
Commentary on Active Living Research

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The 19th-century lessons from the White Plague of tuberculosis—that crowded and wretched housing, interspersed dirty industries, and dangerous streets affect people's health and productivity—lent great power to the push for "healthy cities" with adequate sanitary infrastructure, parks, and clean air. In America, we made significant progress toward healthy environments through zoning and environmental controls. An improved standard of living with "labor-saving devices" and abundant automobiles made our lives physically easier. We engineered more convenience and less "community" as our vehicles and tax policies encouraged the spread of houses and highways across the landscape. Over the last 5 years, a number of us who work in environmental health have become concerned that this shift has exacerbated the most prevalent morbidities of the 21st century, namely chronic diseases. At first, the thought that distant green suburbs might have a negative impact on population health and well-being seems strange—clearly these places are healthier than our teeming cities, aren't they?

In the United States, health and activity are considered matters of independent personal choice, rather than the consequence of our physical surroundings. But now, in a nation in which at least one of three adults is overweight or obese, where big-box stores and low-density suburban sprawl have replaced urban parks and walkable town centers, where ten-lane highways and outdated zoning policies are transforming America's agricultural heartland into a sea of automobiles and fast-food purveyors, the connection between the built environment and public health has become self-evident and common sense.

Our car-loving, pedestrian-hostile environment has made it increasingly difficult to effect one's choice to be healthy and active. A few years ago, a number of us began actively to revive the notion that urban planning and wise land use improves health, in large part by encouraging public transportation, physical activity, and socialization. As new studies are completed and published, this logic is confirmed anew in our own time. Research suggests that individuals will indeed

make more healthful choices if given the opportunity—but as captives of environments that offer few practical alternatives, our physical activity and diet decisions are clearly not solely a personal decision.

Although the "Smart Growth" movement has long supported the link between well-planned communities and social welfare, public health leaders have remained relatively silent. Even now, we do not claim that sprawl and poor urban planning are the principal causes of obesity, chronic disease, or other social ills. As the papers¹⁻¹³ in this supplement to the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* indicate, however, our local environments are where we spend most of our lives, and how they are designed influences our behaviors, thinking, and health, even when we are completely unaware of this.

In an era of smoke-free public buildings, it is hard to believe that just 20 years ago smokers lit up in restaurants and on airplanes. Public policy has made great progress in identifying policies and trends that ravage our health. Policymakers must now recognize the hidden health hazards within our sprawling urban environments to be able to make the same progress on obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and mental health as they have on lead poisoning, smoking, and waterborne gastrointestinal diseases. Furthermore, urban renewal efforts must be multipronged, engaging experts in public health, housing policy, parks and recreation, environmental issues, education, agriculture, and transportation.

A narrow, quick-fix approach will not be enough to deal with the chronic diseases and community transformation that have worsened over the last few decades. We need to adopt systems thinking and changes to undo the damage our built environment has already done. But the underlying idea is, in fact, a simple one, one that we all learned in kindergarten—we humans work and live better when we have the opportunity to play, run around, have fun, and be outdoors with people we like. This simple lesson should underscore the way we plan and inhabit our environments.

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