

2018 PUBLIC LIFE STUDY – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

Public spaces have the potential to improve the city’s health, prosperity, and happiness. The Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT), in a first for any municipal transportation agency in the country, has completed a systematic collection of public life data to measure how people use our streets and sidewalks. Under contract to SDOT, data collection was completed by [Urban Design 4 Health, Inc.](#) By studying public life in a variety of urban neighborhood contexts, we now have people-centered data to: help us understand what makes a successful public space; evaluate urban designs and interventions; better equip us to make public realm investment decisions; compare public life trends across neighborhoods; and measure SDOT’s core value of vibrancy.

The 2018 study consisted of collecting data on 108 block faces across 38 different neighborhoods.

What is public life?

The Gehl Institute defines public life as the “activity that takes place in everyday public spaces—on streets, in parks and plazas, and in spaces between buildings.”

What is a public life study?

A public life study is a type of research conducted through observational methods that focuses on measuring human activity and characterizing how public space is used by people moving through or staying still within a specific study area.

What is the Public Life Data Protocol (PLDP)?

The PLDP establishes a standardized way of classifying and measuring observational data related to activity in the public realm to allow for comparisons across different cities and regions.



FINDINGS

1. The largest number of people were observed in Seattle's densest neighborhoods, but there was variability in activity depending on neighborhood, day of the week, and time of day. On average across the sites surveyed, there were 197 people moving and 22 people staying on our sidewalks on an hourly basis. The busiest neighborhoods included Commercial Core, Denny Triangle, Pioneer Square, Belltown, and South Lake Union. Some lower density neighborhood commercial districts—including Capitol Hill, Ballard, West Seattle Junction, Alki, and Pike/Pine—had nearly as many people staying still as some neighborhoods within the downtown urban center. Overall, urban centers had significantly more people during weekdays, while urban villages and other neighborhoods outside of urban villages were busier on weekends.

KEY METRIC:



197 hourly average
– people moving



22 hourly average
– people staying
(optional activities)

2. One-in-ten people moving ends up staying still on our sidewalks. Sites with a high “linger factor” (this ratio of people moving to people staying) indicate areas with elevated levels of existing public life vibrancy. Sites’ linger factor varied from 1% to 42%, but the highest were observed in the lowest density neighborhoods (13% linger factor), compared to 8% in the downtown urban center.

KEY METRIC:



9% linger factor

3. People's activities on sidewalks are varied, with most people engaging in social, extroverted behavior. The most common activity observed across the entire study was people talking to others (47%), which is a promising figure given the City of Seattle's interest in fostering social spaces in the right-of-way. Other numbers that are indicators of positive uses of public space include commercial activity (25%), eating/drinking (20%), and passive recreation (17%). Overall, 56% of people observed engaged in extroverted behavior, compared to 35% in introverted behavior. Weekend activities were more extroverted (67%) as compared to weekdays (55%).

KEY METRIC:



56% extroverted
behavior

13 people engaged
in extroverted
activity (hourly
average per site)

4. Data suggest that some of our public spaces are not inviting to women, youth, and older adults. For the study as a whole, females, youth (less than 15 years old), and older adults (over 65 years old) were underrepresented as users of public space when compared to Census data. Promisingly, the proportion of public space users who are people of color closely reflected local demographics. Documenting who uses our public spaces can help us understand how they invite or attract different user groups and can illuminate how friendly, safe, and inviting these spaces are perceived to be by the public.

KEY METRIC:



Of people staying:
41% female
33% people of color
4% youth (<15 years old)
6% older adult (65+ years old)

5. Only one-in-four public space users who linger on our sidewalks ended up sitting down in provided seating. The most common posture documented was standing (61%), followed by sitting in provided seating (28%). In total, 11% of people staying still were leaning or sitting on items that are not intended to be used as a seating (known as sitting informally), which indicates a significant demand for additional seating. This was particularly prevalent in the downtown urban center, where six people per hour on average were either leaning or sitting informally, which was three times the study-wide average. By documenting people's postures, public life data can help elucidate where the supply of seating provided does not meet demand.

KEY METRIC:



Hourly average per site:
14 people standing
6 people sitting in provided seating
2 people sitting informally or leaning

PUBLIC LIFE DATA

SDOT is providing access to the public life data to encourage the public and researchers to explore the data. SDOT released the complete datasets using the Public Life Data Protocol format through the Socrata Open Data Portal and has also published an interactive dashboard. These can be accessed from our [webpage](#).

WHAT'S NEXT?

SDOT's public life data program intends to make this type of data collection standard practice on an annual basis, subject to available resources. By collecting longitudinal data, we can better assess how public life changes over time, particularly as it related to population growth, land use changes, and infrastructure investments. We plan to continue to explore ways to institutionalize this type of data collection by developing action plans and using the data to inform the prioritization of public realm improvements.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit our [webpage](#) for more information on the study or contact us at SDOTpubliclife@seattle.gov.