

Building Community for Better Health

WASHINGTON TRANSPORTATION FACTS • FACT SHEET #4

Recent research suggests that social capital—the strength of ties to family, friends, neighbors, and community—may be as important to health as smoking, cholesterol, obesity, or physical activity.¹ Unfortunately, surveys demonstrate social capital in America has been in gradual decline for decades.

Emerging research suggests that good community design—including sidewalks, public meeting places, and parks—may foster social capital by promoting frequent interactions among members of a community. Although the connections among neighborhood design, social capital, and health aren't fully understood, further study may uncover ways in which neighborhood and community design can promote social capital and promote longer, healthier lives.

SOCIAL CAPITAL IS DECLINING IN AMERICA—AND IT COULD BE ENDANGERING OUR HEALTH

- Extensive research shows that social capital—as measured by political participation, civic engagement, group memberships, and casual socializing—has diminished substantially since the middle of the 20th century.²
- Some forms of **social capital can buoy health**. Strong and regular social ties can help people—particularly men and the elderly—weather disease.³ Conversely, people who are socially isolated tend to have higher rates of mortality.⁴
- In states with high levels of interpersonal trust—which is closely related to social capital—residents tend to report better health. But residents of states where people think others will take advantage of them—often a sign of low social capital—tend to have higher mortality rates.⁵ Low social capital has also been linked with higher rates **violent crime, binge-drinking, teen birth-rates, and depression**, and lower rates of leisure-time physical activity.⁶

SOCIAL CAPITAL

is as important to health as smoking, cholesterol, obesity, or physical activity.

LOW DENSITY, SPRAWLING DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS MAY UNDERMINE SOCIAL CAPITAL

- Emerging research suggests that **sprawling and auto-dependent suburbs may actually reduce social capital**. Sprawl tends to substitute public spaces (such as parks) with private spaces (such as fenced-in backyards), which reduces opportunities for informal social contacts. And low density development can physically separate neighbor from neighbor, which limits the casual interactions that help create a sense of community.⁷



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- Residents of sprawling neighborhoods rarely walk for transportation, and make most trips inside cars—and as a result, they have **few opportunities for face-to-face contact** with neighbors.⁸ One study of three US cities found that, in areas with a relatively high share of drive-alone commuters, residents are less likely to have close social ties within their own neighborhoods.⁹ Similarly, studies have found that for each 10 additional minutes spent in a daily commute, community involvement falls by 10 percent.¹⁰

GOOD NEIGHBORHOOD DESIGN MAY HELP FOSTER SOCIAL CAPITAL

- A **robust pedestrian infrastructure may help improve social capital**. A comparison of two demographically similar neighborhoods in Portland, Oregon, found that a safe and interesting walking environment was linked with higher levels of social capital.¹¹ Another study in Galway, Ireland came to similar conclusions: neighborhoods that foster walking have higher social capital.¹²

LEADING RESEARCHERS

believe that sprawling cities and driving-dependent suburbs may reduce social capital.

- Mixed-use neighborhoods that support both residential and commercial development can promote community connectedness by providing residents **opportunities for spontaneous social interaction and incidental contact**. Some caution is warranted, however: several studies have found that very high residential density may be linked with a reduced sense of community.¹³
- Neighborhoods with a **blend of housing types can allow residents to stay in a single neighborhood** as they age by meeting the housing needs of residents over many stages of life--as singles, families, or empty-nesters.¹⁴ Aging in place can allow older Americans to maintain social connections with friends and neighbors.

Sources on following page, or visit http://www.northwestwatch.org/sprawl_health/.

SOURCES

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- ⁶Frumkin et al. op. cit. note 3.
- ⁷Frumkin et al. op. cit. note 3; and Putnam op. cit. note 2.
- ⁸Frumkin et al. op. cit. note 3.
- ⁹Lance Freeman, "The Effects of Sprawl on Neighborhood Social Ties: An Explanatory Analysis," *Journal of the American Planning Association*, Winter 2001, v.67, n.1, pp 69-77.
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- ¹²Kevin M. Leyden, "Social Capital and the Built Environment: The Importance of Walkable Neighborhoods," *American Journal of Public Health*, September 2003; v.93, n.9; pp 1546-1551.
- ¹³Frumkin et al. op. cit. note 3; and Putnam op. cit. note 2.
- ¹⁴Frumkin et al. op. cit. note 3.