

## Walking is Going Places

### The unexpected rise of foot power as a social trend, transportation innovation and path to happiness

By Jay Walljasper

Walking is going places.

Humans' most common pastime--forsaken for decades as too slow and too much effort-- is now being recognized as a health breakthrough, an economic catalyst and a route to happiness.

*Real Simple* magazine (circulation: 2 million) declared "walking America's untrendiest trend" in its February 2014 cover story. A month later *Builder* magazine (a construction trade journal) announced on its cover, "Walkability. Why we care...and why you should too." The reason? Simple: "Increasingly, the market is demanding places where homeowners can hoof it."

*The New Yorker* weighed in last September quoting the new book *A Philosophy of Walking*, which asserts that walking "makes it possible to recover the pure sensation of being, to rediscover the simple joy of existing."

This sheer pleasure of walking is highlighted in one of the year's top [music videos](#), "Happy" by soul singer Pharrell Williams. It's an exuberant celebration of life on foot showing all kinds of people (including Magic Johnson, Steve Carrell and Jimmy Kimmel) strutting, stepping, striding and sashaying down city streets. It's been viewed 465 million times on You Tube, prompting Williams to release a 24-hour [version](#).

There is sure to be continuing coverage of foot power next year when the Surgeon General's office releases a Call to Action on the health and social benefits of walking and walkable communities--a step some are comparing to the

PO Box 10581

Portland, OR

(503) 757-8342 [americawalks.org](http://americawalks.org) [@americawalks](https://twitter.com/americawalks)

# America WALKS

1964 Surgeon General's Report on the dangers of smoking.

Already the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) [recommends](#) all adults engage in 30 minutes of physical activity such as walking five days a week based on the proven connection between moderate physical activity and [lower incidences](#) of major medical problems--not just heart disease, diabetes and obesity, as you'd expect, but also depression, dementia, anxiety, colon cancer, osteoporosis and other ailments.

This flurry of attention about walking is more than a flash-in-the-pan. Evidence that millions of Americans' are now rediscovering walking for transportation, fitness and fun is as solid as the sidewalk beneath our feet.

## **Americans Are Getting Back on their Feet**

"Walking is the most common form of physical activity across incomes and ages and education levels," explained Thomas Schmid of the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at the Pro-Walk, Pro-Bike Pro-Place conference in Pittsburgh this fall. The CDC's most [recent research](#) shows the number of Americans who take a walk at least once a week rose from 56 percent in 2005 to 62 percent in 2010-- which represents almost 20 million more people on their feet.

Speaking on the same panel, Paul Herberling of the US Department of Transportation noted that 10.4 percent of all trips Americans make are on foot-- and 28 percent of trips under a mile. For young people, it's 17 percent of percent of all trips. Americans walk most frequently for exercise, errands and recreation, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Last year the first-ever [Walking Summit](#) was held in Washington DC, drawing more than 400 people from 41 states and Canada representing 235 organizations ranging from the PGA Tour to the [Sioux Falls \(South Dakota\) Department of Health](#). A second summit is scheduled for October 28-30, 2015 in Washington, DC.

The 2013 summit, which sold out weeks in an advance, marked the birth of a

PO Box 10581

Portland, OR

(503) 757-8342 [americawalks.org](http://americawalks.org) [@americawalks](#)

# America WALKS

new walking movement committed to: 1) encouraging everyone to walk more; and 2) boosting policies, practices and investments that make communities everywhere more walkable. It was convened by the [Every Body Walk!](#) Collaborative, a joint effort of more than 100 influential organizations across many fields to promote walking as part of the solution to problems ranging from obesity, chronic disease and health care costs to climate change and the decline of community.

The Every Body Walk! Collaborative (EBWC), which was catalyzed by [Kaiser Permanente](#)--a non-profit health care system serving 9.5 million people--includes organizations ranging from AARP, NAACP, PTA and YMCA to the American College of Sports Medicine, Girl Trek, the Safe Routes to Schools Partnership, and Nike. [America Walks](#), a coalition of pedestrian advocacy groups, helps lead EBWC.

“In addition to the health benefits getting regular physical activity, people’s health can be correlated to having strong relationships, and living in connected communities with high levels of social cohesion,” said Kaiser Permanente Vice-President Tyler Norris at the Pro-Walk Pro-Bike Pro-Place conference. “Among the important determinants of this sense of belonging is ‘Do I know my neighbors?’ A walkable community fosters these connections every day by helping us meet people we otherwise wouldn’t.”

Americans overwhelmingly view walking as a good thing, according to a national [survey](#) from GfK Research sponsored by Kaiser Permanente. Here are some of benefits of walking shown in the survey:

- Good for my health (94 percent)
- Good way to lose weight (91 percent)
- Great way to relax (89 percent)
- Helps reduce anxiety (87 percent)
- Reduces feelings of depression (85 percent)

PO Box 10581  
Portland, OR

(503) 757-8342 [americawalks.org](http://americawalks.org) [@americawalks](https://twitter.com/americawalks)

-Want to design streets to making walking safer--even if it means driving slower (80 percent)

-Walking is “cool” (72 percent)

-Walking stimulates my thinking (66 percent)

And people across the country are translating this favorable impression into increased activism and advocacy for walking. There are now 600 local organizations that have signed on to America Walks’s [Vision for a Walkable America](#), an increase of 100 over the past year-and-a-half.

“The walking movement is happening all across the country, not just in the places we’d expect-- Kentucky, for instance, could become the poster child for walking activism,” points out Kate Kraft, National Coalition Director of both America Walks and the Every Body Walk! Collaborative. The Bluegrass State sports 23 walking organizations, the most of any state except California (with 63 groups, but nine times as many people). Montana, Virginia and North Carolina also rank among the top 11, proving the walking movement has legs beyond big cities. Indeed, people in towns 10,000 to 50,000 make 8.5 percent of their trips on foot, more than those in newer suburbs and only slightly less than those living in urbanized areas (12 percent), according to the most recent Federal Highway Administration’s National Household Travel Survey

## **Why Walking? Why Now?**

What’s driving the growing passion for walking? “It’s a convergence of factors”, says [Christopher Leinberger](#), a real estate [developer](#), George Washington University business professor and a leading advocate that walkable communities are crucial to our future prosperity:

1 The [well-established link](#) between walking and better health, which is reinforced by recent research pointing to the dangers of sitting for long periods. A comprehensive study charting 240,000 Americans between ages 50 and 71 published in the [Journal of Clinical Nutrition](#) found that “overall [time] sitting was

PO Box 10581

Portland, OR

(503) 757-8342 [americawalks.org](http://americawalks.org) [@americawalks](#)

associated with all-cause mortality”.

**2 The accelerating costs of owning one, two or more cars**, which many Americans, especially [younger people](#), find a poor investment of their resources. Transportation is now the highest cost in [family budgets](#) (19 percent) next to housing (32 percent). In auto-dependent communities--where walking is inconvenient and unsafe-- transportation costs (25 percent) approach housing costs (32 percent).

**3 Metropolitan areas with many walkable neighborhoods do better economically** than those with just a few. Leinberger’s recent report [Foot Traffic Ahead](#) finds that walkable metropolitan areas “have substantially higher GDPs per capita” as well as a higher percentage of college graduates. Another study from [CEOs for Cities](#) shows that if we reduce the number of miles traveled per person each day in America’s 51 largest metropolitan areas, these regions would save \$35 billion yearly on fuel and the expense of purchasing and maintaining vehicles. “Less driving means more money in the hands of local consumers; unlike spending on automobiles and fuel--most of which leave the local community immediately,” states their report [The Green Dividend](#).

**4 More people discovering the personal satisfactions of walking.** “Seeing friends on the street, walking to work, strolling out for dinner or nightlife,” are among the pleasures of walking that enrich our lives, says Leinberger.

## **Americans Are Voting With Their Feet**

Even the American dream is being remodeled to meet the public’s growing enthusiasm for walking. Sixty percent of Americans would prefer to live in a neighborhood with stores and services within easy walking distance, according to a recent [survey](#) from the National Association of Realtors, nearly twice as many who want to live where stores can be reached only by car. Fifty-five percent would prefer a home with a small yard that is a short walk from schools, stores and restaurants over one with a large yard where it’s necessary to drive everywhere, which is preferred by just 40 percent.

PO Box 10581

Portland, OR

(503) 757-8342 [americawalks.org](http://americawalks.org) [@americawalks](https://twitter.com/americawalks)

# America WALKS

This is especially true for the millennial generation, who are now entering the workforce and housing market in large numbers. “With drastically different views of transportation from those of generations that came before them, millennials are transforming communities,” notes another [report](#) from the National Association of Realtors....”Millennials own fewer cars and drive less than their predecessors. They’d rather walk, bike, car-share and use public transportation--and want to live where that’s all easy.”

[Federal Highway Administration](#) research shows that total miles traveled by drivers 16-24 declined five miles per day (22 percent) between 2001 and 2009. Even [Motor Trend](#) magazine admits, “Today's young people appear to have less interest in driving and owning a car than do their mainstream...older counterparts.”

The demand for walkable neighborhoods is the most significant real estate fact of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, states Leinberger. His report [Foot Traffic Ahead](#) charts the rise of walkable communities in America’s 30 largest metropolitan regions, finding that office space in walkable locations enjoys a 74 percent rent-per-square-foot premium over offices in auto-oriented developments.

The report is full of surprises about where to find walkable neighborhoods. In [Washington, DC](#), crowned by Leinberger as America’s most walkable metropolitan region, almost 50 percent of walkable neighborhoods are located in suburbs, usually around stations on the Metro train line. That’s the reason DC tops New York, Boston, Chicago and San Francisco for walkability--the suburbs in those regions are much less easy to navigate on foot.

The old distinction between cities and suburbs is outdated today, Leinberger declares. The focus should now be on places that are “walkable” vs. those that are not. Suburban Arlington County, Virginia--which grew up rapidly in the 1950s on the edge of Washington, DC-- now ranks as one of the nation’s 14 most [Walk Friendly Communities](#). Tigard, Oregon--a Portland suburb--is vying to become the [most walkable city](#) in the Pacific Northwest.

Even more shocking are some of the metropolitan regions Leinberger projects to be among the most walkable in the future based on current trends: Miami (#4), Atlanta (#5), Detroit (#8) and Tampa (#10), Los Angeles (#11), Phoenix (#12)

PO Box 10581

Portland, OR

(503) 757-8342 [americawalks.org](http://americawalks.org) [@americawalks](https://twitter.com/americawalks)

and Houston (#13). Until now all have stood out as conspicuous victims of sprawl. “These places are making significant investment in rail transit or other infrastructure that allow walkable urbanism to take off,” he explains. “It looks like they’re turning the corner on sprawl. Five years ago I would not have believed this about any of them.”

## **Walking Means Business**

Firms in the booming tech, information and creative industries are at the forefront of the trend toward walkable communities because the coveted young talent they need to stay competitive in fast-changing fields want to work in places a short stroll from cafes and cultural attractions. This marks a turnaround from the high-tech industry’s origins in the sprawling office parks of Silicon Valley and Route 128 in Boston. Take a look at what’s happening in Seattle. While Microsoft’s headquarters remain at the enclosed campus it developed in suburban Redmond during the 1980s, Amazon.com moved in 2010 to South Lake Union, a revitalized industrial zone near downtown Seattle with lots of streetlife and a streetcar line. The neighborhood was redeveloped by Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen and is also headquarters to REI and the Tommy Bahama clothing company, with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation nearby.

The first thing Google did after buying the electronics firm Motorola Mobility was to move its headquarters away from the freeways and strip malls of Libertyville, Illinois to the walkable environs of downtown Chicago. “They felt like they couldn’t attract the young software engineers they needed” to an isolated 84-acre complex, says Leinberger. Other companies that recently moved from suburban Chicago to the city include Medline, Walgreen’s, Gogo, GE Transportation, Hillshire Brands and Motorola Solutions.

“Two things seem to resonating for businesses about the importance of walkability--how to attract the best workforce and wanting to locate in communities where health costs are lower,” says [Mark Fenton](#), a former US National Team race walker who now consults on public health planning and transportation. Employees with more opportunities to walk at work and at home are healthier, meaning lower insurance rates for their firms.

# America WALKS

From his vantage point at the CDC, Thomas Schmid observes, “If a business is located in a community that is not healthy, they’re paying more to be there. Think of it as a tax or cost of doing business because of health care costs.” One company relocating to Chattanooga, he said, would do so only if a walking and bike trail was extended to their facility.

“Walking is a business issue,” agrees Karen Marlo, Vice-President of the National Business Group on Health, an alliance of large companies. “A healthy workforce means a more successful workforce. It’s important for businesses to share effective ways to get employees to walk more.”

## **The Challenges to a More Walkable America**

The walking movement has picked up a lot of momentum in a very short time. “The wind is behind our sails,” says Kate Kraft, a public health expert working with EBWC and America Walks. But she goes on to note that “it took 80 years to make America unwalkable, and it will take a lot of work to make it walkable again”.

Last year’s [national survey](#) on Americans’ attitudes to walking accentuates these challenges. By a huge majority, people say that walking is good for them but also admit that they should walk more (79 percent) and that their children should walk more (73 percent). Only 11 percent say they meet the CDC’s recommended daily minimum for walking--half an hour a day five days a week.

Common reasons cited for not walking are:

- My neighborhood is not very walkable (40 percent)
- Few places within walking distance of my home (40 percent)
- Don’t have time (39 percent)
- Speeding traffic or lack of sidewalks (25 percent)
- Crime in my neighborhood (13 percent)

PO Box 10581

Portland, OR

(503) 757-8342 [americawalks.org](http://americawalks.org) [@americawalks](https://twitter.com/americawalks)





## **Solutions for a More Walkable America**

A diverse coalition that links fields as varied as business, education, health care, transportation, recreation, social justice, community revitalization and grassroots organizing, the walking movement is advancing on many fronts to encourage Americans to walk more and remove the barriers that keep us off our feet. “Every profession is now starting to seeing the importance of walkability in our communities-- real estate, health care, traffic engineering, economic development, urban planning, sustainability,” reports Dan Burden, Walkability Expert for the [Blue Zones](#) project who has traveled to more 3500 communities over the past four decades to promote walking.

A lot of energy is being generated by organizations involved with the Every Body Walk! Collaborative and America Walks, but the loosely organized movement includes other players too, some of whom have been working on these issues for years and others who were fired up recently about the potential of walking to strengthen our health, our lives, our communities, our economy, our nation and the world.

Here are some of the promising developments, strategies, messages and tools that are now emerging to promote walking:

**Vision Zero for Safe Streets:** 4500 Americans are killed crossing the street every year--a tragedy that very few people acknowledge. But there’s hope that will change now that New York City, San Francisco, Oregon and other places are implementing [Vision Zero](#) campaigns to reduce traffic deaths through street improvements, law enforcement and public education. Similar policies in Sweden cut pedestrian deaths in half over the past five years--and reduced overall traffic fatalities at the same rate. “Vision Zero is the next big thinking for walking,” says [Alliance for Biking & Walking](#) President Jeff Miller.

**Federal Action Plan on Pedestrian Safety:** New US Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx recently announced an [all-out effort](#) to apply the department’s resources to boost bike and pedestrians safety the same as they

PO Box 10581

Portland, OR

(503) 757-8342 [americawalks.org](http://americawalks.org) [@americawalks](https://twitter.com/americawalks)

# America WALKS

do auto and airline safety. Secretary Foxx--former mayor of Charlotte, North Carolina--notes that pedestrian deaths rose 6 percent since 2009. One thrust of his [Action Plan on Bike and Pedestrian Safety](#) will be design changes to streets that discourage speeding and other dangerous driving. “For years the message that bicyclists and pedestrians have been given is: You are responsible for your own safety. Walk at your own risk. Bike at your risk,” Foxx told a cheering crowd at the Pro-Walk Pro-Bike Pro-Place conference. But it’s a new era now, he promised. “Bicycling and walking is as important as any other form of transportation.”

**Safe Routes to Schools:** Half of kids under 14 walked or biked to school in 1969. Now it’s less than 15 percent. Safe Routes to School campaigns work with families, schools and community officials to identify and eliminate barriers that block kids from getting to school under their own power. “We’re finding that the best interventions include both infrastructure improvements and programming. You put the sidewalks in but also get parents involved,” explains Margo Pedroso, deputy director of the [Safe Routes to Schools National Partnership](#). A five-year [study of 800 schools](#) in Texas, Florida, Oregon and DC found a 43 percent rise in walking and biking by using this strategy.

**Walking as a Basic Human Right:** Walking has been shown to optimize our health and strengthen our communities, which means everyone should have equal opportunity to do it. But low-income people often find it difficult or dangerous to take a walk in their neighborhoods, which often lack sidewalks and other basic infrastructure. Studies show that pedestrian in poor neighborhoods are up to [four times](#) more likely to be injured in traffic accidents. Fear of crime is another factor that keeps people from walking. “Is everybody welcome to walk?” is a question we need to ask, said the NAACP’s Director of Health Programs Shavon Arline-Bradley at the Walking Summit last year.

**Communities for People of All Ages:** The mark of a great community is whether you’d feel calm about letting your 80-year-old grandmother or 8-year-old son walk to a nearby park or business district, says Gil Penalosa, former park director of Bogota, explaining why he founded [8-80 Cities](#). Too many young and old people today live under virtual house arrest, unable to get anywhere on their own because driving is the only way to go. This is a [major theme](#) for AARP too,

PO Box 10581

Portland, OR

(503) 757-8342 [americawalks.org](http://americawalks.org) [@americawalks](https://twitter.com/americawalks)

# America WALKS

which partnered with [Walkable and Livable Communities Institute](#) (WALC) to create a series of 11 Livability [Fact Sheets](#) showing how to make your community safer and more comfortable for people of all ages. “Most of us are going to outlive our ability to drive by 10-12 years,” notes Kelly Morphy, executive director of WALC.

**Walk Audits:** A deceptively simple idea, walk audits bring citizens and public officials together to assess the safety and convenience of walking in a particular locale. “They can really change how people look at a place,” says Dan Burden of [Blue Zones](#) who hit upon the idea in 1984 when a group of traffic engineers in Florida laughed at his question about how it would feel to cross the street at a harrowing intersection. “We’d never walk here,” they replied. But when they did, Burden remembers, “the street was immediately torn up and they started over.” This is a key tool to create what Burden calls community-driven planning, where the people living in a neighborhood have a big say in what happens there.

**Complete Streets:** The simple idea that all streets should offer safe, convenient and comfortable travel for everyone--those on foot, on bike, on transit, in wheelchairs, young, old or disabled. Twenty seven states and 625 local communities across the US have adopted [Complete Streets](#) policies in some form. There is no one uniform design. Bike lanes, sidewalks, traffic calming, special bus lanes, median islands, enhanced crosswalks, improved crossing signals, curb extensions, more narrow auto lanes, roundabouts and road diets are among the innovations that have been adopted many places. The goals of Complete Streets are to provide protection for people on foot and bike, to make other modes of travel more visible to motorists, to encourage shared use of the road and to reduce motor vehicle speeds.

**Health Impact Assessments:** Evidence is piling up that walking improves our health and saves big money in health care costs, but how do we make sure this is factored into public decision making about new projects? The World Health Organization has developed a tool for that, says public health and transportation consultant Mark Fenton. The [Health Economic Analysis Tool](#) allows planners and engineers to gauge how an increase in walking or bicycling trips will extend people’s lives, and then places a dollar value on that outcome similar to those used to decide whether other transportation safety measures are worth the extra

PO Box 10581

Portland, OR

(503) 757-8342 [americawalks.org](http://americawalks.org) @americawalks

expense.

**The Healing Properties of Nature and the Outdoors:** Not all exercise offers the same health benefits, according to a growing [body of research](#) showing that outdoor physical activity, especially in nature, boosts our health, improves our concentration and may speed up our natural healing process. A walk in the park is not only more interesting than a work-out at the gym, it may be more healthy too. The Wingspread Declaration--recently signed by 30 of America's leading health officials, researchers and non-profit leaders--calls for business, government and the health care sector to step up efforts to reconnect people with nature.

**Walking as a Medical Vital Sign:** There's an initiative afoot to encourage health care professionals to chart patients' physical activity the same as they do weight, blood pressure, smoking and family health. Ascension Health (with 1900 facilities in 23 states) Kaiser Permanente (648 facilities in 9 states), Group Health (25 clinics in Washington state), Greenville Health System (7 facilities in South Carolina) are among the health providers already doing it.

**Walk With a Doc:** Walking has the lowest drop-out rate of any physical activity, which is why Ohio cardiologist David Sabgir started Walk With a Doc: to sponsor events where people can talk to health care professional while outwalking. [Walk With a Doc](#) now operates in 38 states.

**Signs of the Times:** Many people are so out of practice on walking, they don't realize how convenient it is. That's why architecture student Matt Tamasulo posted signs in Raleigh, North Carolina explaining that key destinations were only a few minutes away by foot. The city soon embraced his guerrilla campaign, and official walk wayfinding signs are found around town. Tamasulo has launched [Walk \[Your City\]](#) to help other communities show how easy it is to get around on your own power.

**Walking Marathons and Half-Marathons:** By nature, Americans are full of aspirations, always pushing themselves to do bigger things. So walking, for all its social and health benefits, can seem pedestrian to some people. That's why certified [fitness and walking coach](#) Michele Stanten promotes the idea of walking

PO Box 10581

Portland, OR

(503) 757-8342 [americawalks.org](http://americawalks.org) [@americawalks](https://twitter.com/americawalks)

# America WALKS

marathons: to give walkers something big to aim and train for. Right now there are only a handful of walking marathons, and walkers are often tolerated more than welcomed at running marathons. But as America's population ages and more folks discover the pleasures of walking, this is an idea whose time is coming.

**Walking is Fun:** "Walking is still not seen to be as sexy as biking," says Robert Ping, Program Manager for [Walking and Livable Communities Institute](#). "We could focus more on walking as recreation-- the stroll through the neighborhood after dinner, going around the block, walking down to the park, meeting your neighbors. Something that's not only utilitarian and good for the environment, but that's fun!"

*Jay Walljasper writes, speaks, edits and consults about creating stronger, more vital communities. He is author of The Great Neighborhood Book and All That We Share: A Field Guide to the Commons. His website: [JayWalljasper.com](#)*

PO Box 10581

Portland, OR

(503) 757-8342 [americawalks.org](#) [@americawalks](#)