



The Grandparent

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WALKING ISN'T JUST GOOD FOR YOU – IT'S GOOD FOR THE ECONOMY

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It's a truism that walking — as with most forms of exercise — is good for you.

John Howard credited his longevity as PM, in part, to daily walks; Albert Einstein walked to sharpen his mind; writer Henry David Thoreau needed four hours a day to preserve his 'health and spirits'.

But walking isn't just good for your physical and mental health; it's also good for the economy.

And we're talking billions.

Aside from savings to the public health system, urban planners and economic analysts argue that the more 'walkable' your community is, the more economically viable it is.

'GOOD FOR HEALTH, GOOD FOR THE ECONOMY'

Just 30 minutes of walking a day can 'reduce your risk of heart disease by about 35 per cent', says the National Heart Foundation's Trevor Shilton.

It follows that the effects on the public health system — in terms of savings — are monumental.

'There's a range of studies around cost-benefit and the economic benefit of reducing heart disease through walking and through physical activity,' Mr Shilton says.

'If you reduce cardiovascular disease by 35 per cent, there'll be massive savings in relation to deaths, hospital admissions, expensive medical procedures, and keeping people well and productive in their communities.

'They're broken down generally into direct medical costs, which we estimated at about \$1 billion per year.'

It's not just heart disease. Walking also reduces cancer and diabetes risk, and boosts mental health.

'Basically, when it comes to the built environment in our cities and neighbourhoods, what's good for health is also good for the economy, environment and good for social policy as well,' Mr Shilton says.

Helen Lochhead, Dean of the Faculty of the Built Environment at the University of New South Wales, agrees.

'The difference between walkable places in cities, and non-walkable places is the difference between healthy people, and not-healthy people ...' – Helen Lochhead, Dean of the Faculty of the Built Environment at UNSW

'The difference between walkable places in cities, and non-walkable places is the difference between healthy people, and not-healthy people,' she says.

'Chronic disease is prevalent in car-dominated environments as opposed to pedestrian environments, which are very people-friendly, which encourage people to walk and talk, and be part of the city.

'It's quite evident [that] the design of the city, and walkability, actually produces healthier outcomes in the community.'

WHAT MAKES A CITY, TOWN OR NEIGHBOURHOOD 'WALKABLE'?

It's a term you've probably heard bandied about before.

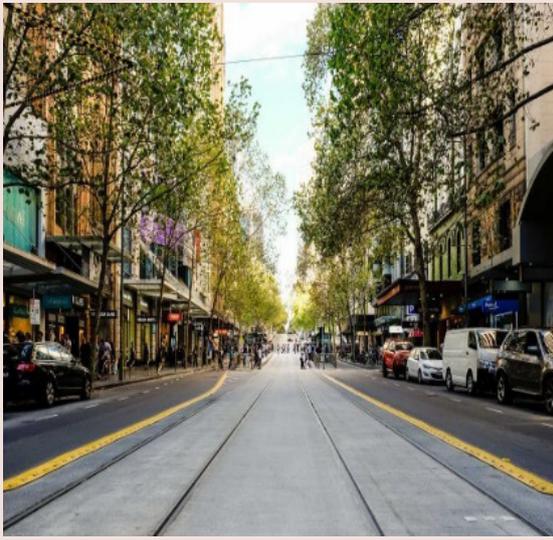
Not surprisingly, 'walkability' refers to how conducive an area is to walking; generally speaking, inner-city CBDs are more walkable than suburbs or country towns.

'In large cities like Sydney and Melbourne in the CBDs, walking is the predominant way to get around,' says Terry Rawnsley from SGS Economics and Planning.

'If you want to walk from your office to see your client or from the office to see a collaborator, or to get a coffee, you're not jumping in your car, you're not catching a bus, you're using your feet to walk a short distance.

'We looked in the city of Melbourne and basically 85 per cent of all the trips in the city of Melbourne are by foot.

Walking is the predominant way of getting around in Melbourne's CBD.



AUSTRALIAN CITIES WITH HIGH WALKABILITY

- Haymarket, Sydney: 99
- Carlton, Melbourne: 97
- Brisbane City, Brisbane: 95
- Northbridge, Perth: 95
- Canberra City, Canberra: 95
- Adelaide, Adelaide: 90
- Hobart, Tasmania: 92
- Darwin City, Darwin: 87

In contrast, a lack of congestion and better parking options in regional centres makes driving more viable.

'Even for a short journey of maybe a kilometre or two, smaller centres are still jumping into the car, because that's the quickest way,' Mr Rawnsley says.

Other factors that affect walkability include traffic and road conditions, footpath options, and proximity of amenities.

There's even a way to measure how walkable your neighbourhood is — Walk Score, a website which assesses any address on a walkability score from zero to 100.

'The algorithm, I would say, is flawed in some ways,' says Jeff Speck, a Boston-based city planner and urban designer.

'But it actually produces pretty accurate results from something less than 50, which is a place where most people aren't walking, to anything above 90 [which] is called a "Walker's Paradise" and everything in between.

'Generally speaking, when a Walk Score is higher, levels of obesity and all the related diseases are lower.'

GOOD FOR YOU, GOOD FOR BUSINESS

Urban planners say investing in walkable communities is also an investment in local economies.

'We know that [in] communities where people walk a lot, [they] are increasingly nearer to things that they value,' Dr Shilton says.

'In other words, businesses become more viable, so there's business benefit.'

One study found increasing the level of walking connectivity in Melbourne by just 10 per cent would add \$2.1 billion to the economy.

On a broader level, according to urban economists, walking also promotes more productivity and connectivity of knowledge-based industries.

'In the work we did for the City of Melbourne, we looked at a pedestrian score,' Mr Rawnsley says

'What we found is if you went from a score of say, 50, up to a score of 100, then the jobs in that area became 8 per cent more productive.

'That means that for every hour they worked, they generated an extra 8 per cent worth of income.'

Mr Rawnsley attributes this to *agglomeration*, an economic term nodding to the benefits of clustering of similar businesses.

'Agglomeration is all about being able to connect with other like-minded firms, connect with clients, be close to your competitors as well,' he says.

'It's all about how you learn from your clients, competitors and peers. A lot of this happens informally: you're out looking for a coffee and you bump into a client and you'll have a chat and you'll learn something.

'That exchange of information is really what drives modern knowledge economies like Australia.'

But as Professor Lochhead points out, 'cars and people can cohabitate, and they do.'

Building and promoting walkable communities requires investment from local governments — internationally, Washington DC, Kyoto and New York are all recent examples of this.

Mr Shilton points to Times Square as an example of the many benefits of a pedestrian focus.

'Yes, you saw massive increases in walking, but guess what? You [also] saw fewer vacant shop fronts, you saw people sticking around and buying lunch and business turnover improving,' he says.

Locally, Melbourne's CBD is a frequently cited example where concerted efforts have been made to promote walkability.

'It's a very well-designed city for walking,' says Mr Rawnsley, citing examples like purposefully-designed 'block links' — multiple building entrances and exits, which encourage pedestrians to walk through.

'That's basically trying to replicate the laneway network.

'The more links, the more laneways, the more passageways and more overpasses that you provide within the built form, the more connections that can be made for our pedestrian network.

'It's almost like thinking about the City of Melbourne like a human brain — the more and more neurons you can link together and fire, it makes the city a smarter and smarter location.'

And Professor Lochhead says the cities lagging behind on walkability will ultimately pay a price.

'The public health outcomes, the outcomes in terms of pollution and lack of connectivity, in disconnection between people in society, lack of access to jobs and services, is manifold when you don't actually build in connected, pedestrian-oriented, walkable communities where all of those things are within a close range, tight-knit environment,' she says.