Reviewer’s report

Title: A comparative case study of walkability for older people: examining the inter-relationship of neighbourhood socio-economic status and urban form

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Reviewer: Miriam Ryvicker

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Review for BMC Public Health

“A comparative case study of walkability for older people: examining the inter-relationship of neighbourhood socio-economic status and urban form”

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This paper addresses the important topic of how characteristics of neighborhood environments – specifically, neighborhood-level socio-economic status and urban vs. suburban form – influence the walking experiences of older adults. The study utilizes a comparative case study design, examining walking experiences and related socio-political processes in four Ottawa neighborhoods that differ along two axes, neighborhood form and SES. The researchers analyze qualitative data from older adults and key informants. The design and methods are appropriate and several important insights emerge from the analysis. However, I believe the paper needs several significant revisions.

1. Major compulsory revisions:

A. Organization and clarification of key findings

The paper would benefit from a clearer statement of the key take-home message(s), as well as tighter organization in the results section. Upon reading I found it difficult to identify and keep track of the overall message. Sections 2 and 3 in the results each could use an introductory paragraph highlighting the key findings for each set of comparisons. For example, in the urban form section (Section 2), an introductory paragraph might say something like: ‘Two major themes emerged in comparing walking experiences suburban and inner-urban older adults: pedestrian infrastructure and walking destinations. For inner-urban residents, sidewalks were important because…For suburban residents, sidewalks were perceived to be more important among low SES…’

In addition to the overview paragraphs, the subheadings could be revised to better guide the reader. I would remove “older peoples’ walking experiences” from the italicized subheadings since it applies to most sub-sections under Sections 2 and 3. Also, the subsequent ‘neighborhood association’ and ‘political organization’ sections seem to be embedded in the larger Section 3 (according to the format), but it is not clear conceptually why this is so. This is another place
B. Interpretation of data on socio-political processes

While I think the conclusions about older people’s walking experiences are reasonable, I believe the interpretation of the socio-political processes from the key informant interviews is on shakier ground. The way it is presented, I am not sure it is possible to make the claims that are being made in this section. Some examples are provided of SES differences the facilitators and barriers to improving walking conditions. Then the authors delve into an interpretation of these examples, informed by insights from the literature. More information is needed to make convincing claims about the relationship between neighborhood SES and the political processes around walkability. Additionally, there is a large literature on neighborhood social capital and health disparities that should be integrated/acknowledged if you want to address these questions. (For example, see work by Kawachi et al.) Some kind of conceptual model or framework for interpreting these issues would be helpful.

My impression is that to adequately address the socio-political issues you would need a more detailed analysis that might be outside the scope of this paper. I actually think that, with a clearer message about the key findings, the discussion of inequities in older peoples’ walking experiences could stand alone, with one of the conclusions/further questions being that further analysis is needed of the socio-political (and political-economic?) processes that influence inequities in walking conditions. Then you could save the more detailed discussion of socio-political processes for another paper.

C. Information on levels of walking activity, addressing potential selection bias

A bit more descriptive information on how much the participants walk would be helpful. Do the authors have information on the variation among participants? Was there a lot of variation? Some comments on this and how it might influence participants’ responses would be useful – this could probably be done in just a couple of sentences. On a related note the authors should comment on the possibility of selection bias and whether/how it might have influenced the findings. Were the participants particularly active walkers? Although the selection criteria do not seem that restrictive (needed to have walked only once in the past year), it is worth acknowledging that the study design leaves out perspectives of non-walkers, who may either be disabled and/or deterred by neighborhood conditions.
2. Minor essential revisions

On p. 31 the authors state that “the problems associated with living next to a heavily trafficked area are created by society as a whole and sustained by transportation policy decisions.” I would avoid referring to “society” as an actor. Try to specify which processes, institutions, etc. are relevant or just keep the transportation policy piece and leave it at that.

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests.