

SPRAWL IS UNHEALTHY, CDC RESEARCHERS CONCLUDE

By LYLE V. HARRIS
Atlanta Journal-Constitution Staff Writer

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Urban sprawl is not healthy for children and other living things.

That's the conclusion of a report authored by researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta and released Thursday by SprawlWatch, a nonprofit environmental group based in Washington, D.C. Instead of focusing exclusively on the bricks-and-mortar effects, the report examines sprawl's impact on flesh and blood. Titled "Creating a Healthy Environment: The Impact of the Built Environment on Public Health," the report states:

- While Americans make 6 percent of their trips on foot, 13 percent of all traffic fatalities involve pedestrian victims. Of the 10,696 pedestrians killed by automobiles in 1997-98, 1,500 were children.
- As people have adopted more sedentary, automobile-based lifestyles, the percentage of adults who are overweight or obese has risen from 47 percent in 1976 to 61 percent in 1999.
- About 850 people died in floods in the last eight years, most often in areas where weak zoning laws allowed developers to drain wetlands and build on floodplains.
- Changes in behavior can make a difference. A local case in point was a dramatic reduction in asthma cases at Atlanta area hospitals during the 1996 Olympics when a restrictive traffic plan prompted motorists to find other forms of transportation.
- Traffic on Atlanta roads fell by nearly 23 percent, and smog levels dipped by about 28 percent, according to the CDC report. At the same time, emergency room visits for asthma sufferers who are especially susceptible to smog dropped by almost 42 percent.

"We already knew that pollution caused respiratory problems, but I don't think most of us understand that the way we build our cities contributes to other health problems," said Grace Trimble of the Georgia Conservancy. "I hope this signals that people will start taking a deeper look at what sprawl really does."

Chris Kochtitzky, an urban planner who co-authored the report with Richard J. Jackson at the CDC, said the report seeks to close the gap between public health officials and developers and urban planners. "There was a time when the whole idea behind planning and zoning was to protect people from harmful areas and industries that were health hazards, but somehow that connection was lost," Kochtitzky said. "It's been our experience in talking to both groups that they don't know each other. Even if they do, they don't tend to consult each other when making their decisions." The report calls for "smart growth" policies that take mental and physical health into account, designing communities around people instead of cars to increase "walkability" and changing building codes to better accommodate people of different ages and the physically disabled.