The Health Index

MIDDLESEX-LONDON HEALTH UNIT

Awareness and Use of Walking Trails

Issue 5, February 2003

Key Points

- Over half of adults in London and Middlesex County reported using the walking trails
- A greater proportion of residents of London (59%) report using the trails than did residents of the County of Middlesex (41%)
- Awareness of the trails is lower among Middlesex County residents
- Younger residents reported using the trails more than older residents.
- Residents with lower education or incomes reported less awareness and use of the trails

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Background

Moderate exercise is identified as a strategy to help to prevent a number of chronic diseases including heart disease, stroke, diabetes and osteoporosis. Regular walking is also identified as a simple, accessible and effective activity to help people get healthy and stay healthy. The Mandatory Health Programs and Services Guidelines (1997), which all health units in Ontario are required to implement, set the following behavioural objectives related to physical activity:

- To increase to 40% the proportion of all adults who include at least 30 minutes of accumulated, moderate physical activity on most if not all days of the week by the year 2010;
- To increase to 60% the proportion of youth who include at least 30 minutes of accumulated, moderate physical activity on most if not all days of the week by the year 2010
- To increase the proportion of children who are active

The Guidelines also indicate that public health units shall, "assist community partners to increase the availability of safe and accessible recreation opportunities such as walking trails and cycling routes and promote, on an ongoing basis, the availability of opportunities for physical activity".

The Middlesex-London Health Unit, along with many community partners, has offered residents of London organized walks once per month from 1998 – 2000 and in 2001, walks once per week. In 2002, the Thames Valley Trail Association continued the weekly walks in the summer and led fourteen weekly recreational walks. The Trail Association plans to continue these weekly walks in 2003. The most well attended walks were those taking place on trails in Conservation and Environmentally Sensitive Areas.

A "City of London Walking Map" was printed in 2001 and 40,000 copies were distributed in the area. The goal for both the weekly walks and the map production was to

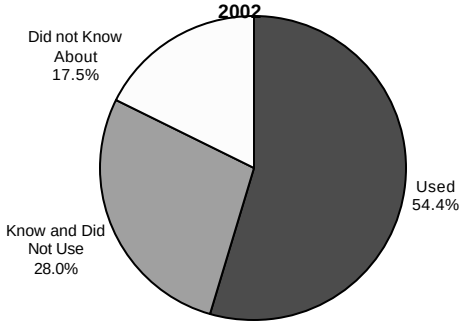
increase the awareness of the walking trails and pathways in London and allow interested people the opportunity to try a new trail. In 2002, a map of "Walking Trails of Middlesex County" was distributed.

To monitor the impact on the community of the promotion of the walking trails and organized recreational walks, a series of questions were incorporated in the Rapid Risk Factor Surveillance System (RRFSS). The RRFSS is an ongoing population health survey that collects approximately 100 telephone responses for the Middlesex-London Health Unit area in monthly increments (waves). This system is currently being used by 21 of the 37 health units in Ontario. The data collected helped to determine the respondent's awareness and use of the walking/ cycling trails and was collected from May 10, 2001 to September 10, 2002. This time frame was prior to the launch of the "Walking Trails of Middlesex County" booklet and therefore can provide some baseline information useful in evaluating the launch of the Middlesex County booklet. The data will continue to be collected until April 2003 and could be used for future planning and evaluation.

Awareness and Use

Over 80% of residents of London and Middlesex County 18 years and older reported that they are aware of the walking trails. Over half (54.4%, ± 2.4), of residents of the City of London and Middlesex County reported that they knew about and used the walking trails in the year prior to being asked and an additional 28% (±2.4) knew about but did not use the trails (Figure 1).

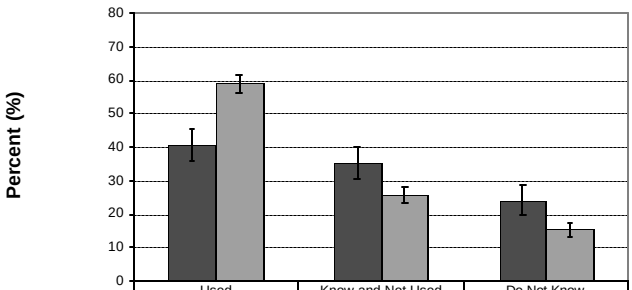
Figure 1: Walking Trail Use and Knowledge in past year by Residence, Middlesex-London Health Unit, 2001-2002



Source: RRFSS, Waves 5-20

A greater proportion of City of London residents (58.9%, (+ 2.8%) reported that they knew about and used the walking trails than did residents of Middlesex County (40.6%, + 4.9%) (Figure 2). More Middlesex County residents (24.2% + 4.3%) surveyed did not know about the trails compared to 15.4% (+ 2%) of Londoners. The promotion of " Walking Trails of Middlesex County" booklet should help to decrease the gap in awareness and use between the residents of the City and the County.

Figure 2: Walking Trail Use and Knowledge in past Year by Residence, Middlesex-London Health Unit, 2001 2002



Source: RRFSS , Waves 5-20

Age and Gender Differences

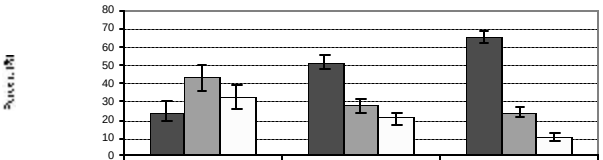
There were no differences in use of the walking trails by gender however use decreased with age. The rate for trail users was highest in 20-44 year olds and lowest in

those over 65 years of age. Of the population aged 20 – 44 years, 63.1% (± 3.4%) used the trails. Of the population aged 45 – 65 years 53.9% (± 4.3%) used the trails and of the population aged 65+, only 23.8% (± 5.8%) used the trials. It is possible that the rate of use in those over 65 years of age may be affected by decreased abilities however promotion of the walking booklets need to continue to target all age groups.

Socio-Economic Differences

Use of walking trails increased with education and income. A significantly greater proportion of post secondary graduates knew and used the trails (65%, ± 3.4%) compared to residents with less than high school education (24.4%, ± 5.9%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Walking Trail Use and Knowledge in past year by Education Level, Middlesex-London Health Unit, 2001-2002



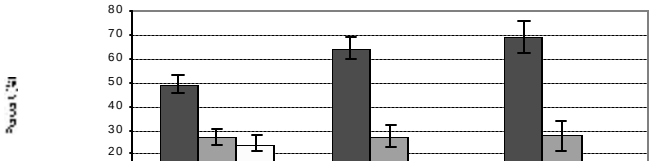
	< Highschool	Highschool +	Post 2nd grad
Used	24.4	51.5	65
Know, Not Used	43.3	27.8	24.2
Did Not Know	32.3	20.8	10.8

Source: RRFSS, Waves 5-20

Similarly residents with income over $100,000 were more likely to use the trails than were residents with an income of less than $50,000 (Figure 4). Furthermore a significantly higher proportion of residents with lower income reported that they did not know about the trails (24%, ± 3.4%) as compared to those with higher income (3.9 % ± 3.8%).

The lower percentage of trail users in the lower education and income groups may partially be affected by age. Older people tend to have less education and income and older people also identified that they did not know about the trails. The walking trails booklets are available to all residents including residents with levels of education below high school. As an attempt to reach families of all incomes the walking trail booklets are also distributed through the Early Years Centres. Efforts should continue to raise awareness amongst lower income families and distribute the booklet among all residents.

Figure 4: Walking Trail Use and Knowledge in past year by Income Level, Middlesex-London Health Unit, 2001-2002



	< $50,000	50 to < 100,000	$100,000+
Used	48.9	64.4	68.9
Know, Not Used	27.1	27.1	27.2
Did Not Know	24	8.5	3.9

Source: RRFSS, Waves 5-20

Methods and Definitions

All data are from the Rapid Risk Factor Surveillance System (RRFSS) and collected for the Middlesex-London Health Unit (MLHU) by the Institute of Social Research, York University. Data were collected in a series of waves of monthly telephone surveys. Households were selected randomly from all households with telephones in Middlesex-London and respondents aged 18 and older were systematically selected from within each household for the adult that had the next birthday. Once an individual was identified as the person with the next birthday, every effort was made to complete the interview with the appropriate respondent. Although on average five calls were made to a single household in order to complete the interview with the designated respondent, up to 12 attempts was standard practice.
Data related to walking trails was collected from May 10, 2001 to September 10, 2002.

The sample was weighted to account for each respondent's probability of being selected within household of different sizes. The unweighted sample consisted of 1605 respondents from London and Middlesex County surveyed between May 10, 2001 and September 10, 2002. All 16 waves included questions related to walking status for which 1591 respondents provided valid answers. The sample for Middlesex County residents was 369 and for London 1222. Those that did not respond to any individual question were excluded prior to calculating proportions provided the non-response category represented less than 5% of the total respondents with exception of income. In total 1191 respondents answered both income and walking trail use question. The remaining respondents were excluded from the calculations. Difference in proportions were considered statistically significant at $p<0.05$. All weighted percentages were provided with 95% confidence intervals. Bar charts include error bars illustrating 95% confidence intervals.

The "**Used**" group consisted of those individuals that identified that they first knew about the walking/ biking or nature trails in the London-Middlesex region and then also identified that they had used them in the past 12 months prior to the survey. Those that identified that they knew about the trails but had not used them were categorized as "**Knew and Not Used".** Those that identified that they did not know about the trails were categorized as, "**Do Not Know**" and were not asked if they used the trails.

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