

Sprawling Cities Face More Car Wrecks and Higher Obesity

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The U.S. on average became slightly more sprawling from 2000 to 2010, and residents in sprawling cities are more likely to suffer from societal ills such as fatal car wrecks, high transportation costs and obesity, according to a study to be released Wednesday.

The study, conducted by **University of Utah** researchers, combines several federal, state and local measures indicative of either sprawl or compact development to create a “sprawl index.” Researchers used that index to rank cities as sprawling or compact and to determine whether sprawl coincides with other social issues.

The study found that the 162 largest urbanized areas in the U.S. on average became 1.4% more sprawling from 2000 to 2010. The study’s authors, Utah planning professor **Reid Ewing** and doctoral student **Shima Hamidi**, made the calculations using data from the U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Transportation, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, university research and road-network databases, among several sources.

“It tells us that the war on sprawl isn’t won yet,” Mr. Ewing said in an interview. Younger and older people alike “want to live in more urban, walkable places. That may be a long-term trend, but in the intermediate term, we’re still sprawling pretty badly as a nation,” he said.

Sprawl typically is considered to be patchwork, low-density and often homogenous development in formerly rural areas. However, Mr. Ewing’s study focuses on measures including population density, employment density, city block sizes and each area’s variety of jobs and its walkability.

The study was funded by the National Cancer Institute, the National Institutes of Health, the Ford Foundation and the Brookings Institution. It was commissioned by advocacy group Smart Growth America. It follows similar research that Mr. Ewing did a decade ago based on 2000 data.

The latest research found obvious connections between sprawl and other factors, as well as some surprises. For example, it found that, from 2008 to 2011, traffic accidents were slightly more common in compact cities than in sprawling areas, most likely due to traffic congestion. However, fatal accidents occurred nearly twice as often in sprawling areas, perhaps due to long stretches of road where drivers pick up speed.

The study confirmed a long-held notion that housing costs are greater in compact cities than sprawling ones. However, when transportation costs are included, sprawling areas end up slightly more expensive overall. Residents in sprawling cities spent 52.1% of their income on housing and transportation in 2010, while those in compact cities spent 51.1%, the study found.

The authors admit that the connections the study finds between sprawl and public health are its most tenuous. According to the report, life expectancy in compact cities was 78.4 years in 2010, whereas it was 77.7 years in sprawling cities. And the average man was two pounds heavier in sprawling cities than were those in compact cities from 2007 to 2010.

Critics of sprawl-focused research argue that the studies typically fail to prove that sprawl contributes to things such as car accidents and poor health. Instead, they say, many sprawl studies only prove that sprawl and other factors coincide.

Harry W. Richardson, a retired University of Southern California professor of urban and regional planning, has co-written studies with Mr. Ewing. He said he doubts that sprawl has as direct a relationship to various societal ills as Mr. Ewing's latest study implies.

For example, he said, the study doesn't take into account varying quality of schools, shorter commutes in suburbs due to less traffic and diet influencing health more than walking.

Wendell Cox, a demographer and public policy consultant based in Belleville, Ill., faulted studies based on the premise that sprawl is bad as ignoring that suburban living often is much less expensive.

"A lot of people would love to live in Manhattan," Mr. Cox said. "But what these studies fail to consider is that people have limited choices. If people have kids, they want a yard, and they only have so much money."

In the report, Mr. Ewing lists the most compact metro areas and the most sprawling in 2010 as determined with his sprawl index. Those ranking as the most compact are, in order, New York City, San Francisco and Atlantic City, N.J.

The metro areas deemed most sprawling are, in order, Hickory, N.C.; Atlanta; and Clarksville, Tenn. The Hickory metro area, which includes Lenoir, Morganton and several other towns, is in a mostly rural area northwest of Charlotte. The four-county area lost roughly 45,000 manufacturing jobs from 2000 to 2013, and its population grew by a modest 7% from 2000 to 365,500 residents in 2010.

Mick Berry, Hickory's town manager, said the area considers itself more rural than sprawling. He added that most growth in the area of late has taken place within towns rather than on their edges.

In Atlanta, officials say three quarters of development in the past five years has taken place in the metro area's dense population centers. They add that it takes a long time to recast a metro area of 5.3 million people.

Tom Redmond makes no apologies for contributing to sprawl. The 45-year-old wholesaler for an insurance company lives with his wife and their three school-aged children in Forsyth County, Ga. His 33-mile commute to his office in Atlanta's Buckhead district often takes 75 to 80 minutes.

Mr. Redmond estimates that he pays \$700 a month for the family's cars and \$2,200 for the mortgage. However, he notes that he pays less in property taxes than he would in the city and sends his kids to public school rather than paying for private school in the city. The family also gets a big yard and friendly neighbors, he says.

"The advantages I get by living out here far outweigh that hour and 20 minutes in the car," Mr. Redmond said. "I've come to accept it."