The Oil Drum: Local
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Walking Towns: Universities, Military Bases & Pre-Auto Urban Areas

Posted by Glenn on November 18, 2007 - 11:30am in The Oil Drum: Local
Topic: Environment/Sustainability
Tags: college, military, transportation, walking [list all tags]

In one of the recent threads, I asked for good local statistical sources and got a few gems, including the Bikes at Work census data commute-to-work mash-up by zipcode. So I ran a quick search on the highest walk to work locations in the US for towns over 1000 population. The results were surprising to me in the lack of diversity:

Location	POP	% Walk to work
Naval Academy, Maryland	4264	82.99%
Houghton, New York	1730	67.84%
Alfred village, New York	3926	60.98%
West Point, New York	7138	60.25%
Air Force Academy, Colorado	7536	59.63%
Parris Island, South Carolina	4841	58.45%
Lackland AFB CDP, Texas	7132	58.09%
New Square village, New York	4707	57.28%
Hamilton village, New York	3510	55.56%
Avalon city, California	3181	52.79%

They are almost all locations that are centered around an institution, like a university or military

academy where many people are housed very close to their classes or jobs and the concentration of people and buildings conspires to reduce the amount of spaces that could be used for roads and parking of automobiles.

So I raised the threshold to at least 20,000 residents.

Location	POP	% Walk to work
Ithaca city, New York	29006	43.33%
Athens city, Ohio	21192	42.39%
State College, Pennsylvania	38420	41.8%
North Chicago, Illinois	36001	29.06%
Oxford city, Ohio	22087	28.86%
Fort Bragg, North Carolina	29246	26.13%
Cambridge, Massachusetts	101355	25.76%
Fort Hood, Texas	33595	23.87%
College Park, Maryland	24590	23.28%
Pullman city, Washington	24740	22.53%

And again, with few exceptions, we find the pattern of high walking rates and major institutions of higher learning, military bases and areas of mixed use development.

So I then raised the threshold again to over 250,000 residents:

Location	POP	% Walk to work
Boston, Massachusetts	589141	13.36%
Washington, DC	572059	12.27%
New York City, New York	8008278	10.72%
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania	334563	10.02%
San Francisco, California	776733	9.82%
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania	1517550	9.22%
Newark, New Jersey	273546	8.03%
Seattle, Washington	563375	7.72%
Baltimore, Maryland	651154	7.28%
Minneapolis, Minnesota	382452	6.85%

While all of these cities have colleges and universities and other major institutions, they are part of a very large mix and cannot alone account for why these cities are on the list. Even controlling for population density does not account for this distribution. It's clear that these are cities that grew to sizable populations before the automobile, which may explain why these major cities are on this list instead of Los Angeles, Phoenix, Atlanta, Houston and Dallas.

Surprising are two cities you might have expected to make this list: Chicago and Portland. They aren't that far off, but while both cities are getting a lot of credit for their green initiatives they don't seem to encourage walking to work as much as these cities above.

An even better question to assess walkability than % that walk to work would be the % that walk to the grocery store or pharmacy. We looked at Walkscore as a metric before and found it had flaws, but was generally useful.

From this very high level look at this census data and Walkscore, it would seem that there are two major factors that influence the walkability of a city or town.

1. Major Institutions: Colleges, Military Bases where people live in dorms/barracks close to their employment/education as well as dining/entertainment/social destinations
2. Pre-Auto City/Village Design: Places created before/without the need for automobiles with close mixed uses of residential/commercial/workplace/dining/grocery/education/entertainment.

The keys to both seems to be co-location of people's housing with the various destinations that they need/desire.

But there is a choice here that seems like one worth considering in greater depth. If we want to

create a post-carbon society, creating more walkable communities seems like a major priority. But what kind of walking towns do we want?