

# Safe Neighborhoods

LIVING IN A PLACE WHERE FAMILIES CAN THRIVE

## Why It's Important

Minnesota is a great place to live, work, play, pray, and raise a family, supported by abundant natural resources and a thriving economy. For most people living in Minnesota, however, their lived experience is limited to the neighborhood where they live and neighborhoods aren't all created equal. Features of neighborhoods have been linked to life expectancy and early death, overall health status, experience of violence, mental health, disability, birth outcomes, chronic diseases, health behaviors, injuries, and other important health indicators.<sup>1</sup> Neighborhoods in Minnesota tend to be segregated based on race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status which results in disparities in property values, school funding, grocery stores, and home ownership. Neighborhoods can range in size from just a few blocks to many square miles and have distinct resources, communities, and demographic characteristics that make each neighborhood unique. Urban neighborhoods look very different from rural and suburban neighborhoods with walkability, accessibility for people with disabilities, access to food, income level, and quality of schools all influencing the health and safety of a neighborhood.

Improving the built environment (i.e. person-made structures, features and facilities that make up a person's environment) is a priority for eliminating health disparities. A neighborhood's built environment can have significant, measurable effects on both physical and mental health outcomes among vulnerable and disadvantaged communities.<sup>2</sup> The National Survey of Children's Health assesses the safety and quality of neighborhoods through self-reporting on the built environment (parks, green spaces, community centers, sidewalks, and libraries) and detracting elements (litter, poorly kept housing, and vandalism).<sup>3</sup> In Minnesota, nearly 25 percent, 1 in 4, Minnesota children do not live in a safe neighborhood.<sup>3</sup>

*"[Women, children, and families need] livable wages, safe neighborhoods with parks and trails, healthy produce available close to home, no gun violence, no domestic violence" – Needs Assessment Discovery Survey Respondent*

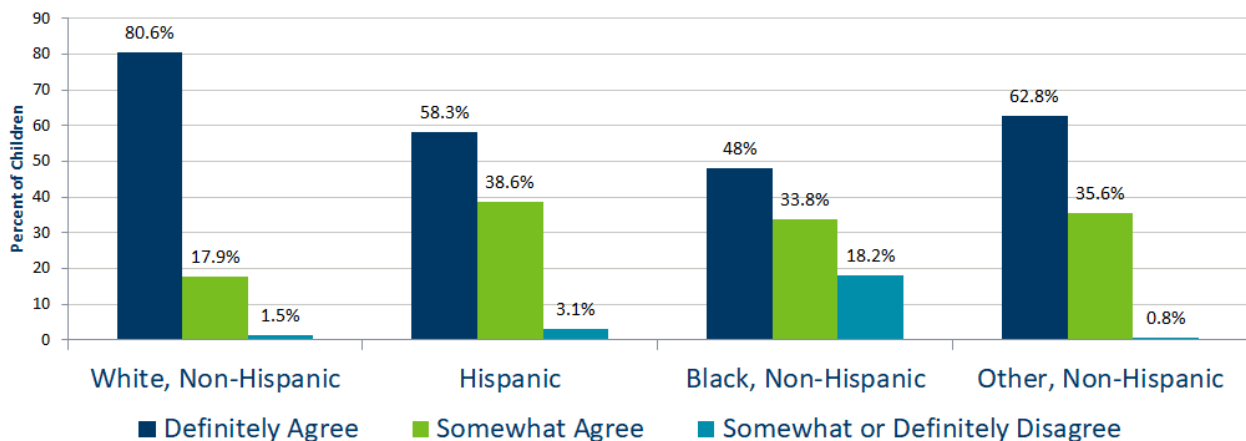
Safety from harm or violence in neighborhoods is very important to the health of its residents. Children, particularly girls in low income households, raised in unsafe neighborhoods are at a higher risk for numerous negative outcomes such as teen pregnancy, sexual assault, poor mental health, and fewer educational opportunities.<sup>4</sup> Neighborhood safety can have an impact on the ability for people to engage in physical activity safely, which in turn can impact rates of obesity and other negative health outcomes.<sup>5</sup> Several studies have shown that the quality of a neighborhood that a child grows up in has lasting impacts on a child's behavior, education, and income level throughout their life.<sup>6</sup>

*"Women, children and families rarely, if ever, have an opportunity to have a safe space to be able to process the stress, the trauma, the heartbreak that they are dealing with." – Key Informant Interview with Dr. Joi Lewis, Founder and CEO of Joi Unlimited, Coaching and Consulting*

## Focus on Health Equity

About half, or 48 percent, of black families in Minnesota ‘Definitely Agree’ that their child lives in a safe neighborhood (see Figure 1). This is below the national average of 55 percent of black families reporting living in a safe neighborhood and significantly less than non-Hispanic white families.<sup>3</sup>

**Figure 1. Minnesota Children (ages 0-17) living in a Safe Neighborhood by Race/Ethnicity**



Source: National Survey of Children’s Health, 2016-2017

Racial disparities are even more pronounced when parents are asked if they live in a supportive neighborhood with 71 percent of white families; 50 percent of other, non-Hispanic families; 47 percent of Hispanic families; and 38 percent of black families reporting that their children live in a supportive neighborhood.<sup>3</sup> In this survey, a ‘supportive neighborhood’ was one where respondents agreed that people in their neighborhood help each other out, watch out for each other’s kids, and know where to go for help. It is important to note here that sometimes knowing where to go for help doesn’t mean that a person feels safe in accessing that resource. To live in a supportive and safe neighborhood means you not only know what resources are available to you, but feel safe in accessing them when you need them.

## Additional Considerations

There are many additional factors that affect families’ ability to thrive in their neighborhood beyond safety and support; some of these additional factors are highlighted below.

### Air Quality

Air pollution is associated with a variety of harmful respiratory and cardiovascular effects, including asthma, pneumonia, bronchitis, and heart attacks. The severity of these effects depends on the type of the pollutant, level of exposure, and individual susceptibility. A 2015 report from the Minnesota Department of Health concluded that air pollution in the Twin Cities contributes to 2,000 premature deaths annually and sends 1,000 people to the hospital for asthma, lung, and heart disease treatment.

### Drinking Water Quality

Drinking water can be contaminated by man-made chemicals or natural resources, like heavy metals (i.e. lead) in rock and soil. Natural water contains impurities, and most impurities are harmless. However, drinking water that has certain levels of micro-organisms, minerals, man-made chemicals, or naturally-occurring pollutants can be harmful to your health. Minnesota has about 960 community water systems

that serve 80 percent of people living in the state. The other 20 percent of people living in Minnesota drink water from private wells. Community water systems are tested regularly for contaminants, but only newly-constructed private wells are required to be tested for contaminants in Minnesota. Private well owners should maintain and test their water supplies to make sure their water is safe to drink.

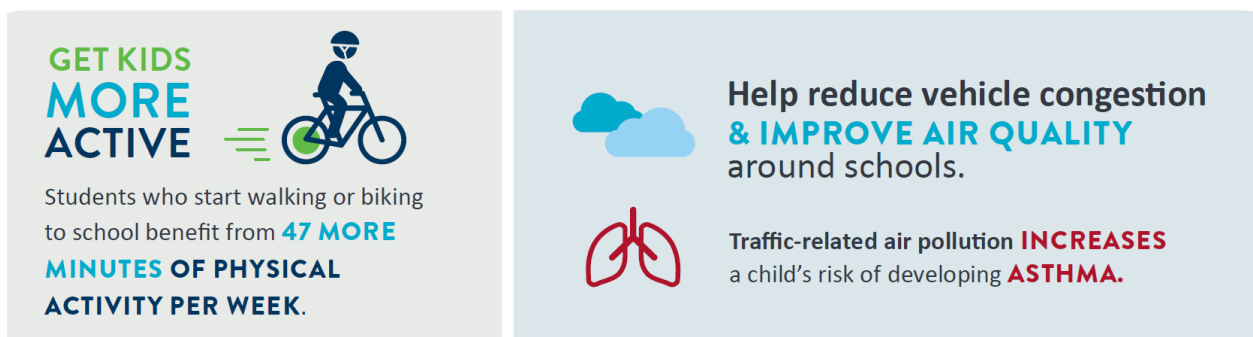
### Liquor Store Density

Research has shown a connection between liquor stores and taverns (sites that sell and permit alcohol on- and off-site) and higher rates of homicide, aggravated assault, and robbery.<sup>8</sup> This is particularly concerning for neighborhoods with higher liquor store density (which tend to be poorer neighborhoods). Liquor store density refers to the number of alcohol outlets (places that sell and/or permit drinking) in a given area.

### Transportation

Street safety is an important component of neighborhood safety. Are community members able to safely get to parks, grocery stores, and bus stops? Are sidewalks maintained during winter months? Are walkways accessible for people with disabilities? While Minnesota pedestrian deaths stayed consistent over the past few years even as national rates rose, 2019 has seen an increase in pedestrian deaths in the state. Ensuring there are safe routes through neighborhoods, especially to schools, promotes health and well-being for people living in those communities.

**Figure 2. The importance of Safe Routes to School (SRTS)**



Source: Minnesota Safe Routes to School Online Resource Center

### Discovery Survey Results

In the summer of 2018, Minnesota's Title V Maternal and Child Health Needs Assessment distributed a Discovery Survey asking people living in Minnesota, "What are the biggest unmet needs of women, children, and families in your community?" More than 2,700 people responded. Safe neighborhoods were in one of the top mentions as very important to the health and well-being of mothers and children. Safe neighborhoods is a broad topic that encompasses many aspects of health such as clean air, clean water, safety from violence, and a sense of community.

### Important Note on Equity and Intersectionality

The Minnesota Department of Health's Title V Needs Assessment team acknowledges that structural (social, economic, political and environmental) inequities can result in poor health outcomes across generations. They have a greater influence on health outcomes than individual choices or a person's ability to access health care, and not all communities are impacted in the same way.

**All people living in Minnesota benefit when we reduce health disparities.**

We also acknowledge that the topic addressed in this data story does not exist in isolation— which is important to remember as we do needs assessments and as we start thinking about how we approach solutions. In addition to the needs themselves being intersectional, there are also intersecting processes and systems through which power and inequity are produced, reproduced, and actively resisted.

## Citations

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Child and Family Health Division  
Title V Maternal and Child Health Needs Assessment  
Minnesota Department of Health  
PO Box 64975  
St. Paul, MN 55164-0975  
651-201-3589  
[health.cfhcommunications@state.mn.us](mailto:health.cfhcommunications@state.mn.us)  
[www.health.state.mn.us](http://www.health.state.mn.us)



5/1/2019

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