Near Northside
Safe Streets, Safe Communities

Photo: Gelila Haile

Building Better Cities
Building Better Lives
The Near Northside is a historic neighborhood in the heart of Houston. A seemingly ideal area for active living, the community has numerous community assets, commercial hubs, schools and homes within walking or biking distance of one another. However, because of lacking infrastructure for pedestrians and people on bikes, safely traveling between these sites is difficult. This report is the second in a series aimed at aiding efforts to improve street safety in the Houston region. It should be read alongside the survey report done in Near Northside which measures residents’ attitudes and perspectives about street safety.

Safety for users on our streets is a crisis. Nationally from 2008 to 2017, the number of pedestrian deaths increased by 35%. According to TxDOT, there were 693 pedestrian and bicyclist fatalities in Texas in 2018 alone.¹

This report documents the presence and conditions of biking and pedestrian infrastructure in the Near Northside. Community volunteers, students from the University of Houston, and Kinder Institute for Urban Research staff conducted several walk audits to assess the availability and conditions of the community’s sidewalks, bikeways and other street elements such as road lighting and building conditions.

Key Findings

- Of the 3,432 street segments assessed in the neighborhood, 40% of the segments do not have sidewalks.
- Of the 2,069 segments with sidewalks, 91.3% have some kind of obstruction, such as gaps, parked cars or plant overgrowth.
- Of the 824 intersections assessed, 32.8% do not have ramp access.
- 3.6% of segments have a designated bike path.
The Walk Audit

The Near Northside street and biking inventory was collected by the Kinder Institute during the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019. The audit tool was designed by combining elements of the Houston-Galveston Area Council’s (H-GAC) Pedestrian Evaluation tool, the Active Living Research Pedestrian Environment Data Scan (PEDS) tool and the Microscale Audit of Pedestrian Streetscapes (MAPS) tool. The questions listed for the walk audit were shared and developed through participation in several meeting groups that included H-GAC, METRO, Traffic Engineers Incorporated, the city of Houston, Bike Houston and other stakeholders. When read in concert with the accompanying survey report, this audit finds that although Near Northside is somewhat walkable, many areas face safety issues related to insufficient infrastructure, automobile traffic and concerns about crime. This assessment can inform future investments and build upon the numerous city- and county-led efforts currently underway that are aimed at improving street safety. The city of Houston’s Complete Communities effort, for example, has seen several communities identify street safety as a major concern and have helped residents set goals to address those issues. The Near Northside’s Complete Community Action plan has a goal to engage 71% of the neighborhood residents in regular physical activities by 2023, with encouraging more walking being a major component of that push. In addition, the Houston Bike Plan and Mayor Sylvester Turner’s recent Vision Zero commitment promise to bring more attention and resources to efforts to improve safety. In order to achieve many of the goals of these efforts, a basic documenting of the existing conditions is critical.
Sidewalks

While the Near Northside is relatively well connected to public transit with the Red Line light rail and several bus routes, the local streets and sidewalks need improvements to enhance safety, walkability and connectivity.

More than 40.1% of the streets do not have sidewalks, and the major types of obstructions identified in the neighborhood inventory include gaps in sidewalks, trash and debris, parked cars and vegetation overgrowth. Figure 1 shows the location of existing sidewalks (blue) and segments that do not have a sidewalk (red).
Figure 2 shows that 91% of sidewalks have trip hazards such as overgrowth, uneven surface cover or gaps and other obstructions (orange). Comparing Figure 1 to Figure 2 also makes it clear that having sidewalks doesn’t necessarily mean that they are in good condition or completely accessible. Much of the southern part of the community has sidewalks, but most are compromised by at least one obstruction.
Intersections

The walk audit also captures information on the availability of pedestrian walk signs, crosswalk markings and wheelchair-accessible ramps as well as pedestrian islands at intersections.

Figure 3 shows overall, 60.5% of all 824 intersections have ramps at both pre- and post-crossings (blue). Approximately, 32.5% of all intersections are without any ramps (red). A small percent of intersections have ramps, but only at either the pre-or post-crossing segment (yellow). Lack of ramps makes accessibility for people in wheelchairs much more difficult.
Bikeways

Bikeways can provide an important connection between transit stops and other key locations. The Near Northside currently has five miles of area on-street bike lanes running primarily along Cavalcade and Irvington. The neighborhood also has one B-Cycle Station at Leonel Castillo Center.

The assessment of availability and conditions of bikeways includes information about whether the bikeway is a protected, shared or designated lane; it also documents its width and condition including the visibility of striping. Since the audit was conducted on foot, the assessment does not capture the relative ease of connectivity between bikeways. Figure 4 below shows street segments with either visible bike route signage or striping for a designated bikeway (blue).
The goal of these audits is to build an inventory of sidewalks, intersections and bikeways in different neighborhoods in Houston. Information on the availability and conditions of walking and biking infrastructure can be used to inform agencies and decision-makers when making future investments in a particular neighborhood. The Kinder Institute plans to conduct assessments in other neighborhoods and make the data publicly available through the Houston Community Data Connections (HCDC) platform. We seek to offer potential comparisons across different neighborhoods.

Further evaluation of connectivity from walking and biking infrastructure to important destinations such as work, school and grocery stores is needed. Collecting original data such as this requires a large amount of time and resources that many communities may not have. This report and the Near Northside community profile page in HCDC seek to provide opportunities for residents, organizations and policymakers to access up-to-date information on availability and conditions of walking and biking infrastructure to inform future decisions about residents' safety and overall quality of life.
References


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Mission
The Kinder Institute for Urban Research builds better cities and improves people’s lives by bringing together data, research, engagement and action.