



Health Policy Snapshot

Public Health and Prevention

www.rwjf.org/healthpolicy**ISSUE BRIEF**

October 2012

How does transportation impact health?

Takeaways:

- Transportation is one of the economic and social factors that influences people's health and the health of a community.
- The health costs associated with traffic crashes, air pollution, and physical inactivity add up to hundreds of billions of dollars each year, but health is typically not considered in transportation policy and planning.
- The National Prevention Strategy and Action Plan is working to boost Americans' health in part through encouraging the development of livable, walkable communities, bike lanes, and other healthy transit options.

Overview

The U.S. transportation system can be harmful to our health, but it doesn't need to be. While motorized transportation modes still dominate—leading to increased air pollution, traffic crashes, and decreased physical activity—opportunities abound to increase alternative transportation options that support walking and cycling and improve health.

CURRENT TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM BODES ILL FOR HEALTH

The U.S. transportation system is a web of highways, bridges, roads, sidewalks, bike paths, trains, and buses that connect people to each other and to places where they work, learn, play, shop, and get medical care. While this system has increased mobility and access to goods and services, it relies predominantly

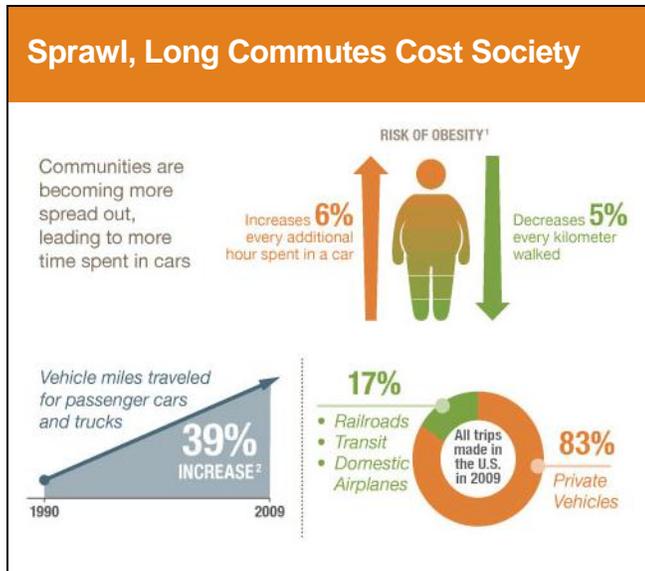
on motorized transportation—and that has consequences for health.

Currently, more than 80 percent of the nation's workers drive or ride in a car to work.¹ Forty percent of all trips in America are two miles or less, 74 percent of which are traveled by car.² In 2008, the average American drove nearly 10,000 miles,³ with sprawl necessitating longer commutes. This dependence on driving leads to 40,000 traffic-related deaths annually⁴ and exposes us to air pollution. Some 35 million people live within 300 feet of a major roadway, placing them at higher risk for asthma and other respiratory illnesses, cardiovascular disease, pre-term births, and premature death.⁵

Our current transportation system also contributes to physical inactivity—each additional hour spent in a car per day is associated with a 6 percent increase in the likelihood of obesity. Conversely, each added kilometer walked per day is associated with a nearly 5 percent reduction in obesity risk.⁶ Regular physical activity promotes health and lowers risk for obesity and premature death.⁷

HEALTH IMPACT NOT OFTEN CONSIDERED IN TRANSPORTATION POLICY

The direct and indirect health costs associated with traffic crashes, air pollution and physical inactivity amount to hundreds of billions of dollars annually. These health costs typically are not included in transportation decision-making and policy. Currently 80 percent of federal transportation funding goes to building highways and improving road infrastructures,⁸ which limits opportunities for active, healthier transportation options, such as public



Sources:

¹ <http://policy.rutgers.edu/vtc/tod/newsletter/vol7-num1/ajpm-aug04.pdf>

² http://www.google.com/publicdata/explore?ds=gb66jodhlsaab_#!ctype=l&strall=false&bcs=d&nselm=h&met_y=VMT&scale_y=false&rdim=state&ldim=state&tdim=true&hl=en_US&dl=en_US&ind=false

transit, walking, and biking.⁹ Yet investments in sidewalks, bike lanes, trails, public transit, and other infrastructure that supports physical activity can result in improvements to individuals' health and decreased health care costs.¹⁰ Health impact assessments help policy-makers understand the health effects of proposed laws and programs and can be used to inform transportation planning.

SUSTAINABLE TRANSPORT OPTIONS ARE HEALTHIER

Walkable, bikable, transit-oriented communities are associated with healthier populations. People in such communities are more physically active, have less weight gain, have lower rates of traffic injuries, and are less exposed to air pollution.¹¹

Studies show that people walk to places that are close by and when they feel safe. Forty percent of people walk to shops—similar percentages walk to work, school and other destinations—when trips are within one mile.¹¹ Walking to public transit also can

help people accumulate an average of 19 minutes of daily activity, helping to control weight and lower health risk factors.

The National Prevention Strategy and Action Plan, designed to increase the number of Americans who are healthy throughout life, recognizes that good health comes not just from receiving quality medical care. The strategy includes efforts to increase physical activity and calls for active transportation options, from increasing bike lanes to supporting livable communities and implementing Safe Routes to School. The U.S. Departments of Transportation, Agriculture, Education, and Health and Human Services are beginning to implement various aspects of this plan.

CONCLUSION

Health impacts and costs should be factored into decisions about transportation and community development at all levels. Increasing transportation options, such as those that promote walking, biking, and use of public transit, can help improve public health.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- [The Hidden Costs of Transportation \(APHA\)](#)
- [National Prevention, Health Promotion and Public Health Council](#)
- [Health Impact Project](#)

¹ <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2008/12/16-transportation-tomer-puentes>

² http://www.bts.gov/programs/national_household_travel_survey/

³ www.apha.org/.../FINALHiddenHealthCostsLongNewBackCover.pdf

⁴ www.cdc.gov/injury/pdfs/cost-MV-a.pdf

⁵ <http://www.epa.gov/airscience/air-highwayresearch.htm>

⁶ <http://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797%2804%2900087-X/fulltext>

⁷ <http://www.canadianmedicaljournal.ca/content/174/6/801.full>

⁸ www.apha.org/.../FINALHiddenHealthCostsLongNewBackCover.pdf

⁹ www.activelivingresearch.org/files/ALR_Brief_ActiveTransportation_0.pdf

¹⁰ www.apha.org/.../FINALHiddenHealthCostsLongNewBackCover.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/walking/>