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National Study Links Health Impacts with Sprawl

Data for Rhode Island Shows Similar Link

A new national study finds that people who live in areas where automobile travel is necessary for most activities are more likely to be obese or have high blood pressure than those living in more compact, walkable communities.

The peer-reviewed study, appearing in this month's edition of the American Journal of Health Promotion, found that in the four Rhode Island counties that were included in the study, residents of Washington County are the most likely to be facing health problems related to sprawling development.

People who live in more sprawling counties are likely to walk less, weigh more and are more likely to have high blood pressure, according to the research, which was based on health data collected from more than 200,000 residents of 448 counties in major metropolitan areas across the United States.

"Walkable communities can improve our health," declares Dr. Patricia Nolan, Director of the Rhode Island Department of Health. "High blood pressure and obesity place us at risk of heart attacks, strokes, diabetes and other major health problems. Compact communities with safe sidewalks and bike paths encourage us to engage in physical activity. Community design is important to health."

The study used national land use data to assign sprawl scores to counties, and an annual national health survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control to investigate the health status of residents in those counties. In Rhode Island, Washington County was found to have the highest degree of sprawl among the four counties analyzed (Newport County was not included in the study) while Providence County was the most compact.

The study concluded that the greater the degree of sprawl, the higher the 'Body Mass Index' of the people who live there. Body Mass Index is a standard measure of weight to height. The study controlled for factors such as sex, age, education, and race or ethnicity. Regional scores are available in a report based on the study's findings prepared by Smart Growth America and the Surface Transportation Policy Project.

Nationally, the study found that every fifty-point increase in the degree of sprawl was associated with a weight gain of just over one pound for an average person. People in more sprawling areas walk less for exercise, and weigh more whether or not they exercise. The study says these results may indicate that people in more sprawling areas have fewer chances to stay fit through routine physical activity, because they cannot walk to the store or other destinations close to their homes.

“We need to develop public policies that make it more feasible for developers to invest in traditional neighborhoods where people can walk to nearby stores, services, recreation facilities and jobs – places such as Darlington in Pawtucket, Wickford in North Kingstown, Providence’s Silver Lake neighborhood, Warwick’s Apponaug section, Valley Falls in Cumberland, Gloucester’s Chepachet and Downtown Warren” says Scott Wolf, Executive Director of Grow Smart Rhode Island. “That’s why we strongly support the policy initiative of Growth Centers, a concept in which municipalities designate parts of their communities for traditional, compact, mixed-use development that is encouraged through targeted state investments.”

The study is one of a number of articles on the health impact of sprawling development published in special issues of the American Journal of Health Promotion and the American Journal of Public Health. Editors of the Journals issued a joint news release to discuss their findings.

The report “The Health Effects of Sprawl,” is available at www.smartgrowthamerica.org. A video news release and B-roll are being distributed via a satellite feed from CNN newssource pathfire under medical and features tabs.

Smart Growth America (SGA) is a coalition of nearly 100 advocacy organizations that have a stake in how metropolitan expansion affects our environment, quality of life and economic sustainability. SGA’s diverse coalition partners include national, state and local groups working on behalf of the environment, historic preservation, social equity, land conservation, neighborhood redevelopment, farmland protection, labor, and town planning.

The Surface Transportation Policy Project is a broad, nationwide coalition working to ensure safer communities and smarter transportation choices that enhance the economy, improve public health, promote social equity, and protect the environment.

Grow Smart Rhode Island is a statewide public interest group representing a broad coalition of partners fighting sprawl and promoting innovative policies and programs to revitalize city and town centers, preserve cultural and natural resources and expand economic opportunity for all Rhode Islanders.

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