



Involving the Community in Assessing the Environment



Introduction

There is potential for members of the community to play a significant role in assessing the physical environment for physical activity. Involving community members can lead to the initiation of positive environmental changes.

The process of improving aspects of the local environment is often instigated by local community members and/or organisations.

Why involve the community?

Expert assessment of features of the physical environment might not always detect important contextual information and needs to be tempered by the experiences and knowledge of members of the community.

Subjective items may be valuable to understanding community perceptions of the local neighbourhood and may complement more quantifiable objective items.

Engaging community members in assessment of the physical environment allows researchers, planners and health professionals to gain valuable local knowledge about the needs, strengths and limitations of individual communities. This will increase the likelihood of achieving real and lasting changes in the physical environment.

The role of the community

Community members could act as one of a number of sources of information in the assessment of the physical environment.

Subjective measures of an environment that community members can provide complement objective measures such as land use and transportation.

Ideally, community members and organisations would become involved in the development of the tool, data collection, analysis and interpretation. This level of collaboration would encourage shared decision making and collective action throughout projects.

Hints for involving community members in the audit process

- People recruited to undertake auditing should enjoy walking and be able to walk for an extended period of time.
- Inclusion of subjective items in an audit tool may provide an insight into community perceptions of an environment and complement objective items.
- The tool developed or chosen for use may need to be short and user-friendly.
- Involving people undertaking the community assessment in developing the map format will increase its ease of use.
- The local community could be involved in all aspects of the audit process as a means of encouraging collective decision making and action.
- Adequate training and support should be provided for people who are conducting audits.

References

Hoehner CM, Ivy A, Brannen-Ramirez L, Meriwhether B and Brownson RC. 2006. How reliably do community members audit the neighbourhood environment for its support of physical activity? Implications for participatory research. *Journal of Public Health Management Practice*, 12(3): 270-277.

