



Do open streets initiatives impact local businesses? The case of Sunday Streets in San Francisco, California



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ABSTRACT

Background: Ciclovías, known in the U.S. as open streets initiatives, close streets to vehicles to increase open space and physical activity opportunities for local communities. In San Francisco, California, the open streets initiative known as Sunday Streets, was founded in 2008 to promote bicycle use in neighborhoods most underserved for recreational resources and experiencing higher than average burden of chronic diseases. In addition to health impacts, open streets initiatives create an opportunity for greater business activity along the routes. This relatively less explored outcome is the focus of this paper.

Methods: Impacts on businesses along Sunday Streets routes were estimated from survey data collected on the types of businesses, revenue, customer activity, level of engagement with the initiative as well as employment.

Results: Overall there was a modest increase in business activity along Sunday Streets routes with increases in revenue, customer activity and sales as well as employment, demonstrating an unintended outcome for a program originally intended for improving health behaviors.

Conclusions: Sunday Streets increased business activity along its routes. Engaged businesses perceived greater benefits. Merchant engagement with open streets initiatives offers additional community benefits.

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1. Introduction

A global movement to increase health-benefiting physical activity has led to the adoption of strategies and programs that convert existing public infrastructure such as streets and sidewalks into temporary parks. Ciclovías, known in the U.S. as open streets initiatives, use streets closed to vehicles to increase physical activity (PA) resources for local communities (Zieff et al., 2014). The Open Streets Project (Alliance for Biking and Walking and The Street Plans Collaborative) reports that over 100 different U.S. cities hosted an open streets event between 2009 and 2013, although there are many others worldwide, with the number of participants ranging from thousands to over one million (e.g. Bogota, Colombia) (Zieff et al., 2014; Sarmiento et al., 2010). A cost-benefit analysis of open streets initiatives found that the health benefits far outweigh the costs (Montes et al., 2012).

The open streets event in San Francisco, California, known as Sunday Streets (SS), was founded in 2008 to promote bicycling among ethnic minority and low-income residents of areas most underserved for recreational resources and with high rates of chronic disease (Zieff et al., 2013). An additional goal, achieved through deliberate route development, had been to unite different neighborhoods (e.g. Bayview and Dogpatch) with historical social divisions (ICF Macro) and to increase social cohesion within communities (ICF Macro, 2011). Several studies show that SS is associated with positive health outcomes for the participants by offering opportunities for outdoor recreation (Wilson et al., 2013); increasing overall PA behavior (+5 min/week); and for integrating communities (Zieff et al., 2014). Among the approximate 8000–25,000 attendees, 29% reported increasing their overall PA as a result of attending SS, while more than 75% of the participants came from “targeted” neighborhoods with numerous barriers to PA (Zieff et al., 2014). In addition to direct health impacts, the

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large scale of open streets events creates an opportunity for increased economic activity for the businesses on host routes, a topic of study absent from the literature and the aim of this study.

Sunday Streets SF is a public, non-profit organization with public and private funding that implements SS with the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) as a main fiscal sponsor. The City and County of San Francisco agencies who initially contributed to, and in many cases continue to support, SS include: Mayor's Office; Economic Development; Environment; Public Works; Recreation and Parks; Public Health (via the active living coalition, Shape Up SF); and the Police Department as well as the National Park Service (Zieff et al., 2013).

During the first Sunday Streets held on the Embarcadero route in conjunction with San Francisco's Fisherman's Wharf Health and Safety Fair in 2008, Fisherman's Wharf merchants were studied to determine the business impact from street closures and lack of parking. This study found that 68.4% of the participants visited the fair specifically to participate in SS and more than 65% purchased a meal while there (Destination Analysts, Inc. 2009). By 2009, due to their experiences and observations of the popularity of SS, Fisherman's Wharf merchants, as well as those in other districts, began requesting SS in their neighborhoods (King, 2009).

Unlike most open streets initiatives, Sunday Streets SF developed multiple routes on different dates, keeping in line with its goal of creating open spaces in "park poor" communities as well as where merchant support exists (ICF Macro, 2011). Routes were also constructed to avoid re-routing public transit and to accommodate community needs (e.g. avoiding church hours). Community groups were engaged for the development of programming and event implementation. There was also an effort to distribute SS across San Francisco with an aim towards eventually connecting with existing and planned bike routes. Each route, traversing through many different neighborhoods, is named after the primary neighborhood in which it is located to make identification of the routes easier.

The intermittent schedule and lack of permanent infrastructure create a unique form of participant utilization and business impact making it difficult to study open streets initiatives and compare with other community events. Organizers of one-off sporting events and festivals tend to over-estimate participant spending (Matheson, 2006) and report general positive impacts of events on the local economy (Moore, 2012). Specific benefits for the retail sector (Janeczko et al., 2002) and increased property values and attractiveness to business and trained employees (Virginia Outdoors Plan, 2007) have been demonstrated by large events and festivals. Increased tourism, including tourist spending, and increased community cohesion have been identified as benefits of developed outdoor space and parks (Harnik et al., 2009). Direct and indirect impact models of recreational and tourist attractions, and evaluations of sports stadiums report inconsequential impact on development and minor economic growth (Rosentraub et al., 1994; Prophet, 2012; Santo, 2005). Among these types of events, a lack of consistent methodology has made it difficult to accurately identify the area of jurisdiction (Weisbrod and Weisbrod, 1997), evaluate expenditures against attraction of large numbers of local visitors (Crompton, 2010) and conduct a relative evaluation of social and economic costs and benefits (Wood, 2005).

Although there is some evidence that a district's "walkability" impacts business activity, the types of businesses that actually benefit from walkability have yet to be determined (Hack, 2013; Moudon et al., 2006). For a 2003 study of the Valencia district commercial corridor in San Francisco (site of a SS route), local merchants were asked to report about the impact of traffic calming and bicycle lanes installed in 1999. The study found that 56% of business owners believed the number of local residents shopping there had increased, 37% reported increased sales, and 65% reported positive impact on business and/or sales (Drennan). Further, a preliminary evaluation in St. Louis found that participants tend to spend money at open streets events and a majority reported increased awareness of new businesses along the route (Hipp et al., 2012).

To date, there has been no rigorous evaluation of the impact of open streets initiatives on business activity. In 2012, the SFMTA commissioned this study of SS impact on businesses along 5 routes that they selected (Mission, Bayview, Chinatown, Western Addition, Excelsior). That year, there were 10 SS events;¹ the other routes were on the Embarcadero, Great Highway, as well as 3 repeated events in the Mission. The Mission route was chosen to pilot the feasibility of holding regular and repeated events and 4 events were scheduled, one each month, from May through August. The SFMTA specifically identified its interest in understanding the business impact of multiple events on the Mission route. These routes represent the northeast (Chinatown); central (Mission, Excelsior, Western Addition); and southeast (Bayview) quadrants of the city, each with predominant ethnic minority and low-income populations (Sustainable Community Index)². Sunday Streets routes for 2012 are indicated on a map of San Francisco (see Appendix A).

In this study, we present results from data that we collected from six SS events: twice from the Mission route and once each from Bayview, Chinatown, Western Addition and Excelsior routes, focusing on the impact of SS on customer activity, sales and revenue outcomes, and employment for businesses operating along these routes.

2. Methods

2.1. Data collection

Survey data were collected from merchants along SS routes using an instrument developed for this study. The survey instrument included types of questions and categories drawn from existing surveys used to evaluate one-time festivals and tourism events, with additional questions that took into account the intermittent and multiple sites of SS (Moore, 2012; Wood and Barta 2002). A 5-question (short form) survey on type of business, customer activity, revenue and employee numbers was developed to collect baseline data on business activity during Sundays, two weeks before and two weeks after the event. To gather event data, a 9-question (long form) survey was used that additionally included questions about merchant engagement with the event and perception of impact. (See Appendix B for surveys).

The surveys were pilot tested on merchants along the routes during the Embarcadero SS and the first Mission SS. Based on feedback from merchants and research assistants, changes were made to the survey tool. For example, we added an open-ended question asking for specific description of the types of activities businesses used for engagement with SS. The pilot test also demonstrated the difficulty in collecting data on Sundays during SS events when store employees were busy assisting additional customers in crowded shops. Finally, close-of-business time varied, with businesses closing before, during, or after the end of the SS event, and managers and employees did not often have the necessary information ready. Moreover, many businesses are closed on Mondays. Thus, it was determined that collecting data on Tuesday mornings would give merchants time to collect revenue data from the previous Sunday and thoroughly respond to the survey.

¹ <http://www.sundaystreetssf.com/2012-sunday-streets/>, accessed March 23, 2015.

² www.sustainablecommunitiesindex.org, accessed August 20, 2014.

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