

How can more walking be encouraged in cities?

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

A report investigating travel habits in seven European cities reveals environmental and social drivers that make people choose to walk.

The new research reveals these include social factors such as how safe people feel and how concerned they are about air pollution, and [urban](#)

[design](#), such as how connected streets are and how close people are to public transport links.

The researchers hope their findings could give [urban planners](#) and policymakers the tools to create more walking-friendly cities through design, policies and outreach campaigns, which could ultimately help tackle air pollution and lack of physical activity.

The study, published in *Environmental Health Perspectives*, forms part of the PASTA (Physical Activity through Sustainable Transport Approaches) project and used data from 7,875 adults from seven European cities: Antwerp (Belgium), Barcelona (Spain), London (United Kingdom), Örebro (Sweden), Rome (Italy), Vienna (Austria) and Zurich (Switzerland).

Understanding what works

Dr. Audrey de Nazelle, from the Centre for Environmental Policy at Imperial, leads the London-based [case study](#) for PASTA. She said: "We know people can get tremendous health benefits from increasing the amount of walking that they do, but insufficient understanding of what works is often used as an excuse not to develop policies to encourage more walking. Our study provides more convincing evidence of how to support healthy walking behavior."

The results show that people that walk the most are those that live in areas with good public transport services and a higher density of households, services and installations, such as shops, parks, schools and their workplace.

Living in this type of urban environment was associated with a 12 percent increase in minutes walked every week, as compared to people living in other environments.

Street connectivity is also important, suggesting that city planners can encourage walking by creating connections for pedestrians between streets where there may currently be walls, housing estates or cul de sacs, for example.

Collecting the data

On average, for the sample used in the study, participants from Barcelona walk the most (259 minutes per week), while those from Antwerp walk the least (50 minutes per week) due to the high use of bicycles in this city. Londoners walk nearly as much as Barcelonans, at 255 minutes per week.

Participants with a high education level and access to a car walk the least.

The study participants answered an online questionnaire on their walking habits: how many hours a week they walked, their criteria for choosing a specific transport mode, and the availability of a motorized vehicle or bicycle, among others.

The researchers then used public geographic information to collect data on the built environment in which the participants live and work or study.

Values that support walking

The team also investigated [social factors](#), and found that people who tended to value safety, low [air pollution](#) exposure, privacy, health benefits and low environmental impacts tended to walk more. This suggests that if people could see the importance of these values, they may be encouraged to walk more.

The results also suggest that walking could be encouraged by improving people's opinion of walking—those who believed that walking saves time, or who felt comfortable walking, were much more likely to do so—both factors that can be improved through enhancing the built environment.

Professor Mark Nieuwenhuijsen, study coordinator and director of the Urban Planning, Environment and Health Initiative, said: "The results support previous studies on the role of urban planning and transport in promoting walking, and provides new information to help achieve sustainable, healthy and livable cities, in accordance with the Sustainable Development Goals."

More information: Mireia Gascon et al. Correlates of Walking for Travel in Seven European Cities: The PASTA Project, *Environmental Health Perspectives* (2019). [DOI: 10.1289/EHP4603](https://doi.org/10.1289/EHP4603)

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