Transforming a Small Midwestern City for Physical Activity: From the Sidewalks Up

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**Background**: Jackson, Michigan (population 36,000) started active living interventions to help solve residents’ low physical activity levels. Jackson’s experience can serve as a case study for beginning similar efforts in smaller communities. **Methods**: In 2003, Jackson began a 3-prong community intervention utilizing the 5P model to increase safe physical activity opportunities and encourage walking and biking for short trips. The focus included work on projects at 1) elementary schools, 2) worksites, and 3) city-wide networks. **Results**: Evaluation results show changes in attitudes toward active transportation (8% increase in children who thought walking to school was “safer” postintervention), intentions to try active transportation (43% of Smart Commute Day participants “would” smart commute more often postevent), and increased physical activity (the percentage of students walking to school more than doubled at 3 of 4 intervention schools). In addition, a community level observational study was conducted at 10 locations in the city in 2005 and 2006. The number of people seen using active transportation increased from 1,028 in 2005 to 1,853 people in 2006 (a 63% increase). **Conclusions**: Local community-driven projects to increase walking and biking can be effective by utilizing a variety of interventions, from the individual to the policy level.

Keywords: active transportation, safe routes to school, active living, walkable community

During the past decade, public health practitioners and physical activity researchers have increasingly pro-
development known as urban sprawl, have been correlated with low levels of physical activity, high levels of obesity, and a high prevalence of chronic diseases such as hypertension.17–20

A great deal of active living research and interventions have focused on large urban centers with unknown applicability to smaller communities. Small cities, like Jackson, are found in every county and state in the United States and face unique challenges to this type of work. The experience of Jackson can benefit similar communities across the country, especially those without a history of active living work.

The Jackson community started the process of becoming a walkable, active community and improving the health of its residents in 2003. Unlike communities well-known for their walkability, such as Berkeley, CA, Madison, WI, and Ann Arbor, MI, the City of Jackson is a blue-collar, industry-based city without a history of advocacy in the area of active transportation.

The city’s 11 square miles has a population of 36,000 (48% male and 52% female) with a median age of 31.3 years.21 Jackson has more families below the poverty level (15.2%) than the average in Michigan and the United States.21 Other barriers to active transportation are Michigan’s 4-season climate, the area’s strong automotive history and culture, and Jackson’s lack of a downtown university campus to provide a major destination and students who typically choose active transportation.

Michigan has been among the top 10 heaviest states for the last 14 years.22 Overweight and obesity statistics for Jackson residents mirror that of the state (62% of adults are overweight and obese, 11% of high school students are overweight, and 13% are at-risk for being overweight).22 Jackson’s rates of heart disease are on par with the State of Michigan at 252.5 cases per 100,000, and Jackson County’s rate of diabetes-related deaths, 118.7/100,000, is far worse than the state’s average of 88/100,000.23 Contributing to all these health problems is a low rate of physical activity. According to a 2006 survey completed by United Way of Jackson County, 30% of Jackson County respondents indicated they have not exercised at all during the past month.24 Unfortunately, there is no data to document how many Jackson residents achieve the recommended amount of physical activity, but it is of great concern that more than one-third of residents are completely sedentary.

In an effort to address the above problem, a variety of Jackson health and human service organizations implemented programs to increase physical activity that used more traditional, individual, and behavior-based approaches. While some were successful for the limited number of individuals enrolled in the programs, the community was ready to try a more widespread intervention that had the potential to affect a greater number of community members. A partnership was formed to generate ideas for interventions and seek funding opportunities. Bolstered by its selection as one of 25 communities in the nation to receive the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Active Living by Design grant, the partnership began a multilevel community intervention in 2003 to create a walkable community where all residents could engage in physical activity in a safe environment.

Some pieces of the intervention are focused on the Jackson community overall, but specific elements target 2 distinct groups: children in grades K–6, and adults who live and work within the city limits.

**Target Groups**

**Elementary School Children**

Elementary school children (K–6) were chosen for intervention because of the availability of strong national and state Safe Routes to School movements and their accompanying tools for school programs. In addition, Safe Routes to School projects involving elementary schools show promising results when the intervention targets both parent and student attitudes about walking, as well as, route improvement.25 The intervention goal for this population is to increase walking and biking trips in students by at least 30% in 5 years.

**Working-Age Adults**

Working-age adults were chosen for intervention because of the availability of national resources for programs like bike-to-work days and worksite health promotion programs. Physical activity programming at worksites has been shown to be effective in the past.26 The intervention goal with this target population is to increase the number of working-age adults walking or biking for their short trips (less than 5 miles) by 50% in 5 years.

**Methods**

**The 5P Model**

The Jackson project utilizes Active Living by Design’s 5P model, which is designed to focus on the areas of Preparation, Promotion, Programs, Physical Projects, and Policy. The 5P model was developed to maximize support for individual behavior change by integrating traditional health promotion approaches (promotion, programs) with policy and environmental approaches (policy, physical projects). The model also encourages the use of multidisciplinary talents from the fields of public health, planning, engineering, and education to solve community-wide health concerns.

**Preparation**

The preparation piece of the 5P model includes development of a multidisciplinary partnership to oversee
the project. The Jackson partnership, the Walkable Communities Task Force (WCTF), is a coalition of more than 20 members, which includes representatives from the city engineering department, road commission, public health department, local hospital, public school administration, local bicycle club, and a variety of other service organizations. The partnership meets monthly, providing valuable opportunities for sharing organizational updates, collaborative planning, and project management.

The lead organization for the initiative and partnership is the Fitness Council of Jackson, a small nonprofit with expertise in physical activity programming. Before this active transportation initiative the Fitness Council (and related organizations) had a 20-year history of promoting physical activity in Jackson County through events like running races and after-school exercise sessions. Looking for a more lasting solution to physical inactivity in the community, the Fitness Council shifted its focus to active transportation promotion and brought together the partners of the Walkable Communities Task Force. The Fitness Council is supported at the state level by the Governor’s Council on Physical Fitness, Health, and Sports in the form of staff assistance and resources.

Promotion

Promotional components of the overall project are used to generate interest in walkability, earn media attention, and introduce individuals to “try-it-out” events.

**Elementary School Children.** Jackson area elementary schools participate in International Walk to School Day as a way to kick-off a larger Safe Routes to School program at their schools and raise awareness about walking to school. The Walk to School Day events are always exciting, fun activities that feature school mascots, bands, local celebrities joining in the walk to school, and educational assemblies postwalk. Walk to School Day is a visible event that also allows the partnership an opportunity to discuss the larger project goals of creating a walkable Jackson with the entire community via messages to parents, pre-event promotions, and media coverage during the event.

**Working-Age Adults.** A city-wide Smart Commute Day with interbusiness competitions and educational sessions about biking safety and other related topics was started as a promotional event to encourage use of walking, biking, and transit to work.

**Overall Community.** Other promotional activities during the first years of the program include the creation of quarterly newsletters, a monthly spot on the local cable channel, a new website focused on the project (www.fitnesscouncil.org), and the presence of the project at popular community events (ie, running races, county fair, vintage car shows, and festivals). Each of these promotional activities help raise awareness about walking and biking in the community and encourage people to either support physical projects or enroll in one of the larger programs aimed at more long-term behavior change (eg, ongoing Safe Routes to School or worksite programs).

**Programs**

The programs associated with the intervention went beyond short-term promotion to encourage long-term increases in physical activity.

**Elementary School Children.** The project’s largest program, Safe Routes to School, aims to increase walking and biking to school daily. Safe Routes to School’s programming builds grassroots, school-based teams that 1) advocate for physical changes to the routes to school to improve safety, 2) educate parents and students about the importance of walking for their health and safety skills, and 3) encourage walking through Walk to School Day, other promotional events, and ongoing walking school buses (for more information about the Safe Routes to School program visit www.saferoutesmichigan.org). The program started with 1 elementary school in 2004 participating in a 1-day promotion event, International Walk to School Day. By 2007, 7 elementary schools in Jackson County had comprehensive programs that were working on projects in the areas of education, engineering, enforcement, encouragement, and evaluation. Safe Routes to School spread to additional schools through word-of-mouth within the school system and presentations about the program by the partnership at district-wide events.

**Working-Age Adults.** Active living programs for Jackson adults focus on residents who live and work within the city of Jackson and who could therefore choose to bike or walk to work and use active transportation for errands during the workday (eg, meetings) or the weekend (eg, to the park, to church). In addition to the companies that took part in the Smart Commute Day promotional event, one area worksite piloted “Foot Energy,” a worksite-based program. The Foot Energy pilot was conducted at a community mental health agency located on the outskirts of the city limits with about 50 employees. The company’s wellness committee partnered with the Fitness Council to implement the program. The Foot Energy program created individualized maps and active transportation plans for workers, made changes at the worksite to support active living (eg, lockers, bike racks), and started a “Company Bikes” program where staff could check-out a bike to use during the day for meetings and errands.

In an effort to expand the adult audience receiving the active living message, another program for adults was developed in conjunction with the Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative (MPRI). Lack of a license or a vehicle leads to many parolees having no access to transportation to get to work and run errands. As part of
a larger set of support services to new parolees, the partnership collects donated bikes, teaches parolees how to fit and maintain a bike, and provides helmets and cycling accessories. In addition, parolees are offered an on-street riding skills training class. This program is an opportunity to introduce the practical benefits of active transportation to a previously unreached audience.

**Overall Community.** At the community level, the partnership collaborated to develop the first bike map in Jackson’s history that highlighted trails, new bike lanes, bike-friendly streets, and safety information. The bike map is widely distributed during Smart Commute Day, at local bicycle shops, and during other community events to help encourage adults to bike in the city for transportation, not only for recreation.

**Physical Projects**

Modifying the physical environment to improve the safety of walking and biking, as well as, the convenience of active transportation is the focus of the partnership’s work in this area.

**Elementary School Children.** A major area of physical projects work is around schools involved in the Safe Routes to School program. By working with city, village, and township governments, new sidewalks, crosswalks, bike racks, crossing pedestrian signs, median islands, and other improvements are installed around school campuses in key areas. Taking advantage of the new Federal Safe Routes to School program, each school with a Safe Routes to School program has applied for several larger projects that include large sidewalk segments and trail sections that will make the routes to school safer and encourage walking.

**Working-Age Adults.** Another focus of the partnership is building more bike lanes and biking facilities throughout the city. One of the first activities of the partnership was to create a master bicycle plan (the first bicycle plan for Jackson) linking key destinations throughout the city with bike facilities. Bike lanes are added to selected roads (according to the master bicycle plan for the city) as the roadway is resurfaced or regular maintenance is performed. In addition, all routes in the master bicycle plan are marked with bike route signage.

**Policy**

Policy level change in Jackson focuses on the local government level and organizations (e.g., schools, large employers) with the goal of creating policies that could lead to long-term, sustainable change in the community.

**Elementary School Children.** The partnership gave input to the design of the local public school district’s federally mandated Health and Wellness Policy to include Safe Routes to School as a piece of their work to improve children’s health throughout the school district.

**Working-Age Adults.** To show support of bike lanes to government officials the partnership designed a media campaign (newspaper, radio, billboards) that educated people about the use of bike lanes and culminated with hundreds of residents signing an online petition stating their support of bike lanes in the community. While not a direct policy change, the support of the public added further credibility to work by the partnership and served for the first time as a formal advocate base for establishing local policies to create bike lanes.

**Overall Community.** Working deliberately to create policy change, the partnership advocated and secured the passage of a local “Complete Streets Resolution” by the city, county road commission, and municipal planning organization. Complete streets are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users including pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, and motorists of all ages. In addition, a representative from the partnership became a member of the local governmental road advisory group to represent bicycle and pedestrian issues in this forum for the first time. To influence others who create local policies, the partnership, in collaboration with the Michigan Department of Transportation, hosted trainings about bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure design for engineers.

**Results**

Project results for the main evaluation areas of promotion, programs, and physical projects are discussed in detail below. Results for the preparation and policy parts of the model are more anecdotal in nature and are summarized in Table 1.

**Promotion**

**Elementary School Children.** Participation in Walk to School Day among Jackson elementary schools grew from 1 school and 650 students in 2004 to 7 schools and 1,254 students in 2007. Participation was assessed by volunteer counters at the doors of the schools on Walk to School Day morning. In addition to the community attention earned for the event, schools also used this festive activity as a way to launch their Safe Routes to School programs that encourage daily walking.

**Working-Age Adults.** Smart Commute Day participation was tracked using individual and business web-based registration. Citywide, Smart Commute Day participation grew from 165 to 334 individuals, a 102% increase from the first year in 2005 to the third year in 2007. Business participation doubled from 6 to 13 teams in that same time period. Even after 3 years of the event, 57% of participants were first-time smart commuters showing
that the event was reaching a new audience and not only those already using active transportation. The intentions and attitudes of working adults toward active transportation were monitored by self-report surveys during annual Smart Commute Day events. Follow-up surveys after the 2007 event indicated that 43% of participants “would,” and 40% “might” bike, walk, or transit to work more often as a result of Smart Commute Day.

**Programs**

**Elementary School Children.** The Safe Routes to School evaluation plan and survey instruments were created and analyzed by Michigan State University’s Department of Community, Agriculture, Recreation and Resource Studies, and adapted from existing programs. The surveys used in Jackson were later adopted by the

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<td>School District Wellness Policy Evaluation: Jackson Public Schools District Wellness Policy includes Safe Routes to School program</td>
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<td>Working-age adults</td>
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<td>Bike lanes Bike route signage Bus bike carriers Evaluation: 6.5 miles of new bike lanes, 12 bus bike carriers installed (entire fleet), and all bike routes signed</td>
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<td>Formation of the Walkable Communities Task Force Evaluation: Coalition of more than 20 people representing a variety of community agencies established</td>
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national Safe Routes to School program. Early evaluation tools were pretested in age appropriate classes and pilot tested in 11 elementary schools. All Safe Routes to School preintervention surveys were conducted before the school having any interventions. The evaluation protocols and instruments had IRB approval and included informed consent.

While behavior change and increased physical activity are the end goals of the Safe Routes to School program, the self-report student survey also showed a change in students’ attitudes toward walking to school. The pilot elementary school, urban school A, matched responses from the same students over the course of 2 school years to track changes in attitudes toward walking to school. Urban school A recorded an 8% increase (from 34% in year 1 to 42% in year 2) in the number of matched students who thought walking to school was safe after 1 year of the program. In addition, there were more matched students at urban school A who felt that walking to school was “fun” (48% year 1 to 53% year 2) and “healthy” (53% year 1 to 57% year 2).

The pilot school (urban school A) collected pre and posttest data to afford matched cases on beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. All other schools participating in the Safe Routes to School program completed multiple observation tallies whereby students were counted for a week and tallied by walking, biking, school bus, parent car, and other categories. Results of this hand-raise tally (Figure 1) calculated the number of children indicating walking as their mode of travel for the week as a percentage of the school population overall.

Figure 1 shows an increase in walking to school at all schools involved in the Safe Routes to School program for more than 2 years (3 urban and 1 rural). No promotional actions beyond the schools’ usual activities were scheduled for data collection week by any of the schools. Differences in student distance to school and the school’s busing routes most likely account for the different baseline percentages of each school. Each school has shown increases in the percentage of students walking each year by expanding their programs and continuing to improve the safety of the routes to school. Walking to school has increased in both urban and rural schools participating in Safe Routes to School, with urban schools being classified as within the city limits and rural schools as outside both the city limits and urbanized township boundaries.

Nationally, parents identify “distance” as the number one barrier to walking to school and this is a valid concern for many students outside the walkable distance to school in Jackson. The same data used in Figure 1 was used to compare the percentage of children living within 1.5 miles (walkable distance established by the school system) to the percentage of children actually walking to determine the potential reach of the program. Figure 2 compares walking ability and walking behavior at 2 of the 4 schools with the longest-running programs. This analysis used student addresses as an indicator for ability to walk, however other factors such as busy roads and unsafe intersections still might make it difficult to walk despite living within the 1.5 mile radius. While Figure 1 shows that walking to school has continued to increase, there is still room for improvement to encourage all children able to walk to do so as Figure 2 indicates.

**Working-Age Adults.** The worksite piloting Foot Energy used their participation in Smart Commute Day in 2005 as a starting point to develop a comprehensive worksite active transportation program. The company purchased bike racks, 3 company bikes, and lockers for their employees. Working with the company’s wellness team and local running and bicycle stores the worksite hosted 3 lunchtime training sessions on fitness with topics ranging from the best walking shoes to how to check-out and use the new company bikes. Unfortunately, the partnership was not able to collect any data to quantify increases in active transportation behaviors. However, the company bikes program has continued and each week employees have reported using the

![Figure 1](image1.png)  
**Figure 1** — Rates of walking to school at Jackson area elementary schools 2004 to 2007. The percentage of children who walk to school at each elementary school in the Jackson Safe Routes to School program. Only participating schools with at least 2 years of data are shown.

![Figure 2](image2.png)  
**Figure 2** — Current and potential active transportation levels 2007. Urban elementary Schools A and B are both public, K–6 schools on opposite sides of the city. Both schools have shown promising increases in the percentage of students who walk each year (see Figure 1), but still have improvements to make to encourage children within walking distance to walk.
The other active transportation program for adults, the Michigan Prisoner Reentry Initiative bike program, has just begun, but in the first 3 months the program graduated 16 participants and has generated interest from other parolees. Evaluation of this program is just beginning, but anecdotal evidence suggests many participants rely exclusively on a bike for transportation while improving their physical, mental, and social health.

**Overall Community.** With local bicycle shops signing on as sponsors, the partnership was able to print full-color bike maps of the city and county highlighting the new bike lanes and trails. By December 2007, almost 9,000 were distributed to Jackson residents through bike shops, Smart Commute Day, and other community events.

**Physical Projects**

**Elementary School Children.** The City of Jackson’s Department of Engineering spearheaded the efforts to improve safety around elementary schools involved in the Safe Routes to School program. First, school teams consisting of parents, administrators, teachers, and volunteers conducted walking audits around each school to identify areas that needed improvement. Based on the audits the department of engineering installed more than 1 dozen zebra stripe crosswalks, a pedestrian island, and flashing pedestrian lights as needed around 4 of the city’s elementary schools. The department has also been key in planning more long-term projects, such as sidewalk replacement, with the elementary schools and the school district’s operations department.

**Working-Age Adults & Overall Community.** The focus of the partnership on improving biking facilities has had great success. Since 2004, 6-1/2 miles of bike lanes have been installed on 13 urban roads. Before this project there were no bike lanes in the city at all. At the same time that bike lanes were being installed, the County Parks and Recreation Department completed a 10-mile extension of the current rail trail that has 1 terminus in downtown Jackson and the other in a small village southwest of town. In addition to these new bike travel ways, new bike racks were installed in the downtown area and bike carriers were installed on all 12 city transit system line-haul buses, a first for the Jackson Transit Authority.

**Global Assessment of Changes in Active Transportation Behavior.** In an attempt to objectively document whether active transportation behaviors increased over the intervention period, the partnership conducted an observational study to monitor the number of people walking and biking in the city. The observation instrument was adapted from university research conducted on trails. Volunteers observed a wide variety of 10 intersections throughout the city. Intersections to observe were chosen to represent a variety of intersections including busy commercial and residential sections of the city as well as areas near parks and schools. Intersections observed also were chosen to represent current trails, current bike lanes, locations for planned bike lanes, and no bike amenities. Volunteers counted the number of people seen using active transportation at each intersection. Unlike automated traffic counters for cars, use of observers allowed for items like “helmet use” and “adherence traffic laws” to be recorded.

The community level observation study was implemented in early August 2005 and August 2006. The survey was conducted the same days of the week and times of day (7 to 9:30 AM, 11 AM to 2 PM, and 4:30 to 6:30 PM) each year. Weather between the years was similar in temperature and precipitation. The number of people seen using active transportation increased from 1,028 in 2005 to 1,853 people in 2006 (a 63% increase). Across all locations and time periods for 2006, 67% of active travelers used walking, 30% used biking, and 3% used skateboard, rollerblades, or some other active mode to travel around the city. Walking was the most popular mode for all age groups in the city. Of the 558 bicyclists recorded during the 2006 survey, 69% used the sidewalk for travel, though the percentage using the sidewalk on roads with bike lanes was less than those roads without lanes. Use of the sidewalk for bicycling instead of the road or bike lane indicates a need for additional bicycle safety education and continued improvement of bicycle amenities in the city (bike lane or trail) so that people have a surface on which they feel safe bicycling. Volunteer observers recorded only 14% of bicyclists wearing helmets in 2006, which is a safety issue the community will continue to address. This survey information was presented to the county road commission and city engineering staff, as well as the community.

**Data Limitations**

While results have been promising to date, the limited ability of the local partnership to collect data has lead to several limitations in evaluation of the intervention. In the Safe Routes to School arena, the data are limited by the lack of control schools to monitor for outside influences such as oil prices, family income (inability to own car), and changes in public transportation service. In addition, the partnership did not have the resources to collect quantitative data for some programs, including Foot Energy, and had to rely on anecdotal feedback. Another limitation involves the observational study, which can be influenced year to year by summer road construction projects, volunteer error, weather patterns,
and local events (i.e., county fair, festivals). The observational study only gives the partnership some indication over time of the rates of walking and biking in the city, though it does not prove the intervention caused the changes in behavior observed.

Conclusions

The experience in Jackson shows support for the importance of a comprehensive multilevel approach to creating a walkable community and encouraging active transportation modes. Jackson’s Safe Routes to School program demonstrates particularly well how multilevel work in the areas of promotions, programs, and physical change can lead to an increase in walking to school over time. At the same time, while it is ideal to combine the strategies of several levels, the promotions-only event, Smart Commute Day, appeared to lead to increased walking and biking on its own and will hopefully one day develop into a full worksite-based program for each participating business (beyond the pilot worksite). The worksite programs and Smart Commute Day should be further enhanced by the continued installation of bike lanes and other amenities.

Local intervention organizers are often caught in a “chicken and egg” question of whether physical activity change can be promoted to increase the demand for better environmental design or whether environmental improvements must be completed before people will even consider behavior change. Jackson’s experience suggests that positive results are achieved when programs and promotions advance at the same time as work on physical projects and policy level interventions.

There are many opportunities for future research both in Jackson and similar communities. One important question is examining more of the short-term and long-term effects of walking to school. Are overweight children losing weight or are average weight children maintaining a healthy weight by regularly walking to school? Are students who started walking to school in elementary school more likely to walk in middle school and/or be more active as they get older? Other areas of interest for all communities developing active living initiatives include research on the specific components of a comprehensive intervention that are needed for communities in different stages of developing active living interventions. For new communities, are physical changes the most important or are promotions to raise awareness the most critical? Should communities with established programs continue to expand projects or aim to reach new people with additional ideas?

Communities hoping to start their own quest to be walkable and healthy should identify a clear lead organization willing to coordinate the project and maintain momentum by helping a multidisciplinary partnership engage all levels of government and enlist citizen support. Promotion of physical activity through environmental design has the potential to reach far more people, of all ages and abilities, than many other more traditional physical activity programs and can be attempted by a variety of types of communities. If a small city with winter weather, in the heart of automotive country can rally support and enthusiasm for this important mission many other communities nationwide should join in the call to create active, healthy places for their citizens to live as well.

Acknowledgments

This project was funded by Active Living by Design (a program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation), the Ruth Mott Foundation, Jackson County Community Foundation, Community Energy Projects (Michigan Department of Energy), Speckhard Knight Foundation, Consumer’s Energy Foundation, Michigan State Medical Society Foundation, Michigan Nutrition Network, and Fitness Council of Jackson members and sponsors.

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