

Sprawl and Obesity in Ohio: What's All the Fuss About?

By Wendell Cox

[Posted September 22, 2003 by [the Buckeye Institute](#)]

It has always been difficult to make something out of nothing, but a new report linking America's growing obesity problem with urban sprawl (suburban living) sets a new record for political spin. The report (*Measuring the Health Effects of Sprawl*), released by Smart Growth America (<http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/>) and the Surface Transportation Policy Project, purports to demonstrate that people living in more sprawling, suburban counties are fatter than people who live in more dense central cities. Accepting, for the sake of discussion, the validity of the results (which I do not), the results fall far short of significant.

The Ohio claims make the point. The researchers suggest that in the less sprawling counties, people walk more, which accounts for much of the doubtfully reported difference in weight. Using their formula, one can deduce that average person in the least sprawling Ohio county (Franklin, by the report's criteria) walks at most 15 minutes more per *month* (30 seconds per day) than those in the state's (and according to the report, the nation's) most sprawling county, Geauga.

Even with their microscopic research tools, the authors find little in health effects.

- In Cleveland, the report claims that residents of sprawling Lorain County residents weigh 0.5 pounds more than people who live in less sprawling Cuyahoga County. But it is the residents of Geauga County who stand out in a crowd, weighing in with an additional 1.2 pounds.
- In Cincinnati, Hamilton County residents can look down on their more sprawling neighbors in Warren County by virtue of their 0.5 pounds lower weight.
- In Columbus, residents of less sprawling Franklin County weigh 0.7 pounds less than those who live in more sprawling Licking County.
- Dayton's less sprawling Montgomery County has estimated average weights 0.5 pounds less than those in more sprawling Miami County.
- Residents of Toledo's less sprawling Lucas County weigh and estimated 0.6 pounds less than residents of more sprawling Wood County.
- Canton's less sprawling Stark County has residents with an estimated weight 0.6 pounds less than residents of more sprawling Carroll County.

The story is the similar elsewhere around the nation. Chicago dominated Cook County residents can look down on their suburban Lake County neighbors, whose slothfulness manifests itself in 0.9 pounds greater weight. Or one can look at San Francisco, whose residents are a fit two pounds lighter than their counterparts in sprawling Marin County. When is the last time you saw a late night cable television commercial for a weight loss program claiming it could take off two pounds in a lifetime?

So much for manipulating the inconsequential to feign significance. Centers for Disease Control data demonstrates that obesity has skyrocketed in the United States over the past 10 years. From 1991 to 2001, obesity rose from 14.9 percent to 21.8 percent in Ohio. By comparison, the report estimates the largest sprawl related obesity difference in Ohio metropolitan areas at 1.7 percentage points --- 1/4th of the Ohio increase over the past 10 years. Something else is going on.

Suburbanization and sprawl did not start in the 1990s. In fact, the 1990s were the least sprawling decade since the World War II, with urban densities remaining largely unchanged. And, transit's share of urban travel is little more miserable today than it was 10 years ago. Car usage increased less in the 1990s than in any decade since before 1940. Yet obesity increased significantly over the last decade.

There are also potentially fatal flaws in the survey design. The researchers excluded the impact of household income in their calculations. Generally, obesity tends to fall as incomes rise. Income alone, had it had been included, could have negated the results. And the "sprawl index" concocted for each county is so skewed by New York City data that the equation developed to predict results could have been rendered useless.

But one thing is sure. *Measuring the Health Effects of Sprawl* falls far short of establishing any material or believable nexus between sprawl and obesity. Public policy should not rest on differences of a pound or less.

* Wendell Cox is principal of Wendell Cox Consultancy, a transport and demographics firm in metropolitan St. Louis. He was a three term member of the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission and a member of the Amtrak Reform Council.
(wcox@demographia.com) This article is distributed in Ohio by The Buckeye Institute.
(www.buckeyeinstitute.org)