

White Paper

Walkable Communities, Stronger Cities:

Why Sidewalk Condition Surveys are a Smart, Human-Centered Investment



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Executive Summary

Imagine a child walking safely to school, an elderly neighbor enjoying her daily stroll, or a young couple exploring their city's vibrant downtown on foot. These everyday moments are made possible — or impossible — by the condition of our sidewalks.

For local leaders, sidewalk condition surveys offer more than infrastructure insight. They are a roadmap to smarter budgeting, safer neighborhoods, thriving businesses, and stronger community trust. This whitepaper makes the case not only for why sidewalk surveys matter, but also for what they make possible: walkable, welcoming, and economically vibrant cities and counties.



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Introduction

A Foundation for Livable, Prosperous Communities

Sidewalks are the most democratic of public spaces — they serve everyone.

But when they're cracked, heaving, or broken, they silently send the message: this place isn't for you.

For cities and counties striving to be more livable, inclusive, and economically resilient, walkable design isn't a luxury...it's essential. Sidewalk condition surveys give local governments the ability to see the full picture of their pedestrian infrastructure, prioritize repairs equitably, and plan with confidence.

***“Walkers are ‘practitioners of the city...’
a city is a language, a repository of possibilities,
and walking is the act of speaking that language.”***

– Rebecca Solnit



Human & Economic Impact of Walkability

Walkability Drives Economic Opportunity

Well-maintained sidewalks attract foot traffic, and foot traffic brings life to local businesses. Communities that prioritize pedestrian infrastructure see higher property values, increased small business activity, and a stronger sense of place.

For residents, homes in walkable neighborhoods are more desirable and valuable. For cities, this means a stronger tax base and greater long-term return on infrastructure investments.

For businesses and developers, walkability is a key factor when deciding where to invest. A city that walks well is a city that works well, and sidewalk condition surveys provide the foundation for making that a reality.

Walkability Pays Dividends – For Everyone

Homes in walkable neighborhoods sell for 23.5% more — or about \$77,600 higher — than homes in car-dependent areas, and each 1-point increase in Walk Score adds up to \$3,500 in VALUE. ^{1 2}

On the commercial side, walkable districts command 35–45% higher rents and sales prices³, while cities like Arlington, VA show that just 10% of walkable land can generate over 50% of tax REVENUE. ⁴

And when homes are close to parks, schools, and shops, they don't just rise in value — they also help communities stay economically RESILIENT. ⁵

Safe Access Around Schools, Hospitals, and High-Use Zones

We owe it to our residents, especially children, seniors, and people with disabilities, to ensure they can move safely through their neighborhoods.

Sidewalks in poor condition near schools, hospitals, and transit zones aren't just unsightly, they're dangerous. These are the areas where pedestrian volume is highest, and safety stakes are greatest. When sidewalks are neglected here, we increase the likelihood of injury, isolation, and inequity. But with regular condition surveys, agencies can identify and address these priority zones before problems escalate, keeping residents safe and infrastructure costs lower over time.



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Planning with Confidence (and Defensibility)

Data That Guides Smart Budgeting

Every city faces tough choices about where and how to spend limited infrastructure dollars. Without clear data, repairs often happen reactively — driven by complaints, not condition.

Objective sidewalk condition surveys change that.

They give agencies a comprehensive, data-driven understanding of current conditions and degradation trends. That means:

- Identifying high-risk, high-traffic areas
- Prioritizing repairs based on safety, accessibility, and equity
- Allocating budgets confidently and transparently

This level of insight not only makes infrastructure planning more effective, but it also builds credibility with residents, council members, and oversight bodies.

Reducing Legal Exposure with Proactive Records

Trip-and-fall injuries are one of the most common and costly liability risks municipalities face. In many states, including California, Michigan, and New York, courts have found cities liable even for small sidewalk defects, especially when there's no documented effort to inspect and maintain.

But here's the good news: sidewalk condition surveys don't increase liability — *they protect against it.*

Municipalities that maintain regular, well-documented inspection and repair programs are in a far stronger legal position. Courts often look favorably on jurisdictions that can show:

- Timely inspections
- Prioritized maintenance planning
- Public transparency and response efforts

A robust sidewalk management plan isn't just good policy, it's your first line of legal defense. In short, having a plan doesn't just make your city safer. **It makes your city stronger.**

Toward a Vision of Inclusive Mobility

Sidewalks serve everyone, but especially those who rely on them most: children, seniors, people with disabilities, and those without access to cars. Prioritizing walkability means prioritizing equity, dignity, and public health.

When cities align their assessments with ADA and PROWAG standards, they create accessible, navigable spaces that welcome every resident. This isn't just compliance, it's compassionate leadership in action.



***"Give people places to walk, and they will walk.
Public health does not build sidewalks.
Sidewalks and places to walk are built by the planners...
if you create the places,
people will use them."***

– Jonathan Dannenberg



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A Call to Lead with Vision

As a city or county leader, you're not just managing infrastructure, you're shaping how people live, move, and feel about their hometown. By budgeting for sidewalk condition surveys, it shows that you are:

- Investing public funds wisely
- Planning proactively, not reactively
- Reducing legal and financial risk
- Increasing property value and economic appeal
- Creating safe, walkable communities where people want to live and do business!

Sidewalks are more than a pathway, they're a sign of who belongs, who is welcome, and how well a city takes care of its residents. And when they're maintained with care and foresight, they become one of the most visible, shared, and powerful investments a community can make.

There's never been a better time to lead with vision and walk confidently toward a safer, stronger, and more connected future!

IMS helps cities and counties build safer, more walkable, and economically vibrant communities through end-to-end sidewalk condition programs. Our Sidewalk Surface Testers (SSTs) capture objective, network-wide data on trip hazards, surface distress, slope, and accessibility barriers. We translate that data into defensible maps, image evidence, and prioritized worklists. With our Easy Sidewalk Analysis (ESWA) tool, leaders can run budget scenarios, weight safety/equity around schools, hospitals, and transit, align with ADA/PROWAG guidance, and develop M&R programs with confidence.

**Want to learn more about how IMS can support your sidewalk management goals?
Contact us at icc-ims.com.**

References

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