

Health Impact Assessment of the Sacramento Safe Routes to School

Executive Summary

November 22, 2004

With the goal of improving the health and safety of students by reducing traffic around school facilities and encouraging greater physical activity among students, Safe Routes to School programs have generated substantial interest as a mechanism to foster an active lifestyle among youth. Currently, few young people walk or bike to school, and the majority relies on non-active forms of transportation, primarily automobiles and buses. Reflecting trends of increasing sedentary lifestyle among sectors of the population, the proportion of children walking or biking to school has declined by 60% over the past twenty-five years (CDC, 2004).

The Sacramento Safe Routes to School Program operating in the Natomas Unified School District was chosen for the health impact assessment analysis because of the district's ethnic diversity, modest socio-economic status, lack of major seasonal changes that would complicate the analysis, and the availability of some baseline data on students' current physical activity and participation in the program.

By collaborating with city council members, local schools, parents, and teachers, the non-profit organization Safe Routes to Schools Sacramento has established an on-going walk/bike to school program at two elementary schools and is beginning in one middle school. It is slated for expansion to the district's remaining three elementary schools within the next year. Program activities include regular walk/bike to school days, class activities and competitions that encourage students to participate while also teaching them about the benefits of safely walking or biking to school, and working with city staff and planning officials to identify and correct safety hazards or barriers to walkability.

Determining the scope of the HIA

While the actual program is somewhat more modest, for the purpose of the case study we assumed that the walk-to-school program would be expanded to all elementary and middle schools in the school district, and that it would involve a comprehensive intervention that involved education, public safety enforcement measures and infrastructure change.

Based on a review of the relevant research literature a “logic framework” was constructed to illustrate the causal pathways through which the program would have likely impacts on health outcomes. We identified two major pathways through which the program could affect health, physical activity and pedestrian safety, and two minor pathways, violence/crime and exposure to air pollution. Each of these impacts and pathways will be analyzed based on existing research data. Most of the analysis will be descriptive and qualitative, but we will also create a simple predictive model to estimate changes in physical activity levels and body mass index.

Recommendations

While walking to school is an excellent way to incorporate physical activity into children’s lives, walking to school alone is probably not sufficient for all children to get their recommended daily amount of physical activity. Walking to school should be seen as one opportunity of many that children are provided throughout the day to be active. Other opportunities should include quality physical education classes at least several times per week, if not daily, after-school programs that emphasize sports, physically active play and walking, and parents should encourage their children to pursue physically active activities after school as opposed to sedentary ones.

REFERENCE

CDC (2004). Kids-Walk-to-School: Kids Walk-to-School Encourages Pedestrian Safety. Retrieved on September