

Sightline Institute

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Car-centered sprawl in Washington is major health risk

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

Car-centered sprawl shortens Washington 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 2,000 northwesterners a year (including 700 in Washington); and they are more likely to be obese, which increases the risk of many chronic diseases. 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 region's communities safer and healthier."

"Washington this year adopted a policy to add bike paths and transit routes for new roads and reconstruction projects in King, Pierce and Snohomish counties. These options will give Washingtonians a wider range of healthier choices for their daily trips," said Governor Chris Gregoire. "This report highlights the importance of designing communities that promote better health."

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:

- **Density linked to lower risk of car-crash fatalities:** Car crashes are the leading cause of death under age 45 in Cascadia, with a death toll of about 2,000 northwesterners a year; another 100,000 are injured. But studies show that residents of the region's densest communities drive less and face the lowest risk of dying in a traffic accident. King County, for example, is the most urban county in Washington state and has the lowest car-crash fatality rate.
- **Car crashes cost more than roads.** Washington's transportation department estimated that comprehensive crash costs in the state totaled \$5.5 billion in 2002, more than 3 times the department's yearly budget. This suggests that car crashes may be more costly than the roads on which they occur.

- **Transit safer:** Compact, walkable neighborhoods further protect drivers and pedestrians because traffic tends to move more slowly than on suburban arterials; and residents usually have more access to transit. Mile for mile, riding a bus is more than 10 times safer than driving a car.
- **Sprawl linked to obesity and physical inactivity:** Twenty-two percent of Washington residents are obese—a rate that’s doubled since 1990—and 1 child in 7 is obese. Estimates suggest that obesity-related ailments kill 112,000 Americans per year, including 2,300 Washingtonians. Neighborhood studies in King County, 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 sprawling cities and counties have more obesity and chronic illness than more compact places.
- **Walkability in King County:** A study in King County, Washington, found that pedestrian-friendly design is associated with up to a one-point reduction in the body mass index. For someone who is 5 feet 9 inches tall, living in a low-walkability neighborhood can translate into up to 7 pounds of extra body weight. (See King County walkability maps, page 45-47.)
- **The BC advantage:** British Columbians do substantially better than Washington residents in health and land use. They are about half as likely to be obese (12 percent compared to 22 percent), one-third less likely to die in a car crash, and live an average of two years longer (81.1 years compared to 78.8 years). And BC’s cities—Vancouver and Victoria—are by far the region’s most compact.
- **Solutions for health:** *Cascadia Scorecard* highlights policy innovations to improve northwesterners’ health and safety, such as fostering a blend of homes, stores, and services; encouraging foot traffic by investing in sidewalks, bike paths, and interconnected streets; easing parking requirements; allowing more development in cities; and requiring new development to pay its own way for infrastructure.

The report also recommends assessing the health impacts of potential transportation projects before deciding to build. “If we designed our roads and neighborhoods with health in mind, we might make very different choices,” said Sightline’s Williams-Derry.

Dr. Lawrence Frank, Bombardier Sustainable Transportation Chair at the University of British Columbia, said that there are activities underway in the Seattle area to do just that. “A King County project (LUTAQH) is developing a health impact assessment tool to measure if, for example, a zoning change would promote walking and other physical activity, or whether a roads construction project would increase air pollution,” he said. Frank is leading the effort and has led several recent studies on health and the built environment noted in the report.

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

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 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 British Columbia, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington and all other materials, including the report and citations are posted at www.sightline.org/research/cascadia_scorecard/res_pubs/cs2006