Overview
Walkable urban environments – those conducive to transit by foot – offer a number of health, social, and environmental benefits and are becoming increasingly desirable. This study examines the availability and affordability of “very walkable” neighborhoods across 83 “large” (pop. ≥ 500k) U.S. urbanized areas using the popular Walk Score® walkability metric and the location affordability index (LAI) developed by the U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD).

Research Questions
- How does the availability of “very walkable” neighborhoods (i.e., those with walk scores ≥ 70) compare between urban areas in the U.S.? Are there regional variations?
- How does the affordability (housing alone and housing + transportation) of “very walkable” neighborhoods vary among U.S. urban areas?

Methods
- Walkability was assessed using the free online Walk Score® metric. An API was used to collect a walk score for approximately 37,000 urban census tracts located within the nation’s 83 urbanized areas (UAs) with populations ≥ 500,000. Walk Score evaluates neighborhood walkability using the density of local amenities (schools, grocery stores, etc.), pop. density, and street network connectivity. Walk Scores range from 0 (no walkability) to 100 (max. walkability).
- Population data for each census tract were acquired from the NHGIS database and the U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey (ACS) for 2015-19 (five-year average).
- Affordability data were obtained from the Location Affordability Index developed by the US Department of Housing & Urban Development.
- All data were processed and joined using ArcGIS Pro (v2.5). Population and affordability data for “very walkable” census tracts – i.e., those with Walk Scores ≥ 70 out of 100 – were summarized and aggregated up to the level of urbanized area for mapping and analysis purposes.

Results
- Access to “very walkable” neighborhoods varies significantly between UAs. Only four UAs with over 30% of residents living in very walkable census tracts: NYC, San Francisco, LA, and Boston.
- UAs with the lowest proportion of residents living in very walkable neighborhoods were generally smaller and/or are characterized by high levels of urban sprawl, including Cape Coral (FL), Colorado Springs, Baton Rouge, & Charlotte.
- Housing within “very walkable” neighborhoods was generally least affordable in the largest (e.g., NYC, Chicago, LA) and the most sprawling (e.g., Charlotte, Atlanta, Orlando) UAs.
- Large UAs have more competitive and expensive housing markets, while those with high levels of sprawl offer few walkable neighborhoods but are often in demand.
- The picture changes somewhat when considering both housing and estimated transportation costs. Generally, “very walkable” neighborhoods in smaller UAs and more sprawling UAs had the highest combined locations costs, including McAllen (TX), Knoxville, Orlando, Tampa, and El Paso.

Conclusions
- The results of this preliminary analysis suggest some significant variations in the availability and affordability of walkable neighborhoods across the nation’s largest urbanized areas. In general, larger cities along the coast and upper Midwest had a larger share of residents residing in walkable neighborhoods.
- Affordability varied depending on whether one considers housing costs alone or housing and transit combined. Cities in the Northeast and parts of the Midwest had the most affordable walkable neighborhoods when considering both housing and transit costs. However, this considers affordability only for those earning the median income within their respective urban area; the experience may be quite different for households earning less than the median or looking to move in from outside the UA.
- Future work should examine the affordability of walkable neighborhoods from the perspective of different household types and incomes. The analysis should also be extended to examine changes over time.