

Active Commuting to School: A Research Brief

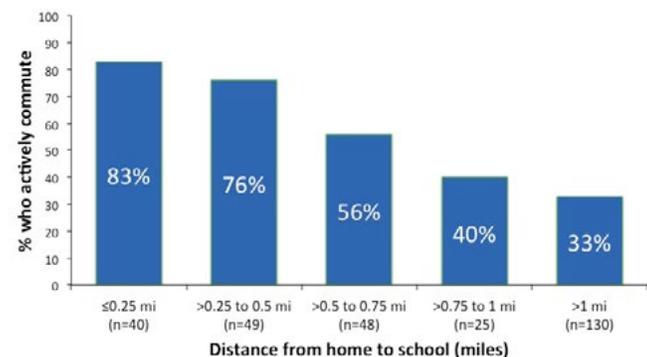
Introduction

Only 12.7% of students in the US walk or bicycle to school, prompting the 2010 White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity to set a goal of a 50% increase by 2015 in the number of 5 to 18 year-olds actively commuting to school.

The New Jersey Child Health Study examined the prevalence of and associations between childhood obesity and active commuting to school in low-income communities in New Jersey in 2009-10 to help local partnerships design targeted interventions.

Methods

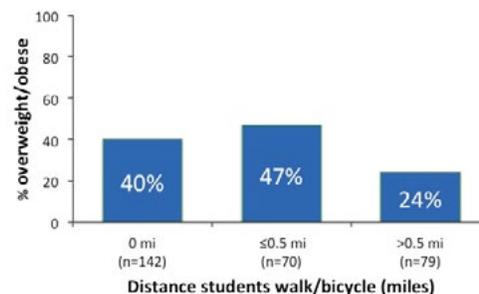
Data were collected in 2009-10 from a phone survey of 1408 households across four cities in New Jersey: Camden, Newark, New Brunswick, and Trenton. The phone survey included questions about the frequency with which a randomly selected child from the household actively commuted to school, parents' perceptions of their physical activity environment, and key demographic variables.



Parents also provided measured heights and weights for themselves and all the children in their household. Publically available data and survey responses were used to determine households' proximity to schools.

Key Findings

- After adjusting for demographics and distance to school, students whose parents perceived the neighborhood as unpleasant had significantly lower (by 61%) odds of walking, bicycling, or skateboarding to school.¹
- Significantly fewer students actively commuted to school with increasing distance between home and school.²
- In adjusted analysis students who actively commuted more than a half-mile to school had significantly lower (by 65%) odds of being overweight or obese compared to non-active commuters or students who actively commuted a half-mile or less.²



Implications

- Locating bus stops and car drop-off points a half-mile from school combined with adult-led Walking School Buses would guarantee daily physical activity for students, and may positively impact weight status.
- Creating a pleasant environment (e.g., shade trees, no graffiti or abandoned buildings) on school routes may result in a greater willingness by both students and parents to accept such a policy.
- State Safe Routes to School coordinators and local partners are encouraged to work together to implement effective strategies.