



RESEARCH BRIEF

Comprehensive Planning Statutes and Physical Activity: Implications for Rural Communities

Overview

Comprehensive plans guide local development of the built environment. State planning statutes influence whether rural communities are required to create a comprehensive plan and the topics that are covered, such as transportation, economic development, and housing. This makes state planning statutes critical for creating physical activity (PA)-supportive communities, especially in rural areas with limited access to PA spaces.

Main Question

1. Do comprehensive planning state statutes address PA-related topics?
2. Are rural communities addressed in state comprehensive planning statutes?

Study

We evaluated if and how PA-related concepts were addressed in comprehensive planning statutes for all 50 states, examining differences based on state rurality.

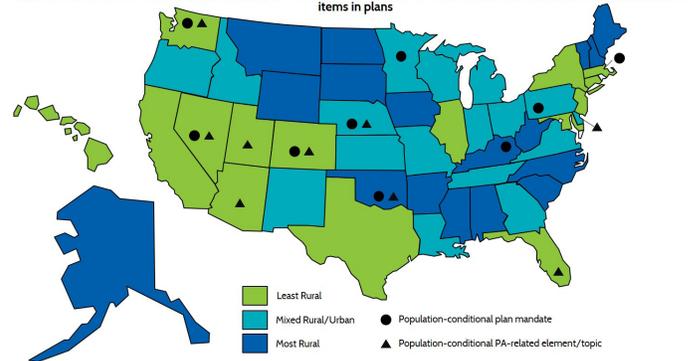
Only 2 states' planning states specifically addressed PA. Broad PA-related items (parks and recreation, land use, and transportation) were addressed in >80% of state statutes and were most likely to be mandated, rather than encouraged or conditionally mandated. Specific concepts such as Smart Growth, bicycle/pedestrian, mixed use, and trails were addressed in <25% of state statutes. Equity was addressed in 31 states' statutes, but it was only a required comprehensive plan component for 15 states.

Several PA-related topics were less likely to be addressed in rural states' statutes. 13 states have conditional mandates in place based on population size (see figure). In these states, smaller communities are not required to write comprehensive plans and/or include PA-related items in local plans.

The Bottom Line

Local governments are well-suited to understand and address their community's unique needs. When comprehensive plans are updated, local decision makers should consider the connection between the built environment and PA. State planning statutes can provide an important framework for incorporating PA-related topics in local plans, thus catalyzing local policy and built environment change.

Figure. Map of state-level rurality and population-conditional mandates for comprehensive planning and including PA-related items in plans



Spotlight on results

- California and Washington were the only states to specifically address PA.
- At least 80% of state comprehensive plan statutes addressed broad topics like parks and recreation, land use, and transportation.
- <25% of state comprehensive plan statutes addressed specific PA-related concepts such as Smart Growth, bicycle/pedestrian, mixed use, and trails.
- Equity was addressed in 62% of the states' statutes. It was a mandated plan item in 15 states, conditionally mandated in 6 states, and encouraged in 10 states.
- Transportation, public transportation, mixed use, infill/reuse, Smart Growth, and PA were all less likely to be addressed in planning statutes for the most rural states.

Call to Action

As states update comprehensive planning statutes, lawmakers should consider including requirements for items specifically related to PA, such as trails and Smart Growth. These requirements should apply to rural communities as well as urban ones. They should be written in such a way that they can be applied in a locally-driven, context-sensitive manner.

Source

Charron LM, Milstein C, Moyers SI, Abildso CG, Chriqui JF. Do state comprehensive planning statutes address physical activity?: Implications for rural communities. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*. 2021;18(22):12190.

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