

Study to evaluate zoning code reforms and physical activity

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Researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago have received a \$1.5 million federal grant to examine the relationship between zoning code reforms, the physical environment, and physical-activity behavior in communities throughout the U.S.

The study, funded by National Institutes of [Health](#), is one of the first to look at community-level land use nationwide to see how zoning can facilitate or inhibit structural change in the environment that could lead to increased [physical activity](#) among adults, says principal investigator Jamie Chriqui, senior research scientist at UIC's Institute for Health Research and Policy.

Communities are increasingly using zoning and land-use laws to reform the [physical environment](#). Many zoning reforms of the past decade were aimed at increasing active living through a mix of residential, commercial, retail and recreational areas interconnected by biking, walking, and public transportation.

The reforms have been adopted by communities in at least 35 states as a way to rely less on automobile transportation, reduce sprawl, and increase physical activity, according to the researchers.

But Chriqui says little is known about "whether or not these zoning reforms are being implemented in communities -- through structural changes to the environment such as [sidewalks](#), parks and trails, bike paths, and street connectivity -- and ultimately, whether or not these

changes are increasing [physical activity levels](#) within communities."

The researchers will compile zoning codes for municipalities and counties encompassing more than half of the U.S. population. Data will be aggregated at the county level, to correlate with county-level physical activity measures.

"We have developed evaluation tools to measure the strength and comprehensiveness of community-level zoning using markers for walkability, bikability, active and passive recreation, bicycle and trails, and interconnected street activity, and these tools will be specifically adapted for this study," Chriqui said.

The researchers will then assess whether or not communities with code reforms have more parks and green space, improved traffic safety, and less urban sprawl than communities without code reforms. They will use geographic information systems (GIS) measures of the physical environment that indicate opportunities for physical activity. This information will be linked to demographic data and health survey data to measure physical activity levels among adults.

"If zoning policies and the structural environment are one way to improve physical activity, then it could be a relatively easy change to modify zoning codes to make them more physical-activity oriented," said Chriqui.

The researchers will share their results with counties and municipalities nationwide, as well as public health, active living, urban planning and transportation organizations.

Co-investigators are Sandy Slater, assistant professor of health policy and administration in the UIC School of Public Health, and Lisa Nicholson, research specialist at UIC's Institute for [Health Research](#) and

Policy.

More information: The project is supported by the NIH's National Cancer Institute under award number CA158035.

Provided by University of Illinois at Chicago

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