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Media Relations

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December 13, 2010

DURHAM, N.H. – Living in an area where amenities of daily life – groceries, playgrounds, post offices, libraries and restaurants – are within walking distance promotes healthy lifestyles and has positive implications for the environment, research has established. Now, new research from the University of New Hampshire has linked walkable neighborhoods with an increase in social benefits as well.

“We found that neighborhoods that are more walkable had higher levels of social capital such as trust among neighbors and participation in community events,” says Shannon Rogers, lead author of the study and a Ph.D. candidate in UNH’s Natural Resources and Earth System Science (NRESS) program. She adds that those who have higher levels of positive social capital have been shown to have a higher quality of life through better health and economic opportunities, among other things.

The article, “Examining Walkability and Social Capital as Indicators of Quality of Life at the Municipal and Neighborhood Scales,” is published in the recent issue of the journal *Applied Research in Quality of Life*.

After piloting a study in two Durham neighborhoods, Rogers and the study’s coauthors – Kevin Gardner, associate professor of civil and environmental engineering in UNH’s Environmental Research Group; fellow NRESS Ph.D. student Cynthia Carlson, and John Halstead, an environmental and resource economist and professor of natural resources and the environment at UNH; – surveyed 700 residents of 20 neighborhoods in two New Hampshire municipalities, Portsmouth and Manchester.

Survey participants self-identified the walkability of their neighborhoods by indicating the number of locations they could walk to in their community; any neighborhood with a mean response of more than seven walkable locations (out of a possible 13) was designated “walkable” by the researchers. To measure social capital, they utilized a well-established scale developed by the Saguaro Seminar at Harvard University, which is headed by “Bowling Alone” author and social capital scholar Robert Putnam.

Those living in more walkable neighborhoods trusted their neighbors more; participated in community projects, clubs and volunteering more; and described television as their major form of entertainment less than survey participants living in less walkable neighborhoods.

Rogers cautions that the study’s results are mitigated by a possible self-selection bias: “People who enjoy walking may choose to live in more walkable neighborhoods,” she says, adding that it would be naïve to say this study “proves” that walkability affects social capital in neighborhoods.

The research comes from a multidisciplinary team led by Gardner that focuses on the broad issue of community sustainability and resilience and the complex interactions between physical, environmental and social aspects that contribute to sustainability. “We often hear about the triple bottom line of sustainability, but while the environmental and economic aspects are fairly well understood, the social bottom line is less well articulated. This research focuses on what sustainability means to a community and in particular focuses on how it might be measured and improved,” says Gardner.

“This study is significant because the relationship between physical community structure and social capital really hasn’t been explored much,” adds Halstead. “It says something about how we might design neighborhoods in the future not to just save gas but to increase social capital.” He notes that it also points to the need to incorporate the relatively new concept of “resiliency” in infrastructure design -- building systems to survive, adapt, and grow in the face of an uncertain future.

The researchers find the link between walkability and social capital an exciting one that, they predict, will

 
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continue to be considered by academics and developers alike. Says Rogers, "If you're able to get out easily in your neighborhood and you live closer to other people, you see people you wouldn't ordinarily. That interaction engenders trust and the exchange of information."

This research was funded in part by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency under the Science to Achieve Results (STAR) Graduate Fellowship Program. In addition, Rogers and Carlson received support from the University of New Hampshire's Sustainability Fellowships to the Environmental Research Group.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

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