



# Incentive Policies That Can Create Opportunities for Physical Activity

## bridging the gap

Research Informing Policies & Practices  
for Healthy Youth

Research Brief  
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## Introduction

Lack of physical activity contributes to the obesity epidemic that affects more than one-third of adults and nearly 17% of youth in the United States.<sup>1,2</sup> Recent estimates show that fewer than half of all adults<sup>3</sup> and fewer than one-third of high school students<sup>4</sup> meet the daily recommendations for physical activity suggested by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.<sup>5</sup> Designing communities with sidewalks, safe and inviting spaces, sport-courts, and parks and green spaces is an important strategy for promoting physical activity.<sup>6</sup>

Photo source: [Flickr Creative Commons/OC Parks\\_CA](#)

Local governments can adopt incentives that will help increase opportunities for physical activity,<sup>6,7</sup> including:

- **Financial:** Incentives in the form of reduced development fees, tax credits/exemptions, or subsidies that could be offered in exchange for a developer providing features such as open space or recreation areas.
- **In-kind:** When a payment is made in the form of goods or services rather than cash. For example, a government could provide playground equipment to developers who provide open space.
- **Permitting:** Incentives that speed-up or streamline the review process for a project if the development includes a desirable amenity. For example, the zoning department can expedite the review process for developments that include optional public amenities, such as parks or pedestrian circulation systems.
- **Density/development bonuses:** Incentives that grant the allowance of additional density or units in a development in exchange for amenities that promote physical activity. For example, regulations could include provisions that allow for an increase in number of dwelling units in developments in exchange for increased open space.<sup>8</sup>
- **Other examples of incentives** include policies that allow a reduction in building lot size in exchange for open space or play areas.

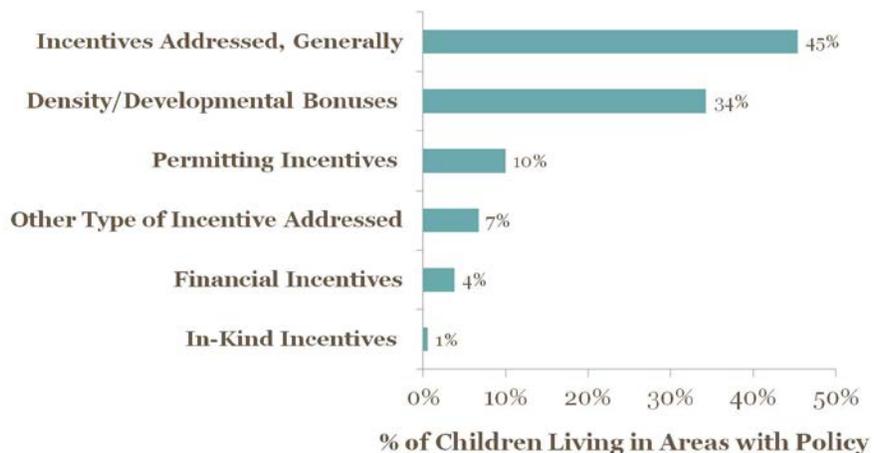
This brief examines how likely children and teenagers younger than age 18 live in communities with codified policies (zoning ordinances, subdivision regulations, and other general ordinances) that include incentives to promote opportunities for physical activity. The codified policies were collected in 2011 and 2012 from 314 catchments (hereafter referred to as “communities”) made up of 676 jurisdictions located in a nationally representative sample of public middle and high school enrollment areas. The areas analyzed were based on middle and high school enrollment areas, but results in this brief are representative of children and teenagers ages 0 to 17. We evaluated policies that specifically incentivized (through financial incentives, in-kind services, expedited permitting processes, or density/developmental bonuses) the development of park and recreation areas, open space, and sidewalks or trails as a means to promote physical activity.

## Key Findings

On average, 45% of children resided in a community with policies that included incentives for promoting active living (see Figure 1).

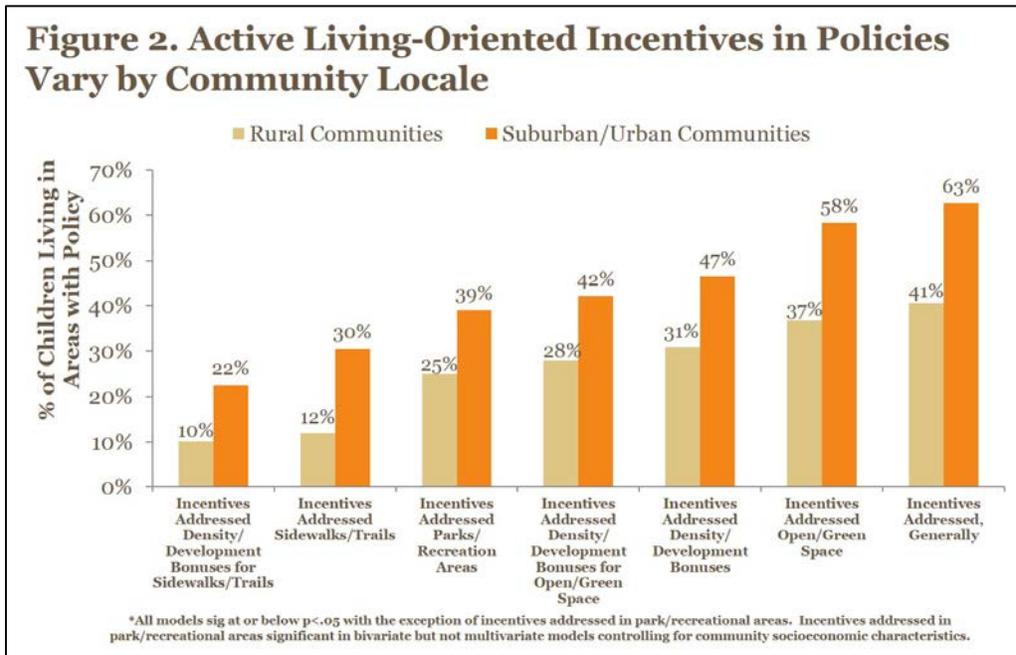
Children were most commonly residing in communities with policies providing incentives for open/green space (41%), development incentives for establishing park/recreation areas (28%), and sidewalks or trails (16%) (Results not displayed in figures).

**Figure 1. Incentive Policies that Promote Active Living**



Children living in suburban/urban areas were significantly more likely to live in areas with incentive policies that promote active living than children in rural areas (63% vs. 41%) (See Figure 2).

Children living in suburban/urban areas were more than twice as likely to live in areas with sidewalk or trail incentive policies (30% vs. 12%) and density or development bonuses (22% vs. 10%) than children in rural areas.



Children living in suburban/urban areas also were significantly more likely to live in areas with incentive policies that addressed open/green space than children living in rural areas (58% vs. 37%).

## Conclusions and Policy Implications

Almost half of children living in the communities studied were living in areas with some sort of incentive policy that promoted active living, yet there were significant disparities between children in rural and suburban/urban areas. Other research shows a link between our health and the built environment: people who live in more walkable communities are more likely to be physically active and have lower obesity prevalence than people who live in less walkable areas.<sup>9,10,11,12</sup>

Incentive policies that can help communities develop infrastructure to promote physical activity include:

- Local governments can provide density bonuses to developers who construct sidewalks and trails and waivers to minimum parking requirements to developments that provide bicycle parking.<sup>7</sup>
- Communities may provide tax credits to developers who donate land to recreational uses.<sup>13</sup>
- Local governments may establish tax incentives to promote the development of parks and recreation facilities and programs.<sup>14</sup>
- Local governments can establish corporate tax incentives for active transportation programs.<sup>6</sup>

### Endnotes

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Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors affect diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. For more information, visit [www.bridgingthegapresearch.org](http://www.bridgingthegapresearch.org) and follow us on Twitter: [@BTGResearch](https://twitter.com/BTGResearch).