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

Version: 2 Date: 28 May 2010

Reviewer: Neville Owen

Reviewer's report:

This paper describes a meticulous qualitative study with findings that examine in-depth issues that have been raised by the extensive body of research on built-environment attributes and walking. It addresses an important problem for the field, specifically in relation to older adults. The authors take a comprehensive and scholarly approach to an important public health problem. The Introduction (with the exception of a concern identified in point 1 below) is scholarly, balanced and provides a comprehensive and focused perspective on the research problem, building on previous research and commenting critically and constructively on the limitations of that research. The project described in the paper was conducted in a thorough and meticulous fashion, and the authors provide a detailed and informative account of the methods that they used. The paper is well-written, free of jargon, and is highly engaging for the reader and easy to comprehend, given the subtlety of the argument being put forward and the complexity of the material that is presented.

There are some broader matters to which the authors ought to attend, and two minor points of imprecision to be corrected.

1. In the Abstract, and also in the second paragraph of the Introduction section, there is an element of ambiguity in how the ‘walkability’ construct is construed. While there is an excellent case for the ways in which urban form and socio-economic position might interact, and the limitations of studies that have controlled for SES interactions in their study design and analyses, there are some changes that are required in order to avoid potential ambiguity. In the third sentence of the second paragraph on page 5, this apparent ambiguity can be seen in the case that is made about how urban form and neighborhood socio-economic status are dimensions of the neighborhood of the environment that have been shown to influence walkability. It is actually the case that these two attributes have been shown to influence walking behaviours. Walkability is a construct that pulls amalgamates more particular elements of urban form (typically attributes such as street collectivity, residential density, access to destinations); in the context of the research on which the authors are building, walkability interacts with socio economic status to influence walking behaviours of residents. It is thus somewhat misleading to explain that aspects of urban form and SES influence walkability, as it is walking that it is being influenced in the studies that are cited. The author’s argument is an excellent one, but this element of it does need to be tidied up.
2. In the last sentence of the second paragraph on page 6 (In other words….), the case in relation to neighborhood preference has been addressed by previous studies, and these studies need to be cited. There is a paper in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine (Owen and colleagues, 2007) which addresses this issue, and which would also lead the authors to other relevant studies.

3. The narrative of the Results section presents several important insights, but it is not easy for the reader to keep track of all of these. The first section of the Discussion has an excellent summary of findings, but it is still nevertheless the challenge for the reader to see clearly what the main findings are. The authors should give serious consideration to presenting a concise summary table, in which the main findings are consolidated in a brief form, and can be seen collectively in the one place. The first part of the Discussion comes close to doing this, but the feeling of this reviewer is that readers may need a little more help in this regard.

4. This paper is well written and meticulously proofread. On page 29 in the first sentence of the discussion section, it would be more correct to describe interrelationships of neighborhood SES and urban form characteristics ‘with’ older people’s walking experiences, rather than ‘interrelationships on’. On page 25, in the paragraph below the quote at the top of the page, in the third line the word ‘principals’ is used, when it should be ‘principles’ in this context.

**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.