Walking the East Harlem Community Walking Trail: How data can support community advocacy for built environment improvements

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National Walking Summit 2017
St. Paul, MN

BACKGROUND

East Harlem is a culturally diverse neighborhood in New York City of 124,000 people, which, like many low-income neighborhoods of color, has historically been deprived of resources.

The Community Walking Trail is a 3-mile route along the sidewalks of East Harlem that connects residents to physical activity resources and highlights the art, history, and culture of the neighborhood, while aiming to improve physical activity, social cohesion, and safety. A steering committee composed of representatives from community-based organizations, other city agencies, and residents developed the concept of the Community Walking Trail and selected the route in response to neighborhood concerns about the built environment, neighborhood connectivity and safety.

In 2016, we conducted street intercept surveys and street assessments along the Community Walking Trail to better understand residents' experiences walking in East Harlem, to identify areas for improvement and to support advocacy for built environment improvements.

METHODS

Street Intercept Survey

- East Harlem adult residents (zip codes 10029 and 10035) were surveyed at 5 intersections along the Community Walking trail between July and August 2016.
- Surveys were conducted in English and Spanish and captured respondents' experiences walking in East Harlem and perceptions of neighborhood safety and conditions of streets and sidewalks.

Street Assessment

- A street assessment tool was developed to describe the physical characteristics of the sidewalks, streets, and pedestrian crossings along the Community Walking Trail, including sidewalk maintenance and characteristics, amenities, and resources and assets.
- Block-by-block street assessments were conducted between September and November 2016 along the route of the Community Walking Trail.

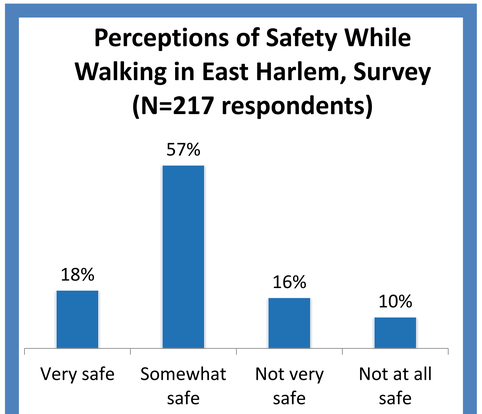
Analysis

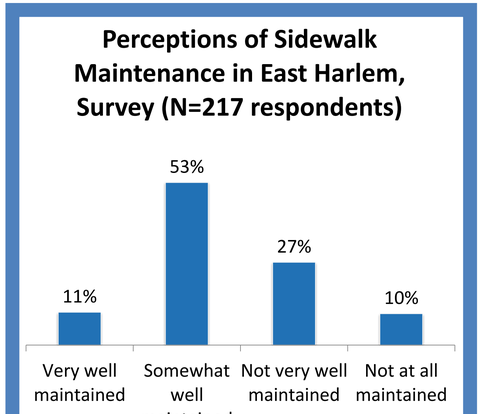
- Univariate analyses were conducted to examine responses and characteristics of survey respondents and street assessments.

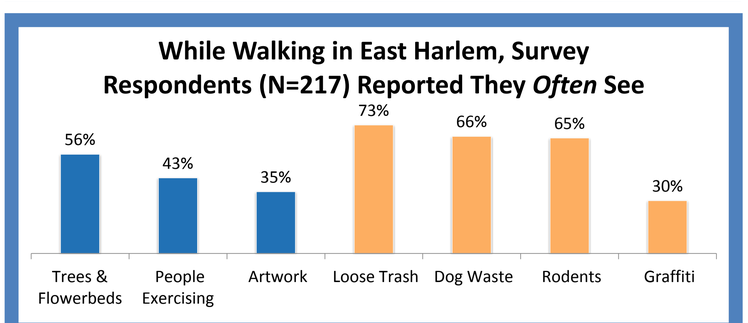
Mural on 115th St. near 1st Ave.

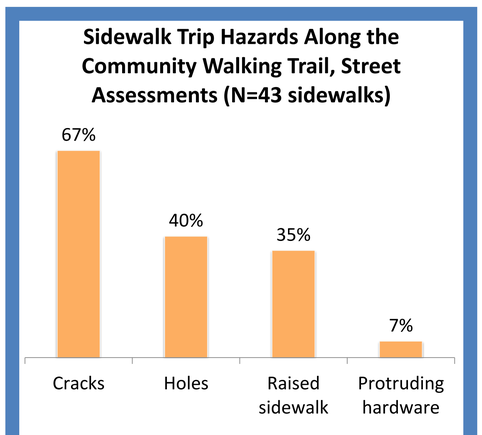
Overgrown tree pit on 115th St. between Park Ave. and Lexington Ave.

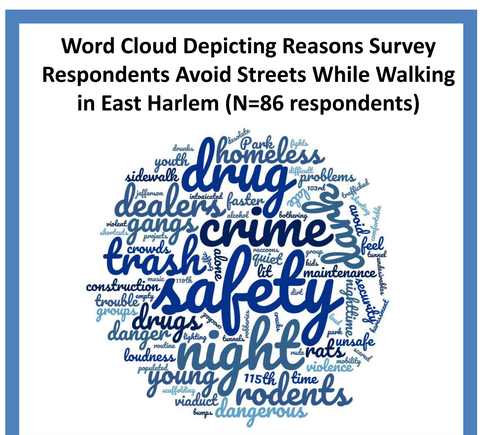
Sidewalk cracks on 106th Street between 1st Ave. and FDR Dr.











SURVEY RESULTS

- 217 adults completed the survey. Most respondents (62%) were female, 50% were black, 44% were Latino, and 12% were White. Six percent of respondents were aged 18-24, 34% were 25-44, 44% were 45-64, and 17% were 65 or older. Most respondents were longtime residents of East Harlem, with 72% having lived there for 10 or more years, 21% for 1-9 years, and 7% for less than 1 year.
- Only 11% of survey respondents believed the sidewalks in East Harlem were very well maintained. Sixty-six percent reported seeing dog waste often, 65% reported seeing rodents often, 30% reported seeing graffiti often, and 28% of respondents reported seeing loose trash often while walking in East Harlem.
- While most respondents reported feeling safe while walking in East Harlem (18% indicating "very safe;" 57%, "somewhat safe"), 40% of respondents reported avoiding certain streets while walking in East Harlem. One of the top reasons reported was crime/safety.

STREET ASSESSMENT RESULTS

- 22 street assessments were conducted. Forty-three sidewalks were assessed, of which 77% had at least one major trip hazard, including cracks, holes, protruding hardware, or unevenness.
- 77% of streets had at least one traffic calming measure including speed bumps, street markings, and signs.
- 42% of the sidewalks assessed had "some" or "a lot" of trash and more than a quarter of segments did not have any trash cans (27%). Dog waste was found on 45% of segments and graffiti was found on 27% of segments.
- 51% of sidewalk trees had either vacant or overgrown tree pits.
- 34 resources were identified along the Community Walking Trail, including benches, parks, playgrounds, community gardens, schools, places of worship, and public art.

DISCUSSION

- Survey data revealed that few respondents felt *very safe* while walking and few felt that sidewalks were *very well maintained*. Respondents reported seeing things that need improvement *often*. These perceptions were supported by street assessment data, which found sidewalks and streets in poor condition, vacant and overgrown tree pits, and trash and dog waste on sidewalks.
- Study findings will be used to identify specific areas of the trail that can be improved and will support advocacy efforts to enhance the East Harlem built environment, challenging some of the effects of resource deprivation through streetscape improvements along the trail.

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank the East Harlem residents who participated in the survey, all of the people who helped collect survey and assessment data, and the East Harlem Community Walking Trail Steering Committee for their ongoing support and guidance. We would also like to thank the New York State Health Foundation for supporting this work.

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