

Active design of built environments for increasing levels of physical activity in adults: the ENABLE London natural experiment study

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Plain English summary

The ENABLE London natural experiment study

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Plain English summary

What was the problem?

Physical activity levels are too low, and population-based strategies to improve physical activity levels have had modest effects, at best. However, small improvements across communities could have significant effects on health outcomes at a population level. Changes in the neighbourhood built environment may offer an attractive way to increase physical activity levels, given their potential reach.

What did we do?

East Village, the former London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games Athletes' Village, was repurposed to provide social, affordable (intermediate) and market-rent housing with high levels of walkability and close proximity to improved public transport. The Examining Neighbourhood Activities in Built Living Environments in London (ENABLE London) study was a natural experiment that aimed to examine whether or not objectively measured physical activity levels, body fat and mental health/well-being show sustained change after 2 years in individuals relocating to East Village compared with a control population living outside East Village throughout.

What did we find?

East Village resulted in a marked improvement in objective measures of the built environment (including improved walkability and access to public transport) and more positive perceptions of lower crime (i.e. less vandalism, feeling safer to walk in the neighbourhood and less of a presence of threatening groups) and quality of the built environment among residents (particularly among those moving to East Village social housing). Despite these sizeable improvements, there were only modest increases in physical activity levels (particularly in the number of daily steps) and few differences in higher levels of physical activity (i.e. moderate to vigorous physical activity), sedentary time, measures of body fatness and other health-related outcomes.

What does this mean?

This study, using a robust design, showed modest improvements in physical activity and other health-related behaviours associated with moving to accommodation designed for active living, suggesting that improving the built environment alone is insufficient to increase population levels of physical activity. Further work is needed to examine how changes in the built environment can lead to improved health behaviours, such as physical activity.

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