American Psychological Association

James Sallis, PhD — Health Psychologist

TAKE A WALK

Looking for a simple way to stay healthy, fit and active? You may want to give some thought to where you live.

Research suggests that cities that are spread out offer fewer opportunities than a compact urban area for walking or biking, often obligating residents to drive frequently and decreasing physical activity as a result.

According to health psychologist James Sallis, PhD, "Our studies show that having destinations nearby — such as homes, schools, employers, businesses and parks — makes walking more pleasant and stimulates physical activity, especially in the case of walking for transportation."

Sallis is a researcher who specializes in health psychology, often collaborating with urban planners to design walkable cities and communities in an effort to combat obesity. People who live in high-sprawl areas are heavier than people who live in compact, walkable cities.[1]

POLICY PUSHER

According to Sallis, research shows that psychological and social factors as well as community design are important elements that can shape physical activity and combat obesity.

"Since the 1940s, we have been building our cities for cars and not for walking," says Sallis. "So we've gotten to the point in our suburbs where we can't walk anymore. Our ultimate aim is to contribute to changing zoning and development policies and transportation goals."

He acknowledges, however, that in order to make a significant impact, it's critical that changes occur in a variety of sectors beyond the health field. For example, the National Physical Activity Plan — a public/private initiative focused on creating and implementing a comprehensive set of policies and programs designed to increase Americans' physical activity — includes organizations working in the health sector as well as those working in transportation, schools and the media.

"Our current focus is on communicating our research findings to decision makers in government and industry so as to encourage them to create more activity-friendly environments," Sallis adds. "Sidewalks, bike trails, easily accessible recreational facilities and prominently placed stairwells all spur physical activity."



"I was trained as a clinical psychologist, but I specialize in health psychology. Now, I'm at the intersection of environmental psychology and public health."

HEALTH PSYCHOLOGY

Health psychologists use psychological science to understand biological, social and psychological factors that influence health and illness. They use their research to promote health, prevent illness and improve health care systems.

WORK THAT FEELS GOOD

Sallis not only enjoys his work as a researcher, but believes he is contributing to the common good. Physical activity is relevant for everyone; there is no downside. No matter your health status, size, age or income, there are physical and mental benefits to moving more.

"I'm happy that I can earn a living and sleep well at night knowing that my work contributes to improving health — and improving the planet."

[1] Ewing, R. et al. (2003). Relationship Between Urban Sprawl and Physical Activity, Obesity, and Morbidity. *American Journal of Health Promotion, 18*(1), pp. 47–57.

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