

RESEARCH CONNECTION

Walking the walk in smaller cities

*By Rachel Herron, PhD, Madalyn Pryke, BSc (Psych),
Jared Friesen, & Grant Hamilton*



Why this research is important

Public spaces, like parks, paths, streets, and sidewalks, are supposed to help people move and connect with others. One of the ways people do this is through active transportation like biking, walking, or using a wheelchair. Unfortunately, not everyone has the same ability to move around the city. Many people feel unsafe walking or biking around the city, and some have no choice but to walk or bike. Research has shown that active transportation initiatives often benefit those who already have health advantages because of their income, education, age, and access to resources. Groups who experience disadvantages must be included in planning active transportation and public space initiatives. Smaller cities also must be included in planning and evaluating active transportation and public space initiatives. Most research to date has focused on larger urban centers.

What you need to know

Public spaces and active transportation can promote the health of people, communities, and our planet. People in Brandon enjoy using public space in a variety of ways, and they want more flexible and accessible opportunities to use public space. Brandon's public spaces need to be safe and accessible, support residents' needs, and provide attractions/programming that help all of us connect with each other and our community.

How the research was conducted

To learn how people in Brandon use/want to use public space and active transportation, we conducted an anonymous online survey and small group discussions called focus groups. We conducted focus groups in collaboration with Seniors for Seniors, Westman Immigrant Services, Manitoba Harm Reduction Network, and the Sexuality Education Resource Centre. A total of 199 people responded to the online survey, and 50 people participated in focus groups.

What the researchers found

Survey participants used Brandon's paths for walking, biking, running, scootering, skateboarding, rollerblading, skiing, sightseeing and connecting with nature. They also used public spaces for picnics, attending events, playing

sports, sledding, practicing Tai Chi, connecting with the land, engaging in river activities, playing with their kids, visiting with family and friends, and walking their dogs. Of those who responded, 17% mentioned walking or biking to work, shop, or attend events. Many survey participants wanted to walk and bike more. They wanted paths that are “safe,” “intersecting,” “connected,” “family-friendly,” “accessible,” and “multi-use.”

Focus group participants used public space to play with children and grandchildren; enjoy food, coffee or tea; play sports; read; meet with other people; connect with the land and ancestors; and find peace. They emphasized the need for public spaces to provide shelter from the extreme heat and cold, offer places for rest, and include sanitation services (i.e., public bathrooms). Safety was a key issue in all focus groups, including traffic safety, downtown safety, bike safety and preventing bike theft. For many focus group participants, accessibility of public space and active transportation was an issue. Focus group participants wanted more attractions and affordable activities for all ages in public spaces.

How this research can be used

The results can guide future active transportation and public space initiatives. Over the winter, the research team will be engaging stakeholders to identify specific ways to promote safety, accessibility, social connection, and activity in Brandon.

About the researchers

Madalyn Pryke is a research assistant with a Bachelor of Science in Psychology from Brandon University. She is currently building her resume to attend grad school.

Jared Friesen is a research assistant studying urban planning at Dalhousie University after completing his Bachelor of Science in Geography.

Dr. Rachel Herron is a professor in the Department of Geography and Environment at Brandon University and a founding director of the Centre for Critical Studies of Rural Mental Health.

Grant Hamilton is the director of Marketing and Communications at Brandon University. He has a personal interest in this project after being hit by a car last year.

The research team also includes **Jeff Fawcett**, mayor of Brandon, **Ryan Nickel**, director of Planning and Buildings at the City of Brandon, and **Dr. Amy Frykoda**, medical officer of Health at Prairie Mountain Health.

SmallerCities@BrandonU.ca
<https://smallercities.ca/>

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Active transportation, public space, healthy cities, safety, health equity

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Editor: Christiane Ramsey RamseyC@BrandonU.ca
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