



## Improving the Health of All Americans by Focusing on Communities

Where you live matters to your health. In fact, your ZIP code may be more important to your health than your genetic code. The communities where people live, learn, work, and play shape how well and how long they live. Consider these examples:

- In Washington, D.C., people living just a few subway stops apart have a life expectancy difference of up to seven years.<sup>i</sup>
- In New Orleans, people who live in one neighborhood off of Interstate 90 can expect to reach age 75. But only three miles away, the average life expectancy is just 54.<sup>ii</sup>

Communities influence health in many ways. For example, the “built environment” can affect rates of smoking, exercise, and obesity:

- Living near a supermarket has been linked with less obesity, while living closer to small convenience stores has been linked with higher rates of both obesity and smoking.
- People are more likely to be physically active when they live in neighborhoods that have parks, bike lanes, walking or jogging trails, and less litter, vandalism, and graffiti.

Low-quality housing can expose people to conditions that contribute to poor health, such as mold, dust mites, water leaks, and poor ventilation, and to hazards like broken stairs or faulty fire alarms.

- Among the 6.7 million children with diagnosed asthma, approximately 40 percent of cases are believed to be attributable to residential exposures.<sup>iii</sup>

Transportation can affect health—for better or worse. In the United States, automobiles are the primary mode of transportation, with more than 80 percent of the nation’s workers driving or riding in a car to work.

- A person’s risk for obesity increases 6 percent for every additional hour spent in a car per day and decreases 5 percent for every kilometer walked per day.<sup>iv</sup>

Communities that provide good jobs—or convenient access to them—enable families to live in safe and health-promoting housing, buy nutritious foods, and purchase health care coverage that protects them when they are sick.

### Opportunities for Living in Healthy Communities

Not all communities provide the same opportunities and resources to support healthy living. Access to health-promoting community conditions varies sharply with household income.

- Nearly one-fifth of all Americans—about 52 million people—live in poor neighborhoods that lack the opportunities needed to support healthy living. Typically, these neighborhoods have fewer job opportunities, lower housing quality, and more pollution and crime.



Access to health care can't fix these problems. Instead, to improve health we need to focus on fixing the characteristics of communities that can make or break health. This means bringing the community and leaders across sectors together to improve the social, economic and physical infrastructure of neighborhoods.

In 2009 the RWJF Commission urged communities to take a holistic view of health, incorporating it into their decisions and planning for education, transportation, housing, economic development, and other areas, and to work with leaders in these sectors to improve health:

*"[O]ur everyday circumstances and activities profoundly affect our health, and efforts to promote and sustain good health must address these environmental factors. We propose that a consortium of philanthropic and public funders support place-based initiatives that bring together community leaders from multiple sectors—neighborhood groups, businesses, schools and universities, local zoning boards, city and county housing, social services and health agencies, volunteer and faith-based organizations—to identify and address local health problems and goals."*

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission to Build a Healthier America  
Beyond Health Care: New Directions to a Healthier America, 2009

This broader view of health and of the need for cross-sector partnership is gaining growing support. As Federal Reserve Board Chair Ben S. Bernanke recently told a group of community development leaders:

*"Perhaps one of the most promising new partners in community development is the health care sector. Factors such as educational attainment, income, access to healthy food, and the safety of a neighborhood tend to correlate with individual health outcomes in that neighborhood. Because these factors are linked to economic health as well as physical health, health-care professionals and community development organizations are seeing new opportunities for cooperation in low-income communities."*

Four years after the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Commission to Build a Healthier America issued a set of influential recommendations for improving the health of all Americans, the Commission is reconvening to provide new guidance on how best to support health in communities and during early childhood. The Commission is charged with identifying actions the nation should take now to improve health. Additional information, including the Commission's 2009 report and recommendations, may be found at: [www.rwjf.org/goto/commission](http://www.rwjf.org/goto/commission).

<sup>i</sup>Braveman P and Egerton S. *Overcoming Obstacles to Health: 2013 and Beyond*. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, June 2013.

<sup>ii</sup>Braveman P and Egerton S. *Overcoming Obstacles to Health: 2013 and Beyond*. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, June 2013.

<sup>iii</sup>Lanphear BP, Aligne CA, Auinger P, et al. Residential Exposures Associated With Asthma in US Children. *Pediatrics* 2001;107(3):505-511

<sup>iv</sup>Frank LD, Andersen MA and Schmid TL. Obesity relationships with community design, physical activity, and time spent in cars. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 27 (2): 87-96, August 2004.