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## **Research Links Sprawl and Health**

*SGA, STPP issue companion report with local data*

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*Washington, DC* – A new national study and special issues of two prestigious medical journals released today offer powerful indications that sprawling development has a hand in the country's obesity crisis. Together, they demonstrate the urgent need to invest in making America's neighborhoods appealing and safe places to walk and bicycle.

The peer-reviewed study, which used a county sprawl index developed in partnership with Smart Growth America, found that people living in automobile-dependent neighborhoods that suppress walking do indeed walk less, weigh more, and are more likely to suffer from high blood pressure.

The study, *Relationship between Urban Sprawl and Physical Activity, Obesity, and Morbidity* is being published in a special issue of the American Journal of Health Promotion. Smart Growth America and the Surface Transportation Policy Project have issued a companion report, *Measuring the Health Effects of Sprawl*, which gives county-level data illustrating the findings for the metropolitan areas studied. In most metropolitan areas, residents in more sprawling counties are heavier and face higher odds of being obese and having high blood pressure than those in less sprawling counties.

“Along with the recent national attention to diet, this research shows that the lack of convenient, walkable communities may help explain why so many Americans are battling high blood pressure and obesity,” said Don Chen, executive director of Smart Growth America. “It shows why we should work harder to create great neighborhoods and cities that invite walking, biking and other physical activity as a part of everyday life.”

While the health researchers' findings argue for greater government support of building walkable, bike-able places, Congress at this moment is preparing to vote on a massive transportation bill that actually would eliminate funding for local bicycling and walking facilities and cripple efforts to expand public transportation.

“Communities with a wider variety of transportation options, including walking and bicycling, are healthier places to live,” said Anne Canby, President of the

Surface Transportation Policy Project. “We urge Congress to remember this when voting on the transportation appropriations bill in September: A vote to restore critical funds for bicycle and pedestrian facilities is a vote for public health.”

Many communities around the country already have plans in the works to build more paths, bike lanes, and sidewalks, and are taking creative approaches to public transit and development. But these plans may fall through if federal funds dry up.

The report outlines seven steps communities can take to respond to the findings of the research, including short-term projects such as:

- Investing in completing sidewalk networks, striping bike lanes, and making street crossings safer.
- Instituting programs that focus on making it safe for children to walk and bike to school. A bill that would provide federal support for a national Safe Routes to School program is under consideration in the House of Representatives.
- Calming traffic with speed humps and bulb-outs.
- Educating and encouraging people to choose to walk, instead of drive.

Over the longer term, communities can:

- Focus development around train and bus stations, so people can conveniently run errands and get to work by leaving their homes on foot.
- Retrofit sprawling communities with sidewalks, pedestrian cut-throughs, and small shops.
- Revitalize existing walkable neighborhoods.

The study is the first national research to find a direct link between sprawl and obesity. It is one of dozens of articles published in special issues of the *American Journal of Health Promotion* and the *American Journal of Public Health* on the built environment and health. The editors of the two journals released their results simultaneously to highlight the importance of the topic.

[\*\*The Surface Transportation Policy Project\*\*](#) is a diverse, 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.

**Smart Growth America** is the only national organization dedicated to researching, advocating for and leading coalitions to bring smart growth practices to more communities nationwide. From providing more sidewalks to ensuring more homes are built near public transit or that productive farms remain a part of our communities, smart growth helps make sure people across

the nation can live in great neighborhoods. For additional information, please visit [www.smartgrowthamerica.org](http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org).

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