

# 50 Reasons Why Everyone Should Want More Walkable Streets

*From making you live longer to making cities more resilient: If you want a reason to make your city more walkable, it's in here.*  
**ADELE PETERS – 08.24.16**



[Photo: Baerbel Schmidt/Getty Images; App Photo: Apple music label (The Beatles, Abbey Road, 1969)]

As more cities try to improve walkability—from car-free "superblocks" in Barcelona to heat-protected walkways in Dubai—a new report outlines the reasons behind the shift, the actions that cities can take to move away from a car-centric world, and why walkability matters.

"The benefits of walkability are all interconnected," says James

Francisco, an urban designer and planner at Arup, the global engineering firm that created the report. "Maybe you want your local business to be enhanced by more foot traffic. But by having that benefit, other benefits are integrated. Not only do you get the economic vitality, but you get the social benefits—so people are out and having conversations and connecting—and then you get the health benefits." A single intervention can also lead to environmental and political benefits.

***If someone shifts from a long commute to a walk, their happiness increases as much as if they'd fallen in love.***

The report sifted through dozens of studies to quantify 50 benefits of walkability in cities.



[Photo: Bernard Osei via Unsplash]

## **1. It helps people live longer**

Inactivity is the fourth leading cause of mortality around the world; physical activity dropped 32% in the last four decades in the U.S., and 45% in less than two decades in China. For people over 60, walking just 15 minutes a day can reduce the risk of dying by 22%.

## **2. It helps people lose weight**

A 30-minute walk can burn 100 calories; for every 12 blocks or so walked a day, your risk of obesity drops 4.8%.

## **3. It reduces the risk of chronic disease**

Regular walking may reduce the risk of diseases such as type 2 diabetes, heart disease, and colon cancer. Inactivity is a primary cause of most chronic diseases.

## **4. It makes people happier**

Someone with a one-hour commute in a car needs to earn 40% more to be as happy as someone with a short walk to work. On the other hand, researchers found that if someone shifts from a long commute to a walk, their happiness increases as much as if they'd fallen in love. People who walk 8.6 minutes a day are 33% more likely to report better mental health.

***People who walk 8.6 minutes a day are 33% more likely to report better mental health.***

## **5. It improves traffic safety**

More than 270,000 pedestrians are killed around the world every year; better street design, and policies that reduce speed, can obviously help reduce the risk of crashes. Just shortening a long crosswalk can reduce the risk of pedestrian deaths 6%.

## **6. It brings back "eyes on the street"**

While some countries invest in security cameras for streets—like the U.K., with 5.9 million cameras in public spaces—encouraging more people to walk is a cheaper way of increasing surveillance and making streets feel safer.

## 7. It reduces crime in other ways

Making streets more pleasant for walking—reducing trash, for example, or enforcing the speed limit—also has the added benefit of reducing crime. In one Kansas City neighborhood, crime dropped 74% after some streets went car-free on weekends.

***In one Kansas City neighborhood, crime dropped 74% after some streets went car-free on weekends.***

## 8. It makes neighborhoods more vibrant

The same features that make streets more walkable, like a safer and more attractive design, make people want to spend more time in them generally, bringing vibrancy back to neighborhoods.

## 9. It enhances the "sense of place"

Spending time walking through a neighborhood, rather than driving, helps people have a better sense of what makes it unique—and more likely to want to help take care of it.



[Photo: Flickr user Loren Kerns]

## 10. It's a driver for creativity

If a neighborhood is walkable, it's more likely to become home to public street art and open-air events; conversely, public art and cultural events can help draw people to streets where they might not have walked before.

## 11. It's universally accessible

While not everyone can afford a car or knows how to drive, walking is universally accessible, and even those who take the subway or drive also walk at some points during the day. The report makes the point that designing pedestrian infrastructure for those who are less mobile also helps make the experience of walking better for everyone.

## 12. It fosters social interaction

Walkable streets bring people together who might not otherwise meet. In a classic 1960s study, people who lived on streets with more car traffic were less likely to know their neighbors.

## 13. It strengthens community identity

As people interact more on streets, that also builds a sense of community. In Ireland, one study found that people in walkable neighborhoods had 80% more "social capital" than those living in car-dependent areas.

## 14. It connects people across generations

In the U.S., millennials prefer walking to driving by a 12% margin. In some areas, the elderly are also more likely to walk or take public transit. Making streets more walkable helps bring people of all ages—including children—together.

## 15. It builds inclusiveness

Traffic infrastructure, such as highways, can physically separate and segregate neighborhoods; better design for walkability makes the whole city more accessible to everyone. For the lowest-income people, who might lose a job if their car breaks down, it can help build a social safety net.

***Biking and walking provide an estimated return on investment of \$11.80 for every \$1 invested.***

## 16. It boosts the economy

Making neighborhoods more walkable increases the number of people who shop there. Pedestrians may spend as much as 65% more than drivers. It also boosts employment; in Dublin, a redesigned pedestrian-friendly neighborhood led to a 300% increase in employment. Overall, biking and walking provide an estimated return on investment of \$11.80 for every \$1 invested.

## 17. It helps local businesses

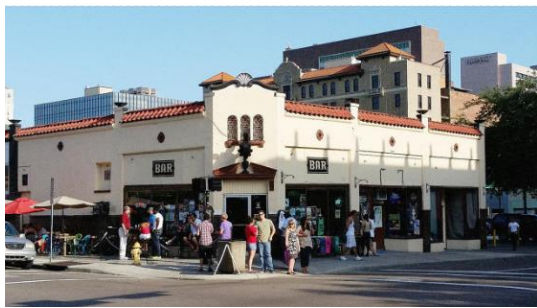
In Brooklyn, redesigning a parking lot into a pedestrian plaza boosted retail sales 172%. People who visit street markets in a city are also more likely to shop at stores nearby. The less that people drive, the more money they also have available to spend locally; an economist estimates that because people in Portland, Oregon, drive 20% less than the rest of the country, they save more than \$1 billion, and much of that goes back to local businesses.

## 18. It helps make people more creative and productive

Research suggests that walking boosts creative output an average of 60%. You're also more likely to be productive, improve memory, and make better decisions after exercise. Walking during work also helps: One internal study at a company found that people felt more energetic, focused, and engaged after walking meetings.

## 19. It improves a city's brand and identity

Making a city more walkable and livable can also give it a stronger identity, and make people want to visit. Barcelona, which has worked on improving public spaces and walkability since the 1980s, has seen its number of annual visitors grow 335% over the last two decades.



[Photo: Flickr user Michel Curi]

## 20. It increases tourism

For tourists, walking is one of the best ways to experience a city, and improving walkability makes more people interested in visiting. In London, Trafalgar Square saw a 300% increase in visitors after pedestrianizing.

## 21. It encourages more investment

After cities invest in walkable public space, it can encourage more investment in the same area. The High Line in New York led to \$2 billion in private investment in the neighborhood around the park.

## 22. It attracts the creative class

Skilled professionals tend to migrate to walkable areas; the most walkable neighborhoods have much higher GDPs per capita, and more college graduates.

## 23. It increases land and property values

When neighborhoods become safer, more accessible, and more livable, property values rise. Pedestrianizing a street can make home values go up \$82 a square foot. It's also good for landlords, if not tenants: Rents can rise \$300 per month.

## 24. It activates the street facade

Walkable neighborhoods are less likely to have a lot of vacant storefronts. In New York City, expanding the pedestrian space in Union Square reduced commercial vacancies 49%.

***Pedestrianizing a street can make home values go up \$82 a square foot.***

## 25. It shrinks the cost of traffic congestion

The more people walk and the fewer people are stuck in traffic on roads, the more that benefits the economy. In the Bay Area, for example, businesses lose \$2 billion a year because employees are stuck in gridlock.

## 26. It saves money on construction and maintenance

While building and maintaining roads is expensive—the U.S. needs an estimated \$3.6 trillion by 2020 to repair existing infrastructure—sidewalks are more affordable. Investing in sidewalks also brings health and air quality benefits worth twice as much as the cost of construction.

## 27. It reduces health care costs

Inactivity leads to huge health care costs. The U.S. spends \$190 billion on obesity-related illnesses alone.

### **28. It decreases dependency on nonrenewable resources**

Experts estimate that the world may only have 56 years' worth of oil left; cars waste most of the gas they use. Walking, by contrast, can actually generate energy if cities install energy-harvesting sidewalk tiles.

### **29. It minimizes land use**

Sidewalks and bike paths are more compact than roads; they also enable people to easily live in denser neighborhoods, unlike traditional car-dependent suburbs.



*[Photo: via Unsplash]*

### **30. It reduces air pollution**

On a single car-free day in 2015, Paris cut smog by 40% in parts of the city. Over the long term, pedestrianization can improve health as the air grows cleaner, and can help cut a city's carbon footprint.

### **31. It cuts ambient noise**

With fewer people driving, cities get quieter. On Paris's first car-free day, sound levels on main roads dropped three decibels. Plants and trees—which make streets more walkable—also reduce ambient noise.

### **32. It helps improve urban microclimates**

While paved roads contribute to the urban heat island effect, making cities hotter, shaded, plant-lined sidewalks can help cool neighborhoods down from 9 to 35 degrees.

### **33. It can improve water management**

Sidewalks designed with permeable surfaces can help suck up water during heavy rain, reducing flooding.

### **34. It makes cities more beautiful**

Roads and sidewalks typically make up the majority of public space in cities; in Chicago, for example, they make up 70%. Making public space more walkable—with landscaping, public art, and other interventions—also makes it more attractive than a typical road.

### **35. It increases active use of space**

In walkable neighborhoods, people are also more likely to make use of parks and public squares, and other outdoor spaces. In Copenhagen, as the city became more pedestrian-friendly over the last few decades, the number of people sitting in squares and otherwise making use of city space tripled.

### **36. It makes better use of space**

Streets that are redesigned to become more walkable also tend to incorporate underutilized space next to roads. In New York, one study found 700 miles of underused public space under elevated structures.

***Plant-lined sidewalks can help cool neighborhoods down from 9 to 35 degrees.***

### **37. It encourages people to drive less**

When Copenhagen pedestrianized its main street, foot traffic increased 35% in the first year. In many cities, a large number of trips are only a short distance, and better design makes it more likely that people will prefer to walk or bike.

### **38. It also promotes public transit**

People using a subway or bus to commute to work have to get there from their home—and a better walk makes it more likely that they'll want to use public transit instead of driving.

### **39. It increases permeability**

Walkability can also make cities more "permeable," or easier to move around, creating a walking network that may even be easier to use than driving.



[Photo: Flickr user Tripp]

#### **40. It bridges barriers**

Pedestrian infrastructure can reconnect parts of the city that may have been disconnected by older infrastructure. In Rotterdam, a crowd-funded pedestrian bridge stretches over a busy road and old train tracks.

#### **41. It makes cities more competitive**

Walkability is directly connected to livability. When Melbourne redesigned its center for pedestrians, it saw an 830% increase in

residents, and it was recognized as *The Economist's* "world's most livable city" five years in a row.

#### **42. It builds political support**

After the mayor of the Spanish city of Pontevedra decided to go car-free in 1999, the public loved him: He's now in his fifth term.

#### **43. It builds engagement**

As people spend more time outside in their neighborhoods, they're more likely to feel attached, and to engage in improving the city in general. Crowd-funded public projects are growing in many cities.

***Every added 10 minutes of commuting cuts community involvement 10%.***

#### **44. It encourages more stakeholders to participate**

Every added 10 minutes of commuting cuts community involvement 10%. In L.A., where commuters waste 64 hours a year in traffic, the city is building more participation by helping neighbors transform underused roads into pedestrian spaces.

#### **45. It inspires civic responsibility**

Walkability brings people together with other community members, which increases a sense of responsibility. Mexico City's self-appointed pedestrian "superhero," who defends pedestrians on city streets, helped build political support for the city's new commitment to zero traffic deaths.

#### **46. It promotes sustainable behaviors**

In Canada, a study found that if people drove one less day a week, it could reduce 3.8 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions a year. As cities become more walkable, it can enable a cultural shift away from driving. Though the report doesn't mention it, taking one sustainable action can also lead people to take others.

#### **47. It helps make cities more resilient**

If people can easily walk, a breakdown in mass transit, or a gas shortage, is less of a problem. Walkability makes cities more resilient in disasters.

#### **48. It's a tool for urban regeneration**

Making neighborhoods more walkable can spark urban regeneration. In Madrid, a walkable park along the river led to investment in new sports areas, plazas, cafes, and the renovation of historic landmarks.

#### **49. It allows for flexible micro-solutions**

A car-free or walkable street is more likely to support pop-up interventions and other cheap, simple, DIY solutions.

***If people drove one less day a week, it could reduce 3.8 million tons of greenhouse gas emissions a year.***

#### **50. It supports cultural heritage**

Pedestrianization around a cultural landmark can increase the number of people who visit, and help support efforts for preservation. As

Beijing quickly modernized, the city decided to pedestrianize several ancient, narrow streets—bringing new visitors and saving part of the city that otherwise might have disappeared.