
Linking Transportation Policy and Public Health

November 13-14, 2008

Doubletree Crystal City ÉArlington, VA

Roadways and Health

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1. What are the most compelling established and/or emerging connections between this area of transportation policy and health and equity issues and outcomes?

Highways including roads, streets and parkways primarily link to health outcomes through vehicular emissions, crashes and traffic risks and emotional well-being exacerbated by traffic congestion and commuting. The result is several negative health outcomes which includes the following: more than 3 million vehicular injuries every year and approximately 43,000 deaths annually; increased incidence of asthma, lung disease, and cardio vascular disease; increased levels of greenhouse gases causing climate instability resulting in natural disasters, food scarcity, unhealthy ecological and weather patterns and premature deaths; degraded social and mental health; limited connectivity forces use of busy roadways exposing travelers to greater risk; road surface erosion causing higher levels of local and regional air pollution and limited access for vulnerable populations. The over reliance on the automobile also leads to physical inactivity and reductions in bicycling and walking trips.

There are a number of equity concerns surrounding highway infrastructure. The higher transport costs associated with automobile ownership precludes accessibility for many minority and low-income populations. In addition, those with disabilities suffer limited mobility if they are restricted to only motor vehicle travel. The transportation system exposes lower income populations to more personal hazards and the air pollution burden is higher among lower income households, minority households and children. Furthermore, the burden of traffic related injuries and deaths are higher for disadvantaged populations.

2. What are key opportunities to improve public health by changing transport policy in this area?

Reduce the reliance on the automobile and increase the amount of federal dollars spent on transit, pedestrian ways, alternative fuels, bicycle planning and reducing emissions, injuries and deaths associated highways use. Additional selected opportunities might include the following items:

- Include climate change legislation in the 2009 transportation reauthorization
- Require open container laws in every state
- Require Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) for major transportation projects
- Increase funding for the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality program (CMAQ)
- Increase funding for the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program
- Increase funding for non-motorized transport systems