

Sightline Institute

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Car-centered sprawl is major health risk in Oregon

Extra driving, physical inactivity linked to higher car-crash fatality risk, obesity

Car-centered sprawl shortens Oregon residents' lives because it contributes to some of the state's leading health risks, reports *Cascadia Scorecard 2006: Focus on Sprawl and Health*, an annual progress report on the Pacific Northwest released today by Sightline Institute (formerly Northwest Environment Watch).

Residents of low-density, residential-only sprawling communities are more likely to die in car collisions, which kill around 500 residents in Oregon a year. They are also more likely to be obese, which increases the risk of many chronic diseases and is responsible for some 1,500 deaths in Oregon each year. British Columbia—which has the region's best record for curbing sprawl—has a car-crash fatality rate that's one-third lower than that of the Northwest states and an obesity rate that's nearly one-half lower.

"The toll from car crashes and obesity-related disease is a tragedy that's largely overlooked because it unfolds slowly," said Clark Williams-Derry, research director for Sightline and lead author of the report. "But this tragedy is not inevitable. Simple solutions—such as giving people the tools to drive less by encouraging more compact, walkable communities—could make the Northwest's communities safer and healthier."

"We cannot treat our way out of the inactivity and obesity epidemics," said Dr. Minot Cleveland, physician at Legacy Good Samaritan Hospital and Project Director of the Active Living by Design Program. "We must move upstream and create activity-friendly communities that encourage walking and biking. Through policies that support physical activity, and improvements like bike lanes, we can make the healthy choice the easy choice."

This year's Scorecard examines the impact of community design on several health trends, including car collisions, physical activity, obesity, and air pollution. Studies have found that residents of compact areas—where homes are mixed with stores and services and the street network is designed for walking—are less likely to be obese; suffer substantially fewer chronic illnesses such as diabetes, lung disease, and hypertension; and have a lower risk of dying in a traffic accident because they drive less.

Key findings from the report include:

- **High rate of car-crash fatalities:** Car crashes are the leading cause of death under age 45 in Oregon, with a death toll of about 500 Oregon residents a year (2,000 in the entire Northwest). Another 100,000 northwesterners are injured. But studies show that residents of denser communities drive less and face a lower risk of dying in a traffic accident. For example, Oregon's most urban counties—Washington and Multnomah—have the lowest per capita risk of fatal crashes.
- **Transit safer:** Compact, walkable neighborhoods further protect drivers and pedestrians because traffic tends to move more slowly than on suburban arterials, lessening the severity of collisions. Also, residents of compact communities usually have more access to transit, and mile for mile, riding a bus is more than 10 times safer than driving a car.

- **Obesity growing:** Oregon's obesity rate, 21 percent of the population, has nearly doubled since 1990. Recent estimates place the US death toll from obesity-related ailments at 112,000 per year, which—based on regional obesity rates—indicates that obesity kills some 1,500 people per year in Oregon, 2,300 in Washington, and 540 in Idaho.
- **Sprawl linked to obesity and physical inactivity:** Neighborhood studies in greater Seattle, Atlanta, and San Diego have found that living in compact neighborhood with good walking facilities reduced the odds of being obese, while increasing levels of physical activity, especially walking. And other studies have found that sprawling cities and counties have more obesity and chronic illness than more-compact places.
- **The BC advantage:** British Columbians are about half as likely to be obese as residents of Oregon (12 percent compared to 21 percent), almost one-third less likely to die in a car crash, and live an average of three years longer (81.1 years compared to 78 years in Oregon). Vancouver and Victoria are the region's most compact cities, with 62 and 34 percent of residents living in compact communities, respectively, compared to Portland at 28 percent and Eugene at 12 percent.
- **Hefty economic costs:** According to National Safety Council figures, car crashes may drain the Northwest states' economies of approximately \$8 billion per year, or more than \$700 per resident, including medical treatments, lost productivity and wages, and other costs. The total costs of obesity and physical inactivity may top \$11 billion per year in the Northwest states.
- **Solutions for health:** *Cascadia Scorecard* highlights policy innovations to improve northwesterners' health and safety, including: fostering a blend of stores and services in residential areas; encouraging foot traffic by investing in sidewalks and interconnected streets; easing parking requirements; allowing more development in cities; and requiring new development to pay its own way for public infrastructure.

The report also recommends assessing the health impacts of potential transportation projects before building. "If we designed our roads and neighborhoods with health in mind, we might make very different choices," says Williams-Derry. "Bike paths or sidewalks might prove surprisingly cost-effective because of their health benefits."

Compact, well-designed communities may also contribute to cleaner air, because residents of denser neighborhoods drive less and emit fewer troublesome air pollutants. And emerging research suggests that walkable community design may foster stronger ties between community members.

In addition to its findings on sprawl and health, *Cascadia Scorecard 2006* reports the Northwest's progress in five other trends critical to its future, including energy use, wildlife, population growth, pollution, and economic security. Overall, Cascadia improved its "score" in 2005, with gains in human health, economy, and energy efficiency. But the Scorecard's new wildlife indicator suggests the region needs to better protect key species such as salmon, greater sage-grouse, and orcas.

Sightline Institute is an independent, Seattle-based nonprofit research and communication center that monitors progress toward a sustainable economy and way of life in the Pacific Northwest. Fact sheets for Oregon, British Columbia, Idaho, and Washington and all other materials, including the report and citations are posted at www.sightline.org/research/cascadia_scorecard/res_pubs/cs2006.