To create safer space for socially distanced activity during the 2020 coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the city of Oakland, California, has transformed 21 miles of streets into temporary pedestrian corridors. By being closed to traffic, the Slow Streets network provides more safe space for people to exercise and move around the city while respecting physical distancing.

New demand for public space for physical distancing

On 16 March 2020, Oakland residents were ordered to stay at home to control the spread of COVID-19. The County of Alameda Shelter in Place Order permitted only essential activities outside of the home, and included a stipulation that individuals must maintain a distance of at least 6 feet from others, including while engaging in permitted physical activity. Overnight, the city saw changes in population behaviour and a new demand for space to be active while maintaining this safe distance from others. With overcrowded lakeside paths and public parks, the City of Oakland Department of Transportation (OakDOT) received calls from local advocacy groups and city officials to close streets surrounding these popular areas.

OakDOT considered how this new space could be created quickly while ensuring the safety of local people. Improving access to public open space is one of the World Health Organization’s recommended policy actions to increase physical activity and promote physical and mental health. However, Oakland also wanted to minimize the risk of inadvertently creating an attraction which would increase crowding, and needed to act quickly with a safe but low-resource response. There was also a concern around promoting equitable access to public open space in order to reduce existing health disparities, partly identified in a 2018 equity assessment carried out by the city.

Creating a network of Slow Streets

On 11 April, the City of Oakland announced the transformation of 74 miles (119 km) of residential streets to support local people in practising physical distancing while staying active. Named Slow Streets, this network of streets is permanently closed to through traffic, giving local residents a safe
space where they can be active. Streets remain open to residents, as well as emergency, delivery and waste collection vehicles.

In deciding which streets to close, the City of Oakland made use of the mapping and community input previously sought for a 2019 update of Oakland’s bicycle plan. Over 3500 residents contributed to the development of the approved plan which includes the proposal of a 74-mile neighbourhood bike route. Vetted by engineers, partner agencies, city officials, and local people, the network of mainly residential streets mostly avoids bus routes and high traffic zones. This list of potential Slow Streets was then tweaked to remove streets which overlapped public transport routes, were key access routes for emergency services, or had no alternative routes for through traffic.

Four streets (4.5 miles) were selected to be the first to benefit from soft closure infrastructure including barriers and signs. An interactive map was created to communicate with residents and highlight future Slow Street developments. As of 10 July, over 21 miles of the 74-mile network had barriers in place, making up 21 corridors across the city.

Implementation and enforcement

To mark these new spaces, OakDOT has opted for renting inexpensive, small-scale signage and barriers. Barriers are installed on the oncoming side of the street, and a barrier’s road position is marked with chalk. In addition to signage provided by the city, Oakland has benefited from the ingenuity of local residents taking to ‘tactical urbanism’ – short-term, low-cost changes intended to improve a local area and catalyse longer-lasting action. Creative ways to remind drivers that routes are closed to through traffic have been spotted across the city. Flyers were also developed by a local advocacy group to spread awareness of the program, as well as function as signs for the closures themselves.

City maintenance workers visit the Slow Streets regularly to check-up on signage and this is supported by a team of self-organised community volunteers who monitor the signage and report
any damages or movements. This is another example of community support strengthening this program and promoting its success.

Collaboration with web mapping services such as Google Maps is ongoing, with the intention of utilising these platforms to direct drivers away from Slow Streets. Compliance with the street closures is monitored via an online community survey, although the city of Oakland is not issuing penalties to unsanctioned journeys. vii

**Evaluation**

The Slow Streets program has received a predominantly positive response from local residents, as well as national and international media. The City of Oakland continue to prioritise outreach for community feedback as well as co-design for ongoing development. OakDOT rapidly launched a community survey to gather data on the use of the Slow Streets, resident satisfaction, as well as issues and unintended consequences. Demographic data facilitated stratification by race/ethnicity, geographic area, household income and age. It also highlighted some disparity in feedback: initial results saw greater popularity with white, higher-income groups based in the north of the city, whilst the needs of Deep East Oakland residents, essential workers and non-white residents were not consistently met.

A live dashboard was created for sharing the results. By the end of June, over 900 responses had been collected, 77% of respondents were in support of the Slow Streets initiative, and 75% had used the streets for walking, rolling, jogging or biking. viii

OakDOT have found that the most common issues observed by residents are: drivers disobeying the road closure (21% of respondents have observed), speeding cars (17%), and driver confusion (16%). Only 4% of respondents have observed people crowding or inappropriate use of their Slow Street. The mandate to create safe streets is clear with over 90% having observed people using roads to maintain physical distance from others. viii

An interim findings report was published in September 2020 to evaluate the initiative, with special attention given to issues around equitable access and participation. The report also shows how Slow Streets has adapted to respond to different challenges and learnings during its implementation, such as modifying the process for street selection or improving the design of street barriers. ix

**Community engagement and co-design**

For the first four streets to receive signage and barricades, OakDOT focused on geographic distribution across the city, including streets in communities of concern and communities with little existing open space access. i Perceiving that there had been inadequate community consultation in this initial selection, a new interactive process was implemented for additional selections. A menu of streets under consideration is now shared via an online interactive feedback map, with an invitation to residents to upvote, downvote and comment, ensuring that their valuable local knowledge and
experience is included. Community responses are automatically added to the live map for other residents to view, and residents may also use this platform to propose additional streets for transformation. Greater community engagement in street selection was prioritised after the initial phase, having learnt that neighbourhood bike streets were not always the most successful choices for Slow Streets. New Slow Streets were also only implemented in collaboration with neighbourhood groups or local organizations, to ensure they reflected community needs and preferences.

Community surveys have also been carried out showing variation in use, although challenges remain in ensuring that the surveys are themselves representative samples of Oakland community opinion. From early June, OakDOT adapted their approach to address disproportionate feedback from white, high-income, North Oakland residents. Local data on COVID-19 cases and deaths by race and geographic area had showed that residents living in East Oakland and communities of colour were disproportionately affected by the pandemic. Reaching out to these communities is now a high priority for the program, in order to understand their health and transportation needs.

In response to resident feedback of traffic speeding and road safety concerns in East Oakland, the Slow Streets initiative has expanded to support safer pedestrian access to essential services on the High Injury Network, such as grocery stores, food distribution points and COVID-19 test sites. Fifteen Slow Streets: Essential Places had been installed across the city as of 10 July, with temporary extensions to pedestrian crossings, deactivation of pedestrian push-buttons, lane closures, and new medians using traffic cones, delineators and signage. While promoting safe access to essential services, the temporary signage is also being used to share important COVID-19-related information.

Looking ahead, the City of Oakland intends to prioritise infrastructure to support safe access to essential services, particularly for streets with the highest level of traffic collisions. They also intend to focus on strengthening the Slow Streets network for marginalised and disadvantaged communities most affected by the pandemic. As movement restrictions lessen and business and social activities are again permitted, attention has turned to the sustainability of the Slow Streets program. Oakland is exploring options for making a subset of the changes permanent where their evaluation shows community needs are being met. This will coincide with continued monitoring of the impact of the network on traffic across the city as movement restrictions ease.

--- Lessons learned: partner with your community and be flexible

Reflecting on lessons learned, the city has highlighted the importance of engaging with community-based organisations, advocates and local people early on and throughout, to listen, learn and co-create. Using light-touch infrastructure and taking a pilot approach also helped to grow public support and create opportunities for community engagement and feedback.

The City of Oakland’s model of working in partnership with fellow public agencies and the local community to rapidly transform space is also one that could be replicated in other programs promoting physical activity and road safety. It has shown that through responsible co-creation, a program can be strengthened and health protection accelerated.

More information can be accessed at Oakland Slow Streets.
Key Resources on Physical Activity and Road Safety

- WHO Regional Office for Europe (EURO) Moving around during the COVID-19 outbreak
- WHO Regional Office for Europe (EURO) Staying physically active during self-quarantine
- NACTO Webinar: Slow, Shared, and Safe: Closing Streets to Thru-Traffic During the Coronavirus
- International Transport Forum COVID-19 Transport Brief - Re-spacing Our Cities For Resilience

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