

POLICY BRIEF

# Transportation, Public Health and Safety



## WITH

American Public Health Association

Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety

American Association of Retired Persons (AARP)

National Advisory Committee of Active Living Research

National Complete Streets Coalition

**MODERATED BY**  
Transportation for America



**The US transportation system** - roads, highways, bridges, ferries, ports, public transit, planes and bike and walking paths - is beneficial and essential to society. It allows its people and goods to get from one place to another. The design and construction of the transportation system shapes communities and affects the health of the people who live, work and play in them.



**Unfortunately, the lack of clear national priorities in our transportation system, coupled with an outdated set of principles, is creating huge costs for the health and well-being of Americans. These negative costs include:**

- Reducing opportunities for physical activity and contributing to rising obesity
- Polluting air, which in turn contributes to respiratory and cardiovascular illness, and accelerates climate change
- Increasing traffic accidents and death and injury
- Exacerbating poverty and inequity by placing especially heavy burdens on vulnerable populations



**Changes in national transportation policy are desperately needed to improve public health and safety. But we cannot meet these demands without working together as a broad coalition and using collective action to achieve our goals.**

**There is a need for change.**

## Obesity

- Obesity is one of the fastest growing public health issues - 16% of children and 66% of adults are overweight and obese.
- Auto-oriented communities are directly linked to low rates of physical activity. Each hour spent in the car increases the risk of obesity.
- Obesity and inactivity lead to a host of chronic diseases that include high blood pressure, heart disease, cancer stroke and diabetes.

## Air Quality

- Kids who attend school near highways have a higher incidence of respiratory problems, such as asthma.
- Communities located near heavily traveled highways have a disproportionately high rate of lung cancer.
- 36 million people live within 30 feet of a 4-lane highway, railroad or airport.

## Traffic Safety

- In 2005, traffic injuries were the leading cause of death for people ages 5 to 34.
- Over the past 2 decades, there have been 43,000 traffic fatalities per year, and around 5,000 of those people killed each year were bicyclists or pedestrians.
- 47% of older adults feel it is unsafe to cross a major road near their home, and a majority of older adults support adoption of complete streets policies.

## Equity

- Nearly 1/3 third of all residents cannot access or afford access to basic needs such as healthy food, medical care, gainful employment or educational opportunities.
- The poorest fifth of US families - earning less than \$13,060 per year - pay 42% of their income to own and drive a vehicle.

SOURCES: APHA 2008. At the Intersection of Public Health and Transportation: Promoting Healthy Transportation Policy, AARP, Fighting Gas Prices, Nearly A Third of Americans Age 50+ Hang Up Their Keys To Walk But Find Streets Inhospitable, Public Transportation Inaccessible.

## The Bottom Line...

1. Opportunities to be physically active have been engineered out of daily life.
2. The amount of time people spend on the road, and the number of drivers, has increased dramatically over the years.
3. Roads and highways are often built to accommodate fast and easy transport and greater numbers of drivers, without sidewalks and crosswalks to provide safe pedestrian routes.
4. Greenhouse gases are the biggest human activity-related contributor to climate change.
5. The transportation sector makes up 1/3 of the carbon dioxide emissions from the U.S.
6. Safe routes to walk and bike to school, work, play or public transit are often not available, especially in sprawling communities.
7. Many households have moved to the urban edges, where housing is affordable, but access to public transportation and safe walking and biking paths are limited.

## COSTS:

- In 2004, the total economic cost of being obese and overweight was estimated to be \$177 billion.
- Traffic crashes cost about \$163 billion annually in property damages and injuries, and are the largest contributor to congestion nationwide.
- The U.S. health costs associated with poor air quality caused by transportation are between \$40 billion and \$60 billion per year.

**SAFETEA-LU** Federal transportation dollars have been used to improve public health and safety. The current federal transportation bill -- also known as SAFETEA-LU -- includes \$286 billion for five years of funding through fiscal year 2009, and allocates specific funding for public health and safety. Funding is available to reduce harmful air pollutants, create safe routes to schools, lower traffic fatalities, and support bicycling and walking -- but overall funding levels for these activities are insufficient, and there is no accountability for improved performance.

## Programs that Improve Public Health and Safety

**Safe Routes to Schools** » Funding for infrastructure investments and education to promote walking and biking to school - \$612 million over 5 years

**Roadway Safety** » Funding for non-profit organization to collect data and conduct public awareness campaigns on roadway safety

**Highway Safety Improvement** » Core federal funding to achieve reductions in traffic fatalities and serious injuries on public roads - \$5.06 billion over 5 years

**Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement (CMAQ)** » Flexible funding to metro-regions to improve air quality/decrease congestion - \$8.6 billion over 5 years

**National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA)** » Law that requires public engagement and assessment of environmental impacts of federally funded transportation projects

**Transportation Enhancements** » Funding for projects that improve and increase travel options - \$4.07 billion over 5 years



# We can make a difference... here's how.

## Our Goals

- Reduce the number of serious injuries and loss of life on our nation's streets and highways for motorized and non-motorized travel.
- Ensure that both immediate and long-term public health issues, including obesity and respiratory disease, are addressed in transportation investment decision making.
- Invest in transportation initiatives that improve the health and safety of our children.
- Expand transportation programs that offer options to the elderly and disabled so that driving is not the only option available in their communities.
- Make safe, convenient walking and bicycling the cornerstones of a higher quality of life in communities and neighborhoods and encourage a shift of short trips to these modes.
- Expand public transit and mixed-income transit-oriented development to improve access to health care and reduce time and environmental pollution associated with high daily per capita VMT.

## Policy Recommendations:

- Set specific national targets for health and safety improvement, particularly in walking and bicycling, as part of the National Transportation Objectives.
- Revise the current Safety Program to better reflect the risks to bicyclists and pedestrians; increase the level of commitment to Safe Routes to School.
- Incorporate the provisions of the Complete Streets Act of 2009 (HR 1443, S584) into the authorization bill to ensure that all road projects are designed and constructed to meet the needs of everyone using them, including bicyclists, transit users, and pedestrians of all ages and abilities.
- Formalize Context Sensitive Design and Solutions as required elements of program and project development. Provide updated design guidance for well-connected, sustainable street design.
- Make Health Impact Assessments (HIAs) mandatory evaluation elements of transportation environmental impact statements and environmental assessments; account for direct and indirect economic impacts of health burdens and benefits.
- Increase the funding for paratransit and other specialized services for the elderly and disabled that improve their access to services and local destinations.
- Reduce and mitigate the health impacts associated with the location of highways, diesel rail lines, and freight facilities near residential areas.
- Revise the air quality "conformity" provisions and the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) program to improve efficacy in selecting better projects.



Transportation for America envisions a U.S. transportation system that supports a wide array of creative, accessible, affordable and interconnected transportation choices that create a healthy environment and support healthier lifestyles.

Transportation for America is a growing and diverse coalition focused on creating a national transportation program that will take America into the 21st century by building a modernized infrastructure and healthy communities where people can live, work and play.

We have formed a broad coalition of real estate, housing, environmental, health, urban planning, transportation and other organizations that seek to align our national, state, and local transportation policies with an array of issues: economic opportunity, climate change, energy security, health, housing and community development. We believe a new national vision will play a key role in strengthening the foundation of our nation.

**Transportation  
For America**

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