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Taking Physical Activity to the Streets: The Popularity of Ciclovía and Open Streets Initiatives in the US

Taking physical activity to the streets

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Taking Physical Activity to the Streets: The Popularity of Ciclovía and Open Streets Initiatives in the US

As a way to reduce chronic diseases associated with increasingly sedentary lifestyles, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advocates community-wide initiatives promoting physical activity. One such initiative gaining popularity in the US is the *Ciclovía*, or Open Streets initiative, where city streets are opened to residents for physical activity and closed to motorized traffic.¹ Open Streets gained international prominence in Bogota, Colombia, and are viewed by policy makers and health and community advocates as being beneficial to social, environmental, and community health.² The interest in initiatives is demonstrated by the increase in the number of events within and across the US in recent years; between 2008 and 2013, over 90 US cities hosted at least one event.³ The cities hosting events range in size from small suburban towns to large metropolitan areas and also range in socioeconomic demographics and diversity.⁴ Open Streets offer a potentially effective public health intervention in a variety of contexts.

Why Open Streets?

The reasons cities host Open Streets initiatives vary, with the most common to provide an opportunity for physical activity (Table 1). Open Streets not only provide access to safe and fun places to cycle, walk and jog, but also include exposure to less common modes of physical activity through associated activity hubs. Hubs include yoga, dance classes, and sports demonstrations, giving participants an opportunity to experience, and perhaps adopt, new forms of activity. Research shows significant

increases (+5min/day) to overall physical activity behavior among participants attending more than one event.⁵ Furthermore, since there is considerably less access to safe public spaces for physical activity in lower income neighborhoods, when compared to higher income neighborhoods, Open Streets can democratize the commons by creating safe, public spaces for community residents to engage in physical activity. While many cities are limited in adding open space and recreational facilities, Open Streets offer a unique opportunity to increase PA infrastructure through “temporary parks” that offer many of the health and social benefits as standard parks.⁶

Showcasing active transportation is another reason for hosting Open Streets. Active transportation can increase community physical activity as well as address sustainability goals of reducing vehicle miles and CO₂ emissions. Many cities connect greenways or parks with Open Street routes, drawing attention to new bike lanes or providing an opportunity for citizens to get to know their streets and feel safe when walking or cycling for transport. Initiatives open not only the streets, but also open the eyes of participants to see their community in a way they may have only seen before from a car.

Open Streets initiatives are also ways to promote social health and community cohesion. Removing automobiles from streets creates space for community members to come together and build social capital, and carefully planned routes can connect people from neighborhoods not normally associated with one another. First-time attendees at San Francisco’s Sunday Streets listed the social environment created by the opening of the street as one of the most important reasons for their participation, while the positive experience and sense of vitality appealed to participants who attended multiple events.⁵

Further, the involvement of community residents in the selection of programming for the events means each site has the opportunity to offer culturally appropriate activities, enhancing the experience—and likely the numbers—of those attending.

Who needs to be involved?

The success of Open Streets initiatives depends on a wide variety of stakeholders. At the recent National Open Streets Training (August 2013; Minneapolis, MN) facilitators were from a public health, pedestrian/bicycle advocacy, urban planning, transportation, engineering, and academia. Participants, from 20 states and Ontario, came from a diverse background including cities, metropolitan planning organizations, visitors' bureaus, commercial associations, YMCAs, health clinics, and health insurance companies. The diversity of interested parties speaks to the need to collaborate across sectors to develop and implement successful Open Streets initiatives.

Of particular importance to successful Open Streets is the involvement and support from policy makers and elected/appointed officials. The Bogota, Colombia, initiative is an exemplar of a successful and sustainable initiative due to present mayoral support.⁷ Policy maker support can come in a variety of forms such as public endorsement, but also more tangible support mechanisms such as funding, assistance with permits, collaboration with city departments (route security), and funding. Without top-level support, an already-complex initiative becomes even more of a challenge to plan, implement, and sustain.

Other stakeholder groups needed for successful Open Streets initiatives are local businesses and community groups. For business leaders, promoting economic benefits

such as increased exposure or sales is imperative. Studies show participants spend money at events⁸ and that Open Streets can be beneficial for business (Table 1).⁹ Community and neighborhood groups also need to be involved in planning and implementation. These stakeholders are the most proximate, and knowledgeable, connection to local residents who are going to be the primary participants in events as well as those most impacted during the day of the event. Support from these two groups often is a product of effective communication during the planning process.

What's next?

Even with the increase in Open Streets across the US, there is little known about the process of planning, implementing, and evaluating initiatives across varied cities.¹⁰ Purposeful, consistent evaluation is needed to learn more about initiatives and identify correlates of successful outcomes. With many purposes and stakeholders, success can be a challenge to measure and communicate.

Just as planning and implementing these complex initiatives must involve input from a combination of local communities, policy makers, transportation, public health, local businesses, advocacy groups, and researchers, it is important they also be involved in measuring success. Identifying goals (e.g., increased physical activity, awareness of bicycling infrastructure, increased sales) that if achieved would support hosting future initiatives is essential. It is critical to recognize or establish key messengers within these groups to ensure there are receptive ears and eyes before, during, and after events.

Many initiatives continue to strive for sustainable funding and leadership. Significant costs of initiatives include communication/marketing and barriers and staffing

at intersections. Some cities and initiatives have been able to reduce costs of staffing at intersections by working with the Police Department on assigning regular-duty officers, incorporating Open Streets into the annual city budget, or training a corps of volunteers. Common sources of funds include local governments, grants, and financial partnerships, but these are often limited by political will and elections, grant periods, and difficult to establish return-on-investments. The inclusion of multiple stakeholders and key messengers throughout the process will increase the pool of potential funders. Successful evaluation will also support funding via the communication of benefits gained.

Leadership has also been a challenge across multiple initiatives as Open Streets have been an auxiliary task for city employees or bicycling/pedestrian advocates. Establishing a steering committee with representatives from key city departments (e.g., Police, Streets, Transportation), advocates, and neighborhood champions allows for shared communication and delegation. With increased collaboration and funding, sustainable initiatives can begin to expand. The expansion of successful initiatives to different neighborhoods and communities, as well as increasing from occasional to weekly or monthly events, will extend the reach and benefits associated with Open Streets. Then streets that are open and inviting to neighbors for biking, walking, and interacting with one another will become the rule and not the Sunday afternoon exception.

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Table 1. Motivations for hosting Open Streets initiatives.

| Motivation to Host Open Streets | Outcome |
|--|---|
| Increase physical activity | 35 – 108 minutes of physical activity per participant ^{6, 8} |
| Access to open space | Respondents (n=60) at one St. Louis event reported closest non-Open Streets open space an average of 0.8 miles away ^a |
| Showcase active transportation | Minneapolis, MN, and St. Louis, MO have used Open Streets to showcase new bike lanes and draw attention to streets in need of improved cycling infrastructure |
| Promote community cohesion and social well-being | 89% of participants reported the initiative changing their feelings about St. Louis in a positive manner ⁸ |
| Stimulate a neighborhood economy | 82% of participants spent money at event and 56% became aware of a new store/restaurant along route Businesses reported a 44% increase in revenue during event compared to non-event Sundays ^{8, 9} |

a – Currently unpublished data