SYNOPSIS

KEY POINT SUMMARY

OBJECTIVES

This study aims to examine the relationship between physical environmental characteristics of path segments and their use for walking for recreation or instrumental reasons by 114 active residents on three retirement community campuses.

DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

The current study provides a framework for understanding how specific path-design characteristics may be related to where people choose to walk. The current study suggests that designing campuses to support walking involves not only a careful consideration of individual local path characteristics but also an understanding how path segments and routes fit within the larger network of path segments on campus.

Where Active Older Adults Walk: Understanding the Factors Related to Path Choice for Walking Among Active Retirement Community Residents

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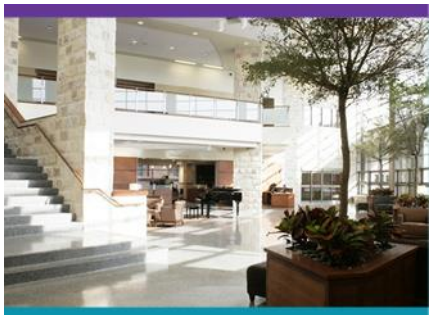
Key Concepts/Context

Growing evidence suggests that the perceived and objective physical environment of neighborhoods is related to how much older adults walk. Older adults who live in attractive communities, those that have connected roads and nearby amenities, are more likely to walk than are older adults in less walkable communities. Neighborhood factors such as having enjoyable scenery, the perceived safety of walking paths, and convenient location and access to recreational facilities and shops are associated with higher levels of walking among older adults living in the community. However, there is little evidence about how path-design characteristics at site and building scale may be related to where active older adults choose to walk.

Methods

Route choice for walking was assessed in three Atlanta, Georgia-area campus-type CCRCs with many different buildings within the same boundary that are connected in some way. The path segment is the unit that possesses certain local, relational, or global qualities. Furthermore, the route taken from one point to another may traverse several path segments. A path segment is a section of the route between two decision points; that is, a path segment ends whenever the need arises to make a decision about the path of travel (e.g., at an intersection).



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Findings

Several local, global, and relational characteristics of path segments are related to path choice for instrumental and recreational walking. Path segments with specific types of destinations such as activity related, administrative, and residential along them and path segments that lay on many routes on campus were more likely to be used for walking to destinations. The current study suggests that locating different types of destinations, especially residences and activity-related destinations, along path segments might support their use for instrumental walking by active older residents. However, as the analysis shows, the location of the path segment within the network of path segments also matters. Thus, while locating destinations along path segments, it might be important to consider whether the path segment is well connected and central within the network of path segments on campus. In all three communities the length of the path segment was identified as a factor related to path segment use for recreational walking.

Limitations

Author-identified limitations are as follows: 1) the small number of cases studied and the low response rate at each site, 2) the majority of the respondents being classified as sufficiently active or highly active; 3) some factors that were not completely independent from each. Due to the second limitation mentioned above, the findings from the current study are more representative of the factors that are related to path choice among active older adults. However, this in itself can be valuable as it provides important information for designers and owners regarding path design to support and maintain an active lifestyle among elderly residents. A wider sample would have allowed the authors to make useful comparisons regarding path choice decisions between the different population groups on campus (less active vs. highly active; those using assistive devices vs. those without) and would have provided important information for designing for the range of needs and abilities on retirement campuses. Also, regarding the third limitation mentioned above, many different factors were found to be associated with path use for walking. For example, most outdoor path segments tended to be long path segments as well. Although the logistic regression analysis takes into account these different confounding factors to some extent, it is difficult to establish causality of any kind.