



# Assessing the Physical Environment



## Introduction

Assessing a community's physical environment, especially aspects related to walking and cycling is becoming more important as physical activity recommendations focus on active living and incorporating moderate intensity activity into daily life (Pikora et al., 2002).

## Assessing the physical environment

The growing body of research investigating the relationship between the physical environment and physical activity has identified a range of factors associated with walking and cycling behaviours (Gebel et. Al, 2005).

At present, there is little empirical research on how to collect environmental data in a systematic manner (Pikora et al., 2002), and tools to assess the community environment are still under development (Hoehner et al., 2006). This level of research will determine:

- the range of potentially important factors;
- factors that have greater levels of influence over physical activity; and
- how activity is affected when these factors are modified.

## Why assess the physical environment?

- Evaluate interventions targeting the environment.
- Identify aspects of the physical environment requiring change.
- Increase awareness of an issue related to the physical environment requiring change.
- Identify issues and generating solutions within the local community.
- Identify issues prior to an advocacy campaign.
- Research environmental determinants of active living.
- Inform local and regional policy development to create walking and cycling supportive environments.

**“An environmental audit instrument is defined as a tool used to inventory and assess the physical environment conditions associated with walking and cycling” (Moudon and Lee, 2003: p 21)**

## Using environmental audit tools

A number of tools have been developed to measure walkability and cycleability. While they are an ideal starting point for anyone wishing to audit the physical environment, the following should be considered when making decisions regarding which tools to use.

- This is a new area of research and many tools are yet to be evaluated for their reliability, validity and applicability to other communities.
- These resources have been developed for specific communities and research questions. They may require modification for different communities.
- Opportunities exist to pilot these tools, and evaluate them within the context of the local area.
- It is feasible that different tools will be better suited to different areas, research questions and purposes.

## References

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