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Is Suburbia Killing Us?

UMD and UNC Researchers Study Impact of Neighborhood Development on Physical Activity and Obesity

COLLEGE PARK, Md. (Sept. 21, 2005) -- A team of researchers from the University of Maryland and the University of North Carolina is looking at five communities in Montgomery County to try to determine the influence that neighborhood characteristics have on physical activity and obesity. Can the built environment make you more physically active and healthier, or less active and unhealthy? What is the relationship between sprawl and public health?

Results of several recent studies have found that residents living in suburban sprawl also often have sprawling beltlines. The findings from these national studies raise questions about the degree to which overweight is attributed to the local environment and its ability to support active lifestyles.

To find out the answers to these questions, the team – led locally by Dr. Kelly J. Clifton of the National Center for Smart Growth Research and Education at the University of Maryland – is looking at activity levels within neighborhoods in Montgomery County. The extensive collection of archived land use and transportation data made Montgomery Count an attractive place to conduct such a study. The five areas within the county: Bethesda, Forest Glen, Four Corners, Layhill and Olney, were selected because they feature a range of urban characteristics, from low-density, suburban development to highly urbanized, transit-oriented development. By comparing physical activity levels in each of these different settings, the researchers hope to determine the characteristics of the built environment that are likely to be most – and least – supportive of healthy lifestyles.

Study staff are recruiting volunteer participants in each of the five Montgomery County communities. Each participant is given a small, pager-sized sensor called an accelerometer to measure physical activity and a diary to record their daily activities. After their participation in the one-week study period is complete, participants are given \$40 to thank them for their efforts.

“I thought the physical activity monitoring and daily logging to be interesting and enjoyable,” said Olney resident Fred Proctor, a 41 year-old electrical engineer, who recently completed his participation in the study. “It gave me a better measure of my weekly workouts than I had been estimating. Too bad it was lower than my estimate.”

Proctor said wearing the activity monitor became as routine as putting on his watch. “When the week was finished, I actually missed keeping the log and, for a couple more days, I kept track mentally just for fun,” he said.

Kim Chan, a Brookeville resident who responded to a recruitment postcard in August, said, “The study made me aware of where I’m going and how I get there.”

Dr. Clifton at the University of Maryland, who is coordinating the recruitment of participants and the data collection, said, “We kicked off this phase of the study in February and so far have recruited around 80 individuals from the study areas to participate. The participants have been enthusiastic and are interested in the research findings once the study is complete.”

Merry Merrill, a senior citizen and long time resident of Chevy Chase, was referred to the study by a friend. “I thought it was fun to participate,” she said.

“This study should give us some very valuable insight into how we can better plan communities to increase the health of our citizens,” said George L. Leventhal, vice chairman of the Montgomery County Council and chairman of its Health and Human Services Committee. “I applaud the efforts of Dr. Clifton and her team, and I look forward to learning the results.”

In the last several years, the health community has become increasingly interested in understanding how urban development patterns may contribute to America’s sedentary lifestyles and unhealthy weight gain. This three-year study is being funded with a \$473,000 grant from the Active Living Research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

“We’re hoping that the knowledge gained will provide a basis for changing the way our neighborhoods are planned,” said Dr. Daniel Rodriguez, a professor in the City and Regional Planning Department at the University of North Carolina and the study’s principal investigator. The interdisciplinary team includes faculty from city and regional planning, civil engineering and public health at the University of North Carolina and the University of Maryland and the staff of the Toole Design Group of College Park, Md.

The study will continue to recruit participants living in the five Montgomery County study areas during the fall of 2005. Postcards have been mailed to all the households in the study areas and posters with study information are displayed in prominent businesses and community locations. If you are interested in participating, contact the study staff at pabe@umd.edu or (301) 405-8971.

For more information on the project, click on <http://planningandactivity.unc.edu> or <http://www.smartgrowth.umd.edu/pabeFAQ.htm> or call Rodriguez at (919) 962-4763 or Clifton at (301) 405-1945.

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