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## Policy Briefs

### Title

Pathways to Autonomy: Supporting Youth Independent Mobility in Westlake, Los Angeles.

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8mq3r3sd>

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### Publication Date

2023-10-01

# AUTONOMY

# PATHWAYS

SUPPORTING YOUTH INDEPENDENT MOBILITY IN WESTLAKE, LOS ANGELES

**POLICY BRIEF**

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OCTOBER 2023

# POLICY BRIEF

Each day, youth in Los Angeles venture out on their own to move to and from home, school, and after-school activities. Their travels represent important pathways to autonomy, agency, and urban citizenship, which a city can support with safe, pleasant paths that offer reassuring familiarity and opportunities for socializing.

In Westlake, a neighborhood with a gauntlet of challenges along its sidewalks, the 11 to 15-year-olds who travel independently accumulate extensive experience and valuable knowledge traversing the city. In the process, they develop ideas about what they like, what they dislike, and how their pathways can be improved. Yet urban designers, planners, and advocates interested in supporting safe mobility know very little about how youth experience the city, perceive their surroundings, and negotiate their travel. Data about traffic-related pedestrian injuries is not enough to explain adolescent mobility patterns, preferred routes, or modes of travel. Though these patterns involve safety, this study shows that many other factors shape independent mobility for urban youth.

To deepen understanding and inform the kinds of improvements we can make along streets and sidewalks, this study examines the experiences of late elementary, middle, and early high school students as they travel independently from school to after-school activities in Westlake: a dense, underserved neighborhood in Los Angeles with a high proportion of low-income, immigrant families and high incidence of traffic-related injuries and fatalities.

In this study, we use the concept of “sidewalk ecologies” to highlight the complex interaction between spatially situated social and material features of sidewalks that influence youth mobility. We use a range of interdisciplinary strategies, emphasizing youth-centered research methods and mapping to capture a rich portrait of the independent travel experiences, perceptions, and ideas of youth, in their own voices. This research was conducted in partnership with Heart of Los Angeles (HOLA), a community-based organization in Westlake that provides after-school programming to thousands of neighborhood youth, and yielded **important findings**:

## NEGOTIATING INDEPENDENT TRAVEL

- **Familiarity is key:** For youth traveling from school to after-school activities, route choice is consistently driven by familiarity and efficiency.
- **Adaptation, not avoidance:** Students’ expectations of the built and social environments along their travel routes are low, but instead of avoiding particular routes, they engage in smaller adaptive behaviors to manage and minimize risk.
- **Complex decision-making:** Youth engage in complex decision-making when traveling independently and hold in-depth neighborhood knowledge and experience.

## MENTAL MAPS, REALIZED WALKS, AND YOUTH IDENTITY

- **Aging into walking:** Youth often negotiate their travel route with a caregiver, and slowly develop more confidence and capacity to navigate the route independently, eventually contributing to a sense of joy and freedom.
- **Gendered experiences:** The embodied, perceptual experience of travel is shaped by gender; girls in particular may experience harassment and unwanted attention and adopt adaptive behaviors to manage risk.

## SIDEWALK ECOLOGIES AND INDEPENDENT TRAVEL

- **Influence of the built environment:** Youths’ routes are marked by positive and negative elements of the built environment, but route and mode choice are more heavily influenced by familiarity, convenience, and efficiency.
- **Influence of the social environment:** Social concerns generally outweigh built environment concerns in influencing travel experiences, but youth adjust their patterns only minimally.
- **Negative “red spots,” positive “green spots,” and the spaces between:** Youth travel is marked by “green spots” associated with safety, familiarity, and comfort, separated by mixed areas and “red spots” associated with crime, risk, and discomfort. This lack of continuity means youth must navigate through a series of unsafe and unpleasant areas to reach their destination.

Our findings bolster our understanding of sidewalks as complex, sociospatial environments for youth. The findings also offer insights for future-oriented design and programmatic interventions to support safe and enjoyable independent travel for youth in Westlake and beyond. We put forward **six propositions** for planners, designers, and advocates invested in enhancing youth independent mobility:

**1 Emphasize social determinants of safety and enjoyment**  
*“Walking with friends, just having a time, you know, just trying to transition from school to HOLA. We are just talking. We are talking about how it’s been. It’s catching up.”*

The neighborhood social environment – including friends, neighbors, familiar faces, or strangers and threatening others – is often more impactful in shaping youth perceptions of their journeys than built environment factors. It is imperative to broaden the scope of research and interventions for safe youth mobility to include and actively address social factors. This reframes sidewalks as sociospatial environments and safety as more complex than the risk of injury.

**2 Focus on the direct routes that most efficiently link destinations**  
*“I think [this route] is more simple and faster to get to HOLA.”*

Even when negative social and built environment features are evident, youth overwhelmingly chose to travel the most efficient and direct route between school and after-school activities. Rather than assume youth will incorporate detours to access more interesting or enjoyable sidewalk segments, interventions should focus on the most direct and efficient links between key origins and destinations.

**3 Reinforce preferred, familiar, and more public paths to increase certainties of travel**  
*“I’m not sure how dangerous some places are... so that’s why I take this route because it’s more open and there’s a lot of people passing.”*

Vehicular traffic can be a danger to young pedestrians, but it is paradoxically coupled with a sense of security. While most youth travel a direct path to their destinations, they choose streets with limited uncertainties and with more public activity, such as those with more pedestrian and vehicular traffic, transit stops, vendors, and storefronts, rather than quieter, residential areas. Visibility and open lines of sight along sidewalks offer certainty to travelers and allow them to make choices about who and what they encounter.

**4 Address links between islands of safe, enjoyable spaces**  
*“To be completely honest, I haven’t taken a different route. I always stick with this one.”*

Faced with limited options and driven by efficiency, public visibility, and familiarity, youth continue their travel between islands of safe, enjoyable spaces through areas of unsafe or unpleasant built and social environment conditions. To create continuous paths of safe and enjoyable travel for youth, improvements can be directed to the “gaps” of negative physical and social conditions between “islands” of joy and comfort. Planners and designers should consider these “gaps” as key sites for transformations.

**5 Support the social life on the sidewalk**  
*“I’m usually with friends, depending on the day, but sometimes I do [walk] by myself. But there’s lots of students here so I’m not worried about it.”*

Early independent mobility powerfully shapes adolescent perceptions of and participation in their community. Sidewalks should be reframed as spaces of urban citizenship for youth, with interventions that support meaningful opportunities for engagement such as purchasing food from vendors, socializing with friends, and chatting with teachers after school.

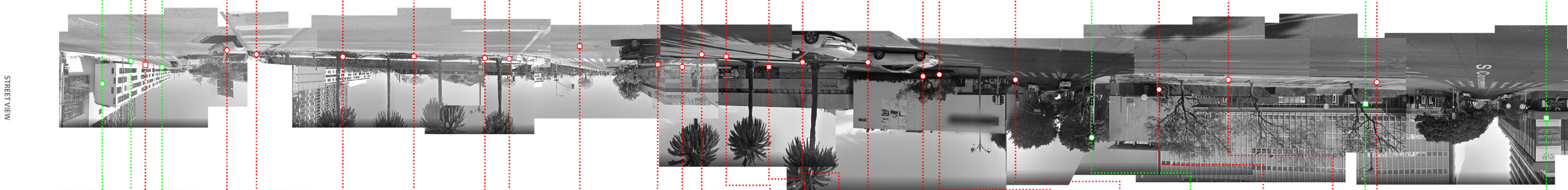
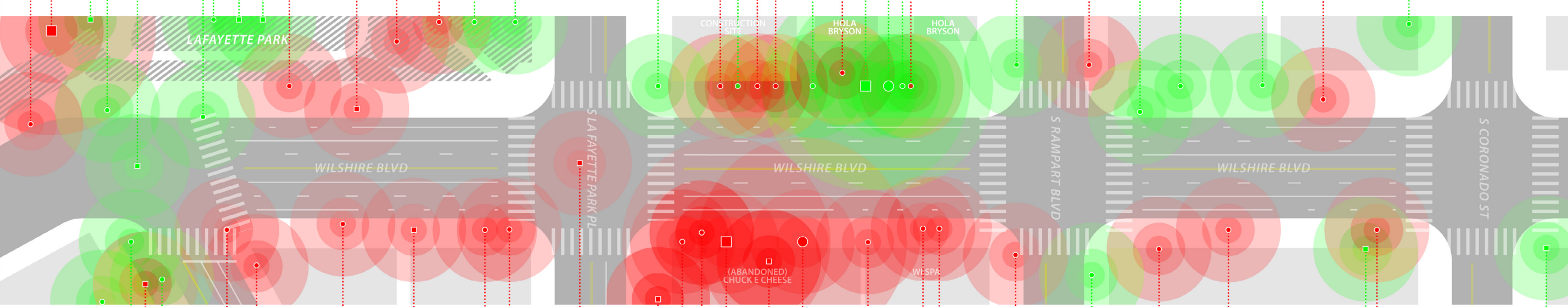
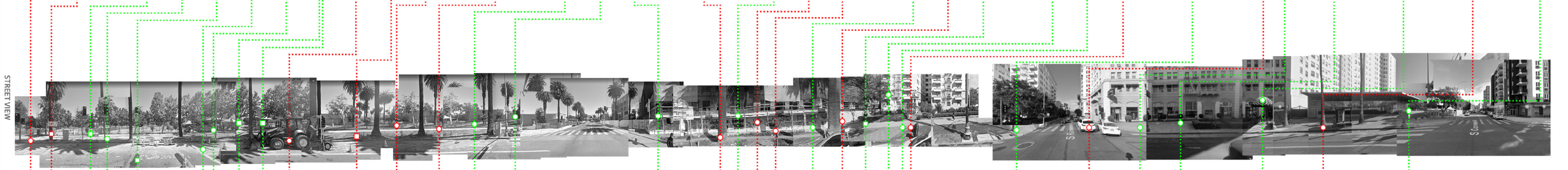
**6 Demonstrate care for people and for place**  
*“That gives you the idea maybe the government is trying to pay attention to us in this part of the neighborhood.”*

Beyond major infrastructural improvements like road and sidewalk repairs, improvements to youth mobility involve strategies that support and make visible care for people and for place. Street furniture like shade structures or trees, trash receptacles, pedestrian-scale lighting, and drinking fountains can support both sidewalk maintenance and user experiences. These interventions, which benefit a wider public, also encourage community ownership and care leading to feelings of belonging for vulnerable youth as they begin to independently traverse the city.

See following page for the **Focus Thick Map** comparing observations from youth and researchers along Wilshire Boulevard from Hoover Street to Coronado Street.



FOCUS THICK MAP



● Physical Negative ● Physical Positive ■ Social Negative ■ Social Positive