have found that low-income neighborhoods, rural neighborhoods, predominantly black neighborhoods, and predominantly Latino neighborhoods have fewer supermarkets and more convenience stores than higher income, urban, and white neighborhoods.<sup>4</sup>
- Sidewalks are only present in 49 percent of low-income neighborhoods compared to 89 percent of high-income neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup> And compared with whites, bicycle fatality rates nationwide are 23 percent higher for Latinos and 30 percent higher for African Americans, with significant contributing factors being lack of adequate or safe infrastructure to support biking.<sup>6</sup>

This lack of access to healthy foods, public transit, and safe places to walk or bike is bad for people's health, and disproportionately affects low-income communities, rural communities, and communities of color.

- Black and Latino residents and low-income residents of all races and ethnicities experience the highest obesity rates nationwide.<sup>7</sup>
- Rural adults experience obesity at a rate that is significantly higher than urban adults of the same demographic.<sup>8</sup>



## What Are the Benefits of Safe Routes to Healthy Food?

Research shows that people with access to healthy food options, streets that are safe for walking and biking, and public transit options have better health outcomes than people without access to healthy foods and active transportation choices.

- Residents living in walkable neighborhoods (where destinations are located within walking distance from residential areas and where there are physical design features that make it safe and appealing to walk) are more likely to be physically active and less likely to be overweight or obese than residents living in less walkable neighborhoods.<sup>9</sup>
- People who use public transit to get to work are more physically active and walk more often to reach daily needs and destinations than people who do not use public transit.<sup>10</sup>
- Studies find a positive correlation between access to supermarkets and other healthy food retail outlets and better health outcomes, including lower BMI and lower rates of chronic disease.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to supporting physical activity and healthy food choices, improving the transportation linkages between where people live, work, and access healthy foods serves multiple benefits:

- **Link to destinations:** Many of the solutions that make it safer and more convenient for people to walk, bike, and take transit to healthy foods also make it easier for people to get to work, parks, schools, and other places they want to go.
- **Safety:** Getting more people out walking and bicycling puts more eyes on the street, which has the ability to influence perceptions of public safety.
- **Economic development:** Grocery stores serve as anchor retailers, attracting nearby retailers, and serve as employers – creating or retaining jobs. Research suggests that improving pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure in commercial areas, such as walkways, bikeways, and bike racks, can increase sales and economic activity at local stores.<sup>12</sup>

## Investing in Communities Without Displacing Residents

Too often, when a new grocery store, bike lane, or bus stop comes to a neighborhood that previously lacked options for healthy food and safe, convenient travel options, it is accompanied by renewed attention to a neighborhood that can raise property values and price people out of the communities they call home. As a result, a key element of our focus on Safe Routes to Healthy Food involves pairing recommended strategies to advance Safe Routes to Healthy Food with policies that mitigate the displacement of those communities these new food venues and transportation options are intended to benefit.

## How Are Communities Working Toward Safe Routes to Healthy Food?

An explicit focus on Safe Routes to Healthy Food is a newer area for planners, health professionals, and advocates, but there are many examples of businesses, agencies, and nonprofits taking action to improve transportation options to healthy food.

### *Supporting Bicycling to Healthy Food*

- In Moscow, Idaho, the University of Idaho partnered with the city to start a Passport for Health program in the farmers market. All children riding to the market receive a \$1.00 token to purchase farm fresh food. Although the incentive is intended for children, it also encourages these children's parents to ride to the farmers market, too. Additionally, the local Safe Routes to School program holds bike and helmet safety education events at the market.
- In Portland, Oregon, the Plaid Pantry convenience store chain offers bike aid stations (pump, flat tire kits, etc.) and ample bike parking at all 104 of its Oregon locations to ensure that people on bikes can conveniently shop there.

### *Making a Clear Link Between Public Transit and Healthy Food*

- In Atlanta, Georgia, the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Agency (MARTA) launched its Fresh MARTA Market, a competitively priced farmers market, at the West End Rail Station. After a successful first year, they are bringing the farmers market to three additional stations.
- The city of Huntsville, Alabama provides free bus passes for students to access summer meal sites. The city also developed a map that shows the location of summer meal sites along the various bus routes.
- In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA) identified "[Improving Access to Local Food Via Transit](#)" as a goal in its Sustainability Plan and set a long term goal of bringing fresh food within 10 minutes of 75 percent of residents. SEPTA has several initiatives that work toward achieving that goal, including: development of farmers markets at transit hubs; providing unused SEPTA property for use as a community garden, the produce from which is then sold as community supported agriculture (CSA) at SEPTA Headquarters; and extending a bus route to service a newly developed grocery store.

### *Using Planning Processes to Address What Is Preventing Walking, Biking, and Taking Transit to Healthy Food*

- In Siler City, North Carolina, the 2013 Pedestrian Master Plan takes food access into account and makes recommendations to improve walkable access to grocery stores.<sup>13</sup> After assessing which stores provided healthy food options, the plan developed recommendations to prioritize sidewalk, multi-use greenway, and multi-use side paths that create connections between those stores and residential neighborhoods.



Photo: Jason Harms

## What Steps Can Communities Take to Create Safe Routes to Healthy Food?

As the above examples show, communities can take a variety of actions to support Safe Routes to Healthy Food:

- Shift away from thinking about food access and active transportation as separate from one another. Effective transportation systems are networks, linking people to places they want and need to go, like parks, grocery stores, and places of employment.
- Work with community members to understand the barriers and challenges to walking, biking, and taking transit to access healthy foods.
- Convene a meeting of local active transportation and food access stakeholders. Discuss how the work being done could be strengthened by working together.
- Use data and maps to display existing bicycle, sidewalk, and transit infrastructure compared with venues where healthy food can be obtained, and use this to guide policy, investments, and programmatic decision-making.
- Look for opportunities to support Safe Routes to Healthy Food in local plans, such as sustainability plans, bicycle and pedestrian plans, and comprehensive plans.
- Work with transit agencies to improve bus access to healthy food, and identify other opportunities for transit to support healthy food access, such as co-locating farmers markets at transit hubs or leasing unused property for use as a community garden.

## Safe Routes to Healthy Food Task Force

Through our role as the [Voices for Healthy Kids](#) Community Consortium lead, we are facilitating the Safe Routes to Healthy Food Task Force, in partnership with [The Food Trust](#), a nationally recognized non-profit working on food access. The role of the task force is to jointly develop recommended strategies for stakeholders to make it easier, safer, and more convenient for people to walk, bike, and take transit to where they access food.

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