

Project memo

Topic: Sidewalks as a measure of equity

Reporter (s):TBD

Editor: Glenn Smith

Summary: The city of North Charleston, SC, drew criticism recently when it announced it was planning to shovel roughly \$45 million worth of infrastructure improvements into Park Circle, a growing and prosperous neighborhood that has seen a continuing renaissance over the past decade.

The outrage stemmed from citizens and activists who raised concerns about the need to invest in other communities that have seen less attention. A key demand: sidewalks.

Activists in the Charleston area have long lamented the lack of paved pathways for the pedestrians in the region's low-income communities. People in these communities often lack access to dependable transportation, making walking and biking a necessity. And the absence of sidewalks makes those daily treks all the more dangerous.

These areas are predominantly home to African American and Hispanic residents, and community leaders insist the absence of sidewalks contributes to unnecessary and problematic encounters between residents and police as well. The lack of sidewalks forces people into the roadways, providing police with a pretext for police to stop and ticket pedestrians.

The Lowcountry Black Leadership Coalition has made the installation of sidewalks a critical plank in its platform for community action. They have called for sidewalks in the up and coming Morrison Drive area of downtown Charleston, which is home to both swank restaurants and low-income housing projects. They have called for similar pathways in North Charleston and in historically black neighbors in suburban Mount Pleasant.

Though the topic has sparked impassioned debate, no survey has been conducted to determine just how deep this measure of inequity is.

We are seeking to answer that question through a detailed survey of sidewalks in the cities of Charleston and North Charleston, as well as in the town of Mount Pleasant. We want to map the location and absence of sidewalks in these areas to determine who has received these resources and who has not.

Then we plan to find out why.

We also want to analyze data from pedestrian stops to see if there is a corresponding relationship between the absence of sidewalks and police encounters. We want to see if this matches traffic stop data trends, which show people of color being pulled over at disproportionate rates.

There is evidence from other regions that this is an issue with wider implications.

For one, pedestrian deaths are much more common in poor neighborhoods in urban America than in wealthier ones, [a Governing magazine examination revealed back in 2014](#).

Two years later, [The Washington Post reported](#) on a study in New Orleans that illustrated how racial disparities across cities are reflected in sidewalk resources. Neighborhoods with higher poverty rates were less likely to have continuous sidewalks. But the correlation was even stronger in non-white communities, the Post reported.

Also in Louisiana, [The Shreveport Times reported](#) that ordinances banning walking in the street were more often used against people of color in neighborhoods with badly maintained or nonexistent sidewalks.

We suspect similar themes are playing out here in the Charleston area, but need data analysis assistance to put that theory to the test.

Impact: South Carolina is anticipating hundreds of millions of dollars to flow into the state through the American Rescue Act and whatever emerges from Congress on the Biden administration's infrastructure spending plans. Gov. Henry McMaster has pushed for the state to invest heavily in upgrading its crumbling infrastructure. While much of the attention has focused on highways and bridges, community leaders argue that much more immediate good could be accomplished by investing in sidewalks and similar small-scale projects in long-neglected areas. This story has the potential to bring that debate into much clearer focus by defining the need and potential inequities at play in a region that has long struggled with racial disparities.

A 2018 report in The Post and Courier revealed that pedestrians and cyclists are more likely to die in the Charleston region than anywhere else in South Carolina, especially if they're people of color, and the long-standing problem doesn't seem to be improving. Much of the attention since has focused on improving bike lane access and crosswalks, with scant focus on the need for improved and expanded sidewalks. This is a chance to bring that issue to the fore.

Time frame: This story could be reported in two to three months once the survey is completed and data analyzed.

Sources and data: For the sidewalk survey, there is potential to draw from GIS data as well as city and state surveys to check compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. The latter formed the basis for the aforementioned New Orleans study.

Traffic stop data is collected through the state Highway Patrol and area police departments keep databases of individuals questioned but not arrested during field contact stops. The Post and Courier won access to the city of Charleston's database of these stops through a 2015 lawsuit. The newspaper also can get access to municipal court databases that can be searched for jaywalking and walking in roadway offenses and fines.

How can we tell the story digitally? The potential exists for us to tell this story through an Esri storymap or similar software, in a format like the one used here:

<https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/92b2ae1a9f11492189d6e9b5fa8ad07e>

Potential costs (if applicable): FOIA costs for access to count GIS and court record databases.