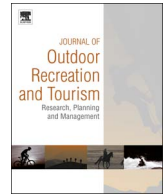




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Walking as urban outdoor recreation: Public health for everyone

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate whether the frequency of neighbourhood walks (both for recreation and for transport) is associated with various indicators of demographic and socio-economic position, indicators of self-reported physical activity and perceived health status. We compare the findings with participation (yes/no) in physical exercise/workouts. A survey (N = 780) was conducted in the Norwegian town Moss. We used linear regression models to assess the potential links between the frequency of walks from home and the following self-reported indicators: income, education, housing type, employment, age, gender, raised in Norway or not, years of residence in Moss, number of financial household providers, household with/without children, exerciser or not, activity level at work, perceived health status, sedentary minutes per week, and dog ownership. The study reveals that neighbourhood walking appeals to all adults regardless of demographic situation or socio-economic position. Furthermore, owning a dog seems to be a successful factor for getting people to walk. Our results show a higher frequency of walks from home for transport than for the walk itself (usually called recreational walks). Given the global political health goal of encouraging people to be more physically active, this study demonstrates the potential of walking from a public health perspective. The study argues for the importance of health promoting urban planning, with attractive and walkable friendly urban environments. Furthermore, the study acknowledges the importance of promoting a broader understanding of outdoor recreation in urban settings, where neighbourhood walking, both for recreation and for transport, should be regarded as an activity within the frame of urban recreation.

Management implications:

- Neighbourhood walking appeals to all adults regardless of demographic situation or socio-economic position.
- Young adults and people who are better economically situated favour physical exercise more than other adults do.
- In a world dominated by inactive adults, a moderate physical activity such as neighbourhood walking has great potential to improve public health.
- Public health policy and management should facilitate efficient measures to stimulate neighbourhood walking.
- Neighbourhood walking, both for recreation and for transport, should be regarded as an activity within the frame of urban recreation; both types are mostly performed in people's leisure time.
- It is important to base urban planning on the principle of developing a walkable city.

1. Introduction

Both international and national authorities (Hansen et al., 2015; World Health Organization, 2017a) are concerned about the high level of inactivity in the population (Hallal et al., 2012). The development of the modern welfare society has involved simplifying, automating and eliminating many bodily activities and routines that were previously part of most people's daily lives. Consequently, physical activities have systematically and increasingly been eliminated from household

routines, transport and working life. Some people compensate for their sedentary lives with sport and exercise in their leisure time. However, participation in such activities tends to appeal to a small proportion of the population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011; Beenackers et al., 2012; Breivik & Rafoss, 2017; European Commission, 2014; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Previous studies indicate that people with a higher socio-economic position (SEP) are overrepresented in sport and exercise, whereas people from a lower SEP are overrepresented among the inactive population (Beenackers et al., 2012; Breivik & Rafoss,

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2017). There is need for a broad analysis of whether walking from home is influenced by any demographic or SEP indicators and whether walking tends to differ from performing physical exercise or working out. From a public health perspective, it is also important to identify and promote activities that seem especially likely to increase the general activity level in the population. Our study is based on the notion that neighbourhood walking is likely to be such an activity. Monitoring studies reveal that walking is one of the most common physical activities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015; Statistics Norway, 2014). However, there are many types of and contexts for walking. In this study, we were primarily interested in low-threshold neighbourhood walks in a typical middle-sized Norwegian town.

1.1. Neighbourhood walking as urban outdoor recreation

Walking has mental, social and physical health benefits (Hanson & Jones, 2015). For instance, walking can increase positive affect and relaxation (Ekkekakis, Hall, Vanlanduyt, & Petruzzello, 2000), well-being (Gatrell, 2013) and socialization (Friedman, 2014). Furthermore it can potentially postpone mortality (Arem et al., 2015) and reduce the risk of obesity (Frank, Andresen, & Schmid, 2004). Moreover, the World Health Organization, 2017b includes walking as a recommended moderate-intensity activity and recommends (for adults) at least 150 min of moderate physical activity, or 75 min of more vigorous physical activity a week – and in bouts of at least 10 min duration. In a qualitative study from the same case area as this study, Rybråten et al. (2017) found that walking was a flexible and dynamic activity with great importance for citizens' health and wellbeing. Walkers ascribed a variety of qualities to their walks, several of which were often experienced during the same walk: walking may include different kinds of exercise, a transport aim, the opportunity to enjoy nature or other surroundings; it may facilitate contemplation and reflection; and it may serve as an activity for social interaction or for a solitary walk. Although several of the informants (op cit.) appreciated leisure walks in natural surroundings, recreational aspects were also highly evident in urban environments and during walks for transport. Walking for recreation and for transport is a natural part of urban daily life; as such, it has great importance for public health (see also Cerin, Leslie, & Owen, 2009). Hence, we find it reasonable to include both walking for recreation and walking for transport in the phrase “urban recreation”. The importance of walking and walkability has also been acknowledged in the neighbourhood and urban planning literature (e.g. Friedman, 2014; Bannister, 2008; Southworth, 2005), not only for transport reasons but also because it is an appreciated activity. In Norway, as in many other parts of the world, people are increasingly moving to urban areas. In line with political agendas for sustainable urban development, towns and cities are becoming denser. This development encourages walking as an important transportation mode (Buckley, Stangl, & Guinn, 2017; Hanssen, Hofstad, & Saglie, 2015) as well as the need to plan for the convenience and pleasure of walking (Friedman, 2014).

There are several reasons for a more inclusive and broader understanding of urban walking as an activity within the concept of urban outdoor recreation. In Norway, traditional outdoor recreation (termed *friluftsliv*) is closely connected to people's visitation and experiences of nature. Skår (2010) argues that a narrow understanding of outdoor recreation as something that people do in nature and away from home may have contributed to de-emphasizing important outdoor activities in people's everyday lives. For example, Statistics Norway's regular monitoring of outdoor recreation activities includes activities such as fishing, cross-country skiing, hiking in forests and mountains, and strolls, but not walking for transport (SSB 2014). However, it is encouraging that the latest Norwegian white paper on outdoor recreation (Ministry of Climate & Environment, 2016) emphasizes outdoor recreation in urban settings, such as neighbourhood walking.

1.2. Associations between walking and socio-economic position

There are many types of walking and many arenas and environmental conditions in which walking is, or can be, performed. Monitoring and research have revealed that some of these walking categories or situations represent biased participation concerning SEP. For example, for mountain walking in Norway, a higher level of education is related to higher levels of participation (Statistics Norway, 2014). This is not the case for recreational short walks/strolls (op cit.). Moreover, short recreational walks are (and have been for many years) the activity with the highest level of participation of all monitored outdoor recreation activities in Norway (Derivo et al., 2014). For the majority of the monitored outdoor recreation activities, participation depends on socio-economic position (Ministry of Climate & Environment, 2016).

Findings and conclusions vary in studies on the correlation between different kinds of walking and various SEP indicators. For example, Cerin and Leslie (2008) found that people with high SEP walk more for recreation compared to those with lower SEP. Other studies have found that people with low SEP are more likely to walk for transport (Rachele et al., 2015; Turrell, Haynes, Wilson, & Giles-Corti, 2013), whereas Cerin et al. (2009) found that both income and educational level influence even the frequency of walking for transport. Ghani, Rachele, Washington, and Turrell (2016) conducted a large multi-level study (N = 7866) in Australia on gender and age and found that older persons were less likely to walk for transport but more likely to walk for recreation. With regard to gender, the authors found that women were more likely than men were to take recreational walks, whereas walking for transport showed no gender differences. Few studies have investigated the possible correlations between walking and a broad spectrum of SEP indicators. Instead, the literature tends to focus on another important issue: how environmental or neighbourhood factors motivate people to walk or prevent them from walking (Cerin et al., 2009; Lee, Ory, Yoon, & Forjuohetal., 2013; Owen, Humpel, Leslie, Bauman, & Sallis, 2004; Suminski, Poston, Petosa, Stevens, & Katzenmoyer, 2005; Sundquist et al., 2011; van Dyck et al., 2010; van Lenthe, Brug, & Mackenbach, 2005; Wei, Xiao, Wen, & Wei, 2016). Some of these studies include analyses of some SEP indicators (Cerin et al., 2009; Sundquist et al., 2011; van Dyck et al., 2010; van Lenthe et al., 2005; Wei et al., 2016), but the findings illustrate the point presented above: there are various associations between SEP indicators and the different types of walking.

1.3. Associations between sport/exercise and socio-economic position

A large body of literature examines correlations between various SEP indicators and participation in exercise and more vigorous leisure activities. The report by the European Commission (2014) emphasizes the correlation between low education levels and no participation in sport or exercise. Furthermore, the report show that men (and especially younger men) are more likely to be involved in sport and exercise than women are. In general, participation in sport and exercise decreases with age, which has also been found in the United States (U.S. Bureau of labor statistics, 2016). Both in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011) and the United States (U.S. Bureau of labor statistics, 2016), coherence was found between SEP (income, education, employment) and participation in physical exercise, higher SEP equalled increased participation in such activities. The above-mentioned international studies seem to indicate that physical exercise appeal to a narrower group of the population compared to participation in neighbourhood walks.

In Norway, only 1/3 of the adult population reaches the recommended level of minimum 150 min of moderate physical activity per week (Hansen et al., 2015). Three Norwegian studies have found differences in participation in physical exercise/workout as a function of SEP (Breivik & Rafoss, 2017; Hansen et al., 2015; Vaage, 2015). First, all three studies reported that people with higher levels of education

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