Executive Summary

Active Living Research

*Active Living Research* is a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) national program that promotes healthy living by identifying environmental factors and policies that can increase physical activity and by sharing this evidence with policymakers to help them create activity-friendly communities. *Active Living Research*’s vision is to make being physically active a part of daily life and normal routine.

The program has three core objectives:

- To build an evidence base of active living research
- To recruit and nurture a multidisciplinary and diverse cadre of active living researchers of all ages
- To inform policy and practice

While consistently pursuing these objectives, *Active Living Research* has also evolved—focusing on children’s physical activity since 2007 to support the RWJF goal of reversing the childhood obesity epidemic, concentrating on disseminating actionable evidence in response to policymaker needs, and, in 2014, supporting RWJF’s new vision of building a *Culture of Health*.

The program has issued 260 grants to researchers from 31 disciplines who have developed 173 new active living tools and measures, published findings in nearly 400 journal articles, and made research contributions that resulted in 32 local or statewide policy changes. RWJF invested $32.9 million in the program from August 2001 through the end of January 2014. An additional grant supports accelerating use of credible evidence to drive
childhood obesity prevention and strengthen the growing field of active living research and runs through January 2016.  

**CONTEXT**

Physical inactivity is an important modifiable threat to health and a contributor to childhood obesity. By the end of the 1990s, emerging research began to suggest that environmental factors and public policy play important roles in promoting or inhibiting active lifestyles. Yet, little was known about the impact of these factors and policies or how to leverage them to promote long-term increases in physical activity.

**THE PROGRAM**

Each year from 2002 to 2010, the *Active Living Research* national program office released one or more calls for proposals soliciting studies about the environment and physical activity. Each call for proposals required researchers to develop multidisciplinary teams in order to address an issue of importance to policymakers, practitioners, and advocates. Special solicitations for dissertation and diversity grants encouraged young and minority researchers to apply for funding.

Starting in 2007, the program’s funding priorities shifted from physical activity in general to physical activity as a way to prevent childhood obesity, especially among low-income and minority populations who are most affected by obesity. Since 2011 *Active Living Research* has shifted away from funding new studies to assertively promoting the policy and practice impact of previously funded studies—what is called translational research.

James F. Sallis, PhD, directs the program. Carmen Cutter, MPH, is the co-director. The program office was located at San Diego State University Research Foundation during this time period. It moved to the University of California, San Diego, in December 2011.

**KEY RESULTS AND FINDINGS**

National program staff and evaluators\(^2\) summarized the following key findings in journal articles, reports to RWJF, and in interviews for this report:

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1. ID 71566 ($1,750,000, February 1, 2014 to January 31, 2016)
2. Evaluators were Dianne C. Barker, MHS and Marjorie A. Gutman, PhD.
• Through June 2014, Active Living Research issued 260 grants to researchers from 31 disciplines. Investigators created 173 new tools and measures and produced research that directly contributed to the creation of more active schools and communities. For example:

  — Lois Brink, MLA, studied how the renovation of inner-city school playgrounds, called Learning Landscapes, influenced physical activity levels of children in Denver. Her findings contributed to passage of a 2008 bond measure stipulating that every elementary school in the city have a Learning Landscape.

  — Jason A. Mendoza, MD, MPH, assessed the impact of a walking school bus program on rates of biking or walking to school, safety, and physical activity of children attending eight ethnically diverse low-income schools in Houston. He found walking school buses promoted active commuting, moderate to vigorous physical activity, and safer pedestrian behaviors. His study validated the Safe Routes to School travel survey for use in Spanish and English among low-income Latino and black children.

• Study findings appeared in 393 peer-reviewed journal articles. Active Living Research was the focus of 13 special journal issues and supplements, including the American Journal of Preventive Medicine and the American Journal of Health Promotion. Research briefs and syntheses, available on the Active Living Research website, translated these findings into practical tools practitioners can use in deciding how to allocate resources for promoting active living. For example, when the Seattle-King County Department of Public Health received $25 million in federal stimulus funds, James Krieger, MD, chief of chronic disease and injury prevention, used Active Living Research publications in deciding how to allocate federal stimulus funds for promoting active living.

• The program’s website averages 29,896 page views per month and draws viewers from 201 countries.

• Researchers reported 62 examples of contributions to policy, 32 of which informed actual policy change at the local, county, or statewide level. Of these changes:

  — Seventeen were bicycle- and pedestrian-related. Examples included installing bicycle walkways and paths; implementing traffic-calming features to improve trail safety; and providing new monies for nonmotorized improvements.

  — Eleven were school-related. Examples include passage of bills requiring more minutes of physical activity per week and expansion of Safe Routes to School policies.

  — Three were park- and playground-related. In one case, a city recreation department restructured playgrounds and other public areas to promote physical activity.
— One state added body mass index measures to a state immunization registry.

- National program staff and funded researchers developed strong ties with representatives of agencies not traditionally focused on health—city planning and zoning officials, urban development agencies, and engineers—and engaged in joint projects with them.

**SIGNIFICANCE**

"*Active Living Research* helped to set the stage for all the work we are doing now in Culture of Health by refocusing upstream on policy and environmental drivers of everyday physical activity levels, and away from individual-level drivers, such as motivation or intention," says C. Tracy Orleans, PhD, RWJF’s senior scientist. When it was launched, “the program was cutting-edge in that it changed the traditional paradigm for understanding and addressing the drivers of physical activity. It helped to spur other national funders to make this shift as well.”

For Sallis, the creation of a new multidisciplinary field of active living research is a hallmark of the program. “When we started *Active Living Research*, there was essentially no research being done across disciplines.”

One of the program evaluators, Dianne Barker, MHS, agrees, “Before *Active Living Research*, there were people working in public health and people working in urban planning, but the connection was not there about why it was important for public health to think about the urban landscape. You need people who make zoning policies on board so they design new developments for active living.”

**GOING FORWARD**

RWJF has funded *Active Living Research* through January 31, 2016, specifying that it focus on accelerating the application of credible evidence for promoting policy change. National program office and RWJF staff also are pursuing strategies to sustain the program for the long term. These include collaborations with private firms, such as Nike, and assumption of some functions by federal agencies. Sallis believes that the program’s connections with multiple nonhealth disciplines position it to contribute to RWJF’s vision of a Culture of Health.

**Program Management**

National Program Office: University of California, San Diego
Program Director: James F. Sallis, PhD
Program Co-Director: Carmen Cutter, MPH