

Suburbs May Be Hazardous to Your Health People Who Live in Sprawling Suburbs May Face Greater Health Risks

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Sept. 27, 2004 -- Living in a sprawling suburb may be hazardous to your health.

A new study shows that people who live in areas with a high degree of suburban sprawl are more likely to report chronic health problems, such as high blood pressure, arthritis, headaches, and breathing difficulties, than those who live in urban areas.

Researchers say the findings suggest that an adult who lives in a more sprawling city, such as Atlanta, may have the same health status as a similar person four years older who lives in a more compact city, such as Seattle.

But despite those who say living in the suburbs may breed isolation and depression, researchers found no evidence that suburban living increased the risk of mental health disorders.

Instead, they propose that suburbanites' dependence on cars to get around may be responsible for their higher rates of health problems.

"We know from previous studies that suburban sprawl reduces the time people spend walking and increases the time they spend sitting in cars, and that is associated with higher obesity rates," says researcher Roland Sturm, a health economist at the RAND Corp., in a news release. "This probably plays an important role in the health effects we observe."

The results appear in the October issue of the journal *Public Health*.

Suburban Sprawl: Public Health Enemy No. 1?

In the study, researchers analyzed information gathered by the Healthcare for Communities surveys conducted in 1998 and 2001, which contain information on physical and mental health for more than 8,600 people in 38 metropolitan areas across the U.S.

Researchers then compared the responses of the participants according to the degree of sprawl in the area in which they lived. The sprawl index ranged from a low of 14.2 in Riverside-San Bernardino, Calif., which had the most sprawling neighborhoods, to a high of 177.8 in New York City, which had the most compact neighborhoods.

Sprawling areas were defined as those that had:

- Streets that are not well connected, such as cul-de-sacs rather than a well-connected grid layout
- Homes, schools, work, and shopping areas that are far from each other
- Few people living per square mile (low population density)
- No or little centralized downtown area

The study showed that people living in sprawling areas reported a greater number of chronic medical conditions than those living in more compact areas. On average, people reported having 1.26 medical conditions, but those living in the sprawling areas reported up to 1.77 medical conditions (West Palm

Beach, Fla.).

Researchers say the link between suburban life and higher risk of physical health problems remained significant even after they controlled for factors like age, economic status, race, and local environment that might help explain the disparity.

They say suburban sprawl seems to have a disproportionate impact on the physical health of the elderly and possibly the poor. These groups may have less access to motor transportation and have more difficulty in walking the greater distances to destinations such as markets or parks.

"To improve our health the study suggests that we should build cities where people feel comfortable walking and are not so dependent on cars," says RAND researcher Deborah Cohen, MD, in the release. "This study gives the public a way to personalize the issue of sprawl in a way that hasn't happened before."

Regions with the worst suburban sprawl included:

- Riverside-San Bernardino region of California
- Atlanta
- Winston-Salem, N.C.
- Greenville-Spartanburg, S.C.
- West Palm Beach, Fla.
- Bridgeport-Danbury-Stamford, Conn.
- Knoxville, Tenn.
- Rochester, N.Y.
- Detroit

Regions with the least amount of suburban sprawl included:

- New York City
- San Francisco
- Boston
- Portland, Ore.
- Miami
- Denver
- Chicago
- Milwaukee

SOURCES: Sturm, R. *Public Health*, October 2004; vol 118: pp 488-496. News release, RAND Corp.

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