

A push for female-friendly cities

As women take over downtown demographics, urban designers skewing to their needs, safety

By Haya El Nasser
USA TODAY

PHILADELPHIA — Chunks of the sidewalk behind the 16th Police District building off Lancaster Avenue are so torn up that mothers pushing strollers and women in wheelchairs can't negotiate the jumbled concrete slabs without venturing into the street.

Many then must climb a flight of stairs to get to the front door of the old row houses in west Philadelphia. If kitchens are on the second floor, they lug groceries, canes or strollers up another flight of stairs. All along the way, they fear crime.

"There are some areas that aren't well lit at all," says Blaine Straub, 25, who lives near Lancaster Avenue and had to get around in a wheelchair after she broke her ankle in October. "That's a little intimidating."

In a neighborhood where 54% of the residents are women, 70% of the households are headed by women and 70% of the elderly are women, the broken walkway on North Sloan Street symbolizes some of the physical challenges that women in America's cities face: an unsafe urban environment that's not conducive to walking.

Medical experts, concerned about increased rates of obesity, diabetes and hypertension, have studied how the design of cities affects health for some time. Now, they're focusing on its impact on women, an increasingly prominent demographic segment of the urban landscape.

Health scientists are joining urban planners and targeting the specific effects that the layout and design of streets, houses and transportation systems have on women.

Focus on women's safety

"Women are feeling frustrated in dense urban environments that are not designed for them to be able to get out," says Afaf Meleis, dean of the School of Nursing at the University of Pennsylvania here. "We tell women, 'You need to walk and exercise.' ... If there's violence going on, it prevents them. Curbs are not designed for women and women's shoes. We really have not taken gender into consideration."

Health and planning professionals convened in September on the Penn campus a few blocks from this neighborhood when the School of Nursing hosted a rare gathering of policymakers, politicians, health officials and researchers.

"Decisions that are made for women are going to be made for men as well," says Eugenie Birch, chairwoman of Penn's

department of city and regional planning. "But there might be more sensitivity to safe places, to lighting, to creating an environment that women would more likely inhabit."

That means fixing sidewalks, lengthening the time traffic signals give pedestrians on crosswalks, designing housing without stairs and encouraging walking, biking and mass transit by building trails and safe access to public transportation.

Addressing such issues "is an emerging trend," says Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, chairwoman of UCLA's urban planning department.

The connection between urban design and health has been the foundation of how cities plan growth. Building codes and zoning regulations were created largely to ensure public safety and to limit overcrowding and the spread of disease.

The linkage gained new relevance in the late 1990s when environmentalists and opponents of sprawl who were pushing for less driving and more walking found common ground with health professionals campaigning to reduce skyrocketing rates of obesity.

Now, for the first time, the intersection of disciplines is be-

coming more gender-specific because of powerful demographics:

► There are 118.5 million women in the nation's central cities and their suburbs, more than half the urban population.

► About 17 million women in those areas are age 65 and older — almost 60% of the total number of seniors in cities.

► Women 65 and older are three times as likely as their male counterparts to live alone.

► More than 14 million women live alone in cities.

► More than 23 million women are heads of households.

► More than 60% of those who care for an older person are women.

"Women's health is incredibly important not just for women but for the entire family," says Dean Kehler, a member of the board of directors of the Penn School of Nursing and CARE, a global humanitarian organization that focuses on women. "No disrespect to the men, but if mother's ill or grandmother's ill, it doesn't just affect her, it threatens the whole family."

The school's LIFE (Living Independently for Elders) program provides nursing home-

level day care, including medical, dental, prescription and personal grooming services plus meals and social activities for 325 seniors in west Philadelphia — 80% of them women — to help them live at home.

Other developed nations have incorporated planning strategies specifically through the prism of women, UCLA's Loukaitou-Sideris says.

In Canada, for example, planning agencies ask women to walk around neighborhoods and pinpoint areas where they feel unsafe.

In the United Kingdom, transit agencies have a late-night program that drops women at a stop that's off the regular route but closer to their destination.

Loukaitou-Sideris, studying what U.S. public transit agencies are doing to lessen women's fear of transit, received responses from 132 agencies. Only three are doing something aimed at female customers.

Elinor Ginzler, director for Livable Communities in the Office of Social Impact at AARP, says businesses are paying more attention to the issue. Detroit automakers know that as the nation's 79 million baby boomers get older, women will

drive the longest. "They make more trips," Ginzler says. "They're the ones running errands."

That has led to efforts to improve road signs in Michigan. In Iowa, transportation planners are adding left-turn lanes and signals at intersections to reduce accidents, she says. Some are offering training to ease the fear that some women have taking public transportation.

Gaining some ground

Planning for women's safety isn't a novel idea for the folks who run the People's Emergency Center in West Philadelphia. The social service agency for homeless women and children formed the PEC Community Development Corp. in the early 1990s to provide housing for the families they were helping.

Kira Strong, vice president of economic and community development, says developers and designers still have to be nudged into thinking about women's needs.

"You take a typical three-story row home that has two apartments, and they want to stick the kitchen on the third floor," she says. "Do you want to carry your groceries and strollers up to the third floor?"

A three-story, six-unit apartment building for teenage mothers who are coming out of foster care is being planned. It will have no elevator, but developers are putting a rack in the lobby for bikes and strollers.

"It's a little small nod to the fact that we've got moms here and they're single," Strong says.

Straub, a cabinetmaker before she injured her leg, says it has been challenging to reach the area's only supermarket.

"It closes really early," she says. "If the only store available is down some dark street all torn up, it's not acceptable to a lot of women."