



South Carolina Institute of  
Medicine & Public Health

SOUTH CAROLINA OFFICE OF  
**RURAL HEALTH**

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**POLICY BRIEF | APRIL 2024**

# Walkability in Williamsburg County



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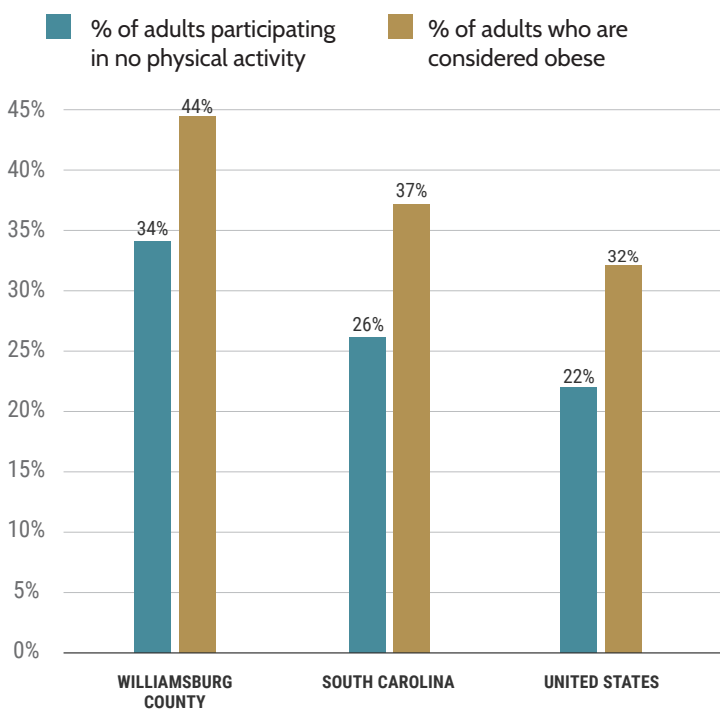
# Background

Social determinants of health, such as where people live and work, factor into walkability levels.<sup>1</sup> Researchers have long identified a relationship between active travel and health.<sup>2</sup> Studies show that insufficient pedestrian and bicyclist infrastructure is associated with a reduced amount of physical activity.<sup>3</sup> This is, in many ways, a result of communities increasingly being designed around the use of automobiles.<sup>4</sup> Decades of data conclude that physical inactivity results in an increased risk of chronic and cardiovascular diseases and obesity.<sup>5</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends adults get 150 minutes of moderate-intensity physical activity per week.<sup>6</sup> Three out of four Americans do not engage in the healthy amount of physical activity recommended by the CDC.<sup>7</sup> In Williamsburg County, **34%** of adults reported participating in no physical activity outside of work; this is **8%** higher than the South Carolina average and **12%** higher than the United States average.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, **44%** of adults in Williamsburg are considered obese with a Body Mass Index of 30 or greater.<sup>9</sup> This is **7%** higher than the state average and **12%** higher than the national average.<sup>5</sup> Obesity resulting from inactivity increases the risk for diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and some cancers.<sup>10</sup>

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## Risk Factors for Chronic Diseases



Source: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (2020)

As obesity and chronic conditions continue to rise in the United States, researchers have explored how walkability influences health outcomes. Walkability refers to the ease with which pedestrians can access destinations in a community through walking.<sup>11</sup> Studies show that walkability is linked to increased physical activity and lower obesity rates.<sup>12</sup> Adults who live in walkable neighborhoods are **1.5 times more likely** to engage in physical activity and are less likely to be obese.<sup>13</sup> In rural communities, limitations exist that contribute to the number of individuals who do not engage in the recommended walking levels deemed by the CDC. This includes limited transportation infrastructure and low population density levels when compared to urban communities.<sup>14</sup> Low population density coupled with a wide landscape result in automobiles becoming the primary use of transportation.

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## Sidewalk Utilization

The intersection of health and rurality influences a county's ability to develop a connected community. Rural communities present a unique set of barriers that make building walkable communities challenging. Because rural communities have a lower population density and their points of interest are often not as close in proximity when compared to urban communities, sidewalks are not a priority in the built environment.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, sidewalks in rural areas are more likely to receive inadequate maintenance.<sup>16</sup> Poor sidewalk quality like uneven surfaces and tripping hazards makes sidewalk usage more difficult, especially for the disabled. The characteristics of a walkable community include accessibility, safety and cohesiveness. This includes utilizing curb cuts, leveling sidewalks and installing signal lights. Fortunately, this can be addressed on the local level. Any municipality in South Carolina may issue an ordinance to the proper authority for the payment of permanent improvements of sidewalks.<sup>a17</sup>

Another critical function of sidewalks is providing a safe walking path. Pedestrians should be able to walk with protection from moving vehicles in combination with crossing signals and traffic lights that enable safe movement through intersections.<sup>18</sup> Walking paths should be clean and usable for pedestrians. They should also connect community members to landmarks of interest. Providing safe walkable paths is critical for families to achieve healthy levels of activity. Pedestrian friendly communities can benefit all residents, but low-income families are twice as likely to use walking as a form of transportation in comparison to other families.<sup>19</sup>

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## Complete Streets Policies

Communities throughout the United States are becoming bicycle and pedestrian friendly to promote physical activity and reduce traffic and air pollution levels. Because of these changes, communities have experienced improvements in population health. One way communities have done this is through the implementation of Complete Streets, a planning approach that enables safe access for pedestrians and bicyclists of all abilities.<sup>20</sup> This planning approach includes installing sidewalks, crosswalks, signal lights and designated bike lanes to increase pedestrian and cyclist safety.<sup>21</sup> Complete Streets policies accommodate those who are not able to drive cars, such as older adults and disabled individuals.<sup>22</sup> In Williamsburg County, 14% of the households do not have a vehicle, and 31% of households in Williamsburg County only have one vehicle.<sup>23</sup>

Seventeen cities throughout South Carolina, ranging from Charleston to Ninety-Six, have adopted Complete Streets policies.<sup>24</sup> These were implemented through County Resolutions or City Ordinances.<sup>25</sup> Modifying the built environment to create connecting routes provides an opportunity for residents to engage in short walks to stores and public transportation hubs.<sup>26</sup> The installation of sidewalks presents walking as a realistic and safe travel option.<sup>27</sup> To improve access to walkable areas, elected officials should consider zoning codes, traffic regulations and investing in pedestrian infrastructure that will positively influence pedestrian travel.<sup>28</sup> Community perception is critical when making policy decisions around walkability. Elected leaders should seek community input before making policy decisions to ensure walking paths are implemented in desired areas. Historically, community members have sometimes been left out of the zoning planning process, and the lack of community voice has resulted in under-utilized development.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> A road in South Carolina can be under state, county or municipal jurisdiction. The respective authority is responsible for maintenance of the sidewalk.



# Green Spaces

Aside from physical improvements and zoning, increasing the amount of usable green space has been proven to increase activity. Green space refers to land with natural vegetation, like grass and trees, that is open and accessible to the public.<sup>30</sup> Building community gardens, enhancing existing parks and establishing walking trails are all efforts that would increase the availability of recreational green space accessible for pedestrians.<sup>31</sup> Creating spaces and opportunities for residents to engage in physical activity

**Providing safe walkable paths is critical for families to achieve healthy levels of activity.**

is a critical component in improving a county's walkability. Access to green space is associated with reduced heart rates, lower blood pressure and fewer stroke and diabetes cases.<sup>32</sup> Living closer to green spaces has been proven to reduce childhood obesity rates as well.<sup>33</sup>

Green spaces should ideally be placed less than 1 kilometer from residential areas for maximum effect.<sup>34</sup> To create desirable green spaces, decision makers should include community members in the planning and design process.<sup>35</sup>

Government personnel should keep in mind that promotion of green space is critical. People cannot utilize a resource if they do not know it is for them. Maintenance, security and the promotion of community-centered activities are important considerations when developing a new green space.<sup>36</sup> Local to South Carolina, the city of Columbia recently invested millions of dollars to revitalize Finlay Park, a green space centrally located in the downtown district.<sup>37</sup> Included in the revitalization is a plan to create multiple walkways, strolling gardens and safety components such as open sight lines, cameras and enhanced lighting solutions.<sup>38</sup>

The development of green spaces alleviates disparities related to physical activity. Public green spaces allow residents of any socio-economic status to have access to a safe and enjoyable environment to engage in physical activity. Green spaces are significantly more beneficial for families who do not reside in walkable neighborhoods or those who live in a neighborhood without sidewalks.<sup>39</sup>



# Conclusion

It is important to find solutions to improve walkability in Williamsburg County many households do not have a vehicle, and a greater percentage of households only have access to one vehicle.<sup>40</sup> Securing funding to support these infrastructure improvements is critical to implementing these changes in Williamsburg County. In 2023, the town of Kingstree was awarded nearly \$700,000 from the Department of Commerce Community Development Block Grant that will be used for beautification efforts, including sidewalks on Main Street.<sup>41</sup> County officials in Williamsburg are encouraged to seek similar grant opportunities that could alleviate the financial burden of these investments.

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