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Money's Two Cents

Putting a price on walkability

Posted by David Futrelle

August 22, 2009 11:13 pm

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How much is walkability worth? An intriguing new study suggests that people are willing to pay considerable premiums for houses in neighborhoods that are highly walkable — that is, where you can actually get to nearby stores, schools, and parks without having to hop in the car.

The study, conducted by a group called [CEOs for Cities](#), looked at 90,000 homes in 15 different markets in the US, mashing up home sales data with “walkability” scores from [WalkScore.com](#). (See the press release describing the study [here](#), or download the study itself, in pdf form, [here](#).) In 13 of the 15 areas studied, homes in highly walkable neighborhoods sold on average for \$4000 to \$34,000 more than homes in neighborhoods of average walkability. The pattern held in locations as diverse as Chicago, Tucson, and Jacksonville, Florida; only in Las Vegas were more-walkable neighborhoods less desirable than less-walkable ones. To the author of the study, Joseph Cortright, this suggests that neighborhood walkability is “more than just a pleasant amenity,” and deserves far more attention from politicians and other urban leaders.

Is this study simply saying that people pay more for homes in high-density metropolitan areas? Well, no; the study controls for this effect, as well as for a host of other factors (like home size, neighborhood income levels, and access to jobs) that might have affected the results.

Still, the results should be seen as only preliminary, in part because the walkability scores they use are crude at best. The idea behind the WalkScore.com website is ingenious: you [plug in your address](#), and the site uses Google Maps data on the locations of various businesses, schools, libraries and so on to calculate a personalized walkability score.

The problem is that this Google data is incomplete: many businesses aren't in the database and those that are can be mischaracterized. When I punched in the address of my Chicago apartment, I got a walkability score of 97 out of 100 (“Walkers Paradise”), which seems about right; my neighborhood is lousy with restaurants, grocery stores, and all sorts of little shops. When I used the address of my parents' suburban home, WalkScore declared their neighborhood “car dependent,” which is also correct.

The results I got all seemed more or less accurate. But the way WalkScore generates these results is still somewhat problematic. Looking into the data they used for my neighborhood, I noticed that it omitted countless restaurants, including most of my favorites, and miscategorized a bunch of different performance venues as “movie theaters.”

The authors of the study are well aware that WalkScore has what they call “both conceptual and technical limitations.” But it is still pretty good as a rough-and-ready guide to walkability, and as Google's data gets better, so will WalkScore's results.

The implications of the report? In the broadest sense, as Cortright notes, the results seem to confirm that many urban residents agree with urban guru Jane Jacobs that dense, mixed use neighborhoods are more vibrant and interesting than soulless planned developments or suburban sprawl.

In more practical terms, CEOs for Cities head Carol Coletta argues in her group's press release, the study's results "tell us that if urban leaders are intentional about developing and redeveloping their cities to make them more walkable, it will not only enhance the local tax base but will also contribute to individual wealth by increasing the value of what is, for most people, their biggest asset."

For more discussion of the report, see [here](#) and [here](#).

So how walkable is your neighborhood? How much is walkability worth to you?

Yes! Walkability is essential not for exercise but because a neighborhood becomes a full, discrete entity only if it is part of a dense business district. Only then is one's life really and satisfyingly integrated into a coherent community. I was so lucky to reach Green Bay while the suburban flight mentality still prevails; two years ago I bought my historic 3600 sq ft colonial for 70k, a block from an up and coming, historic, vibrant urban district. Now I shop, eat at cafes or fine restaurants, visit art galleries, the museum, riverfront parks, grocery store, post office, pharmacy, farmer's market, all less than 2 blocks away!

Posted By Martie Siller, Green Bay, WI: August 23, 2009 4:05 pm

There is a major social shift in the United States away from suburbia and auto-dependence. Living on a human-scale is emerging as the new American Dream. Glad research is finally getting behind this evolution of values.

Posted By Anonymous: August 23, 2009 3:53 pm

Not all places which have a vibrant neighborhood within walking distance are in urban or decaying neighborhoods. That is the reason I bought my home, across from a park, 5 blocks from the train station, and center of a really small mini town, with a supermarket, three gas stations, 3 Italian restaurants, sushi bar, Dunkin Donuts, 3 mini markets, 2 nail salons, 4 hair dressers, three banks, and two chinese restaurants, an art gallery, a store for collectibles, dry cleaners, Hallmark shop, and a holistic salon. Oh not to mention there is free family movie night every weekend at the museum attached to the train station. I almost forgot, a Synagogue, Catholic church, Baptist church, and a Presbyterian church. Plus an elementary school, two swim clubs, and an assisted living convelescence home.

In addition it has a major bus route, which goes to the larger malls.

That is the reason I bought where I bought.

Posted By Somplace NJ: August 23, 2009 3:52 pm

I live less than a mile from the Atlantic Ocean front with a very well known boardwalk and got a very low walkability score. PSSst this things a bust.

Posted By Duder, Virginia Beach, VA: August 23, 2009 3:46 pm

You have to take this information with a grain of salt.

While crime statistics isn't part of the equation, even that is misleading.

I agree in the premise that urban developments are more walkable than the 'burbs. As one commenter pointed out, you have community hubs that are within walking distance while the build outs since the 50's and 60's tended to rely on more use of a car to get around. (Can you say suburban sprawl?)

I think that what we're starting to see is a trend back to urban redevelopment where you can walk to work, walk to the stores and get out and about. And this isn't a bad thing.

I live north of the Chicago 'loop'. I can walk to my client's sites so I don't have to worry about either public transportation or the high cost of parking in the city. I'm too close to bike to work.

How much is it worth to save 2+ hours a day from not having to commute?

Posted By Gumby, Chicago , IL: August 23, 2009 3:31 pm

I would think much of this would depend on your age as well. At 47 y/o, for me, "walkability" isn't a factor. Privacy is. I want a home where the neighbors aren't five feet away to hear me sneeze and where the homes have character.--I don't want a garage with a home attached nor would I live in an area where all the houses are the same.

Posted By Laura Austin, Texas: August 23, 2009 3:10 pm

I live in Las Vegas, the only city where more-walkable neighborhoods were less desirable. That's because in LV, if your neighborhood is near lots of stores, you generally live in high congestion on major roads. Vegas's efforts to bring walkability to insulated planned communities has primarily been shut down by the economy, though my last

neighborhood was close, with two parks, a library, some shopping, and restaurants all within a few miles. It was also in a new (built around 2002) upper-class master planned community. It still didn't hold a candle to my old neighborhood in Oak Park, IL outside of Chicago. I frequently went months without seeing my car when I lived there.

Posted By Gina, Las Vegas, NV: August 23, 2009 3:02 pm

Birkdale Village in North Carolina is a great example of a walkable community maintaining its property values and performing better than surrounding car dependent sub-divisions. Here in Birkdale we have walkable access to an entire outdoor mall, supermarket, gym., starbucks, restuarants, and more. Its amazing how many of our neighbors that we see at the gym or walking the dogs or sitting in the cafe. In fact, there's not a house for sale right now in our entire section of the neighborhood. Compared to the surrounding neighborhoods, we are doing great.

This is a great article but you should follow it up with what we as a society or a government can do to improve our walkability. [LEED Certification](#) offers one possibility but what if every home that was listed for sale had its walkability score calculated in the way that we calculate a gas mileage rating for a car. Simply putting a number to it would raise awareness and help significantly.

Posted By Jon, Huntersville, NC: August 23, 2009 2:52 pm

I live about 2 miles from the famous Niagara falls, My home to the Brink of the falls is 2 miles , and i have been walking to it , for 23 years. I am soooo lucky to be able to do so. I am 70 and walking has kept me medication and pain free. as to know . i vill not move unless to a same walkable place.

Posted By Niagara falls On Ca: August 23, 2009 2:29 pm

I checked my house in a very walkable neighborhood in Salt Lake City and found out that the information used to compile the data was extremely incomplete. It's a nice concept but a long way from being a reliable source of information when trying to locate a home. Maybe other areas of the country have more complete data???? Just my opinion.

Posted By BC Salt Lake City,Utah: August 23, 2009 2:22 pm

I tried the Walkability index for my address and agree that the overall score is a pretty good match, but that there are some individual data items that are either a bit inaccurate or out of date (some new restaurants not listed and some closed businesses listed).

But being an avid cyclist, my hope is that there will be either another Web site for "Bikeability" or an added option on the current "Walkability" site. Many of the businesses listed for my address are perhaps too far for a walk, but are within an easy biking distance.

Posted By Dave, Dover, DE: August 23, 2009 2:15 pm

My neighborhood is extremely walkable, but not according to WalkScore.com, because they don't have any of the stores or the gym or anything like that even LABELED. I sure hope anyone looking to buy in my neighborhood relies on what's actually here rather than that site.

Posted By Megan, Orlando, FL: August 23, 2009 2:08 pm

Some factors left out of the survey:

- * Do you have to lock your door when you go for a walk?
- * Is it safe for your children to be out walking, riding bicycles or skateboards?
- * How breathable is the air?

Posted By Mike in Indiana: August 23, 2009 2:02 pm

5 years ago, I lived about 5 miles from the nearest grocery store/strip mall, which was also the location of the nearest bus stop, and the nearest bike trail. Schools weren't within 3 miles. There was a church about 2 miles away. Emergency services, 25-30 minutes. I don't have a car, so if I still lived there, I would have to hire a driver every time one of my kids has to go see a doc, dentist, etc.. And one of my kids is diabetic and wears glasses. Today, I can catch any of 4 buses within 4 blocks of my house. There is only one part of Anchorage, AK I can't get to within about 40 minutes on the bus. It's about 30 minutes to the kids' dentist, 25 minutes to the Pediatric Sub Specialty Clinic. 20 minutes to the Neighborhood Health Clinic (that allows time for the 6 block walk from the bus stop to the clinic.) 10 minutes to the VA Medical Center. No bus runs to Elemendorf AFB Hospital, but it is within a 10 minute walk from the gate of the base, which is about 3 blocks from the end of the bus line. The elementary school is 4 blocks away. We have 2 grocery stores/strip malls within a mile. There are several restaurants within about half hour walk, and even a movie theater about 40 minutes away. I'm about a 5 minute sled ride from over 150 miles of biking/walking trails that zigzag all over the city. That doesn't matter much in the summer, since I put my sled up on wheels, I can use the sidewalks and back roads. Wintertime is a completely different animal. Not much tears up sled skids faster than road gravel, which does get plowed onto the sidewalks. Remember that part of town that was inconvenient to get to on the bus? Well, 20 minute bike ride, half hour to 40

minutes on the sled. In case you haven't figured it out yet, I'm talking about a dog sled. And just so you know, my dogs aren't racers, they're cargo haulers. They are fast enough for my needs, but I don't think we will be winning the Iditarod any time soon.

I rent a modest size 3 bedroom home on a small lot in a residential neighborhood. I pay \$1375. I wouldn't pay more than \$900 for the same thing where I used to live.

Posted By Cliff Gould, Anchorage, Ak: August 23, 2009 1:57 pm

Caroline, who posted before me, is spot on – I grew up in Cambridge, MA, and within a half mile of my house, I had my school, my little sisters' school, the local mechanic and gas station, at least three dozen restaurants, two grocery stores and a bunch of little mini markets, doctor's offices, you name it! We'd go to visit my grandparents in rural Oregon and didn't know what to do with ourselves because the nearest anything was three miles away.

I don't get where Fred's coming from, other than he seems to dislike big cities – which is fine, they aren't for everyone – but to the millions of Americans who live in urban centers and enjoy having all of the above in easy access to you, the price IS indeed worth it! Furthermore, pay in cities is almost uniformly better than it is in suburban/rural areas, so for instance, living in an \$800 apartment in Boston or LA is much like living in a \$500 apartment in a rural area in the same state after everything balances out. There may be data missing but I hardly think it's "stupid" – not every person in America wants to live on a sprawling property that's a half-hour ride to the nearest gas station.

Posted By Tristan, Seattle, WA: August 23, 2009 1:55 pm

100 score here. I love walking for most of my needs: 4+ parks, school, restaurants galore, 3 supermarkets, various stores and museums, many bars, etc. You meet your neighbors, get to know the local shopkeepers, have a ton of stuff available.

Yes, it's expensive, but factor in not owning any cars and general time savings, and it's a good way to live for many people.

Posted By Michael, NYC, New York: August 23, 2009 1:53 pm

Walkability is of utmost importance as far as I am concerned. I read an article that said the average European walks about 10 miles a day. The average American walks under 2. It wasn't until a Honduran friend of mine made a comment about the "car culture" of North Americans that the concept clicked as to why I find suburbs unpleasant. Cities are not my idea of paradise either, I have lived in several where crime, lack of pedestrian police presence and traffic jams make that a last choice as well. I live within walking distance of my job and I have a bicycle, but being a pedestrian in Orlando is no picnic. It can also be dangerous. I hope developers and planners take a fresh look at how to make safe, profitable but affordable communities that people where can safely raise their children and grow old, and enjoy being on foot.

Maybe someday...

Posted By Bette Lawhon Orlando, Florida: August 23, 2009 1:41 pm

I just tried this out with my newest address in a downtown neighborhood that lacks most of the types of stores I would want to walk to — like a good grocery store and our favorite restaurants. It ranked 80/100 as "very walkable" — although it did include lots of places I either wouldn't go to, or wouldn't want to walk to (like a movie theater over 2 miles away — including a number of hills). I then tried it with my old neighborhood which I consider extremely walkable — all the restaurants we like, our favorite park and the grocery store we still use. It ranked only 65/100 "somewhat walkable." I'd say this is a neat feature but agree with the author it is still not perfect because it doesn't take into account the quality of the businesses close by.

Posted By Dana, Little Rock, AR: August 23, 2009 1:37 pm

These high score neighborhoods have stores, parks, restaurants, etc. within .3 miles or less. That is not going to lose you much weight, IMO. If you want a quiet, peaceful, car free place to live, then having most stores, etc. approximately 1 mile away would be better. That way when you walk to the store you would **really** be doing your health a favor and your home would be in a less congested area. Parks and recreation (bike trails, etc.) should be really close but not stores, workplaces or bars (IMO).

Also the walkscore.com website was missing a number of parks in my neighborhood.

Posted By HMM Denver CO: August 23, 2009 1:19 pm

Walkability was HUGE for me when I purchased my house last year. I walk for exercise and the occasional event. My neighborhood and adjacent ones are full of wide sidewalks, close to mall, grocery, post office and bank. I LOVE it!

Posted By Conni, Norman, OK: August 23, 2009 12:34 pm

While this web site and its' data are valuable, academic and consulting studies will have to be done to verify it

and get at the root causes. I suspect it to be the case that one factor conditioning the phenomenon is that people who already live in urban areas are conditioned by experience to want to live in those kinds of spaces, and are accustomed to paying higher prices for their housing, while people who are conditioned by experience to want to live in suburbs would not go looking for housing in those urban spaces and would not be willing to pay higher prices. If I'm correct, then you have populations of home buyers living in alternate universes, which would greatly affect marketing or sales over time as places change. Nobody can prove or disprove my theory until more study is done...

Posted By Rich, Mansfield, Connecticut: August 23, 2009 12:21 pm

Those of us lucky enough to grow up in New England towns already know this secret – we walked to schools, there was a town common or green, there were stores you could walk to, along with the library and post office. Many “new” towns take their style after an old New England town – hoping to bring back that sense of community so missing in suburbs.

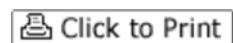
Posted By Caroline, Marblehead, MA: August 23, 2009 12:16 pm

The walkability score is really stupid. If you look at the places with the highest walkability score they are overwhelmingly very urban areas with a lot of business – you might as well call this the spendability score because it really show how many places are nearby that you could spend your money at. It also doesn't take into account safety of the areas it analyzes, urban congestion, noise, taxes, or a myriad of other factors. This is really a self-serving attempt to relabel cities and urban areas as ‘walkable’ thereby putting a positive spin on them without considering their other attributes.

Posted By Fred, Chicago, IL: August 23, 2009 12:12 pm

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