

Public Health, Urban Form, and Smart Growth

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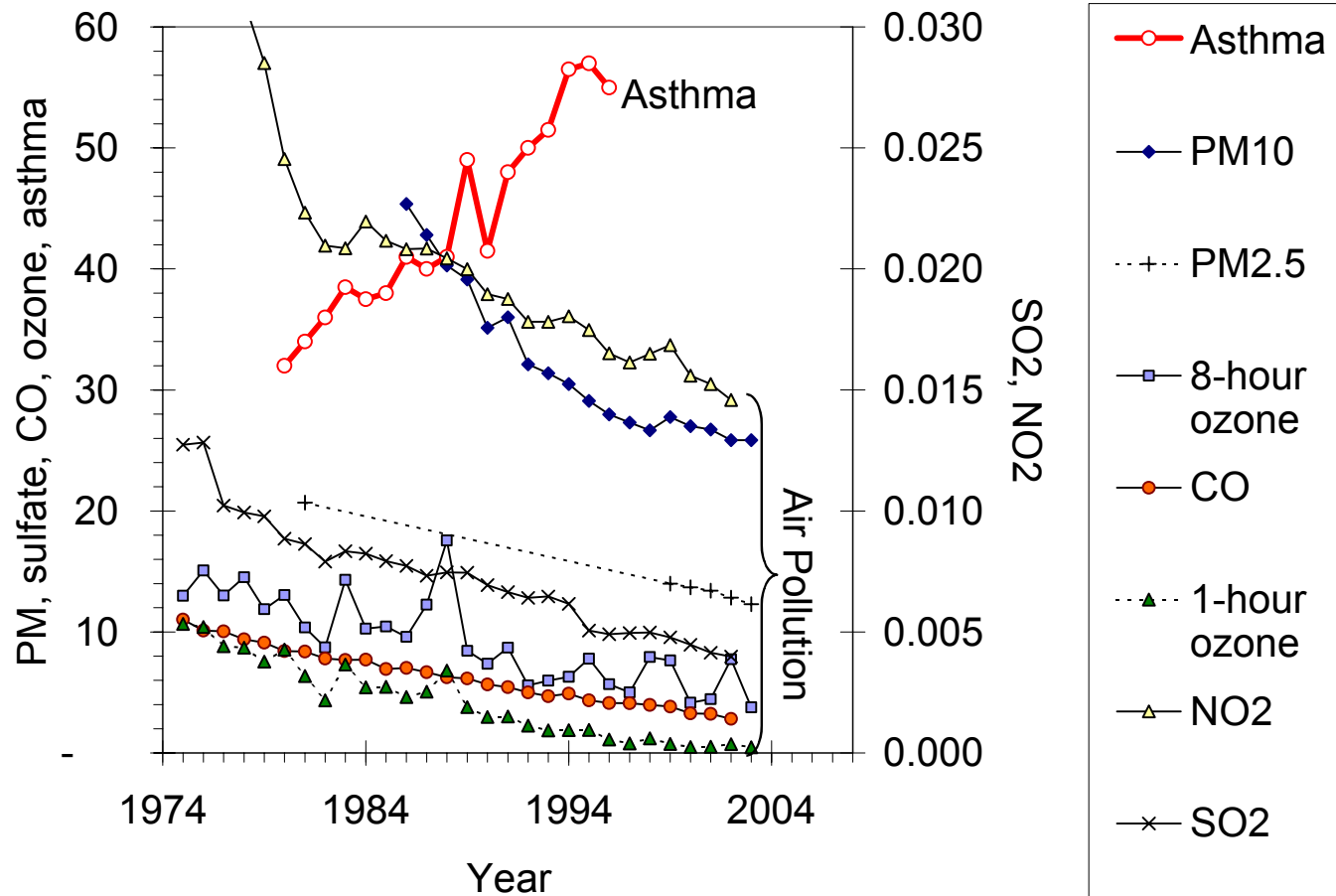
Is Sprawl Killing Us?

- Air pollution
- Physical Activity and Obesity
- Transportation safety
- Social isolation

Declining Air Pollution/Rising Asthma

But gov't officials and activists claim:
 "Increases in vehicle miles traveled has resulted in an increase in air pollution and in the incidence of respiratory disease."

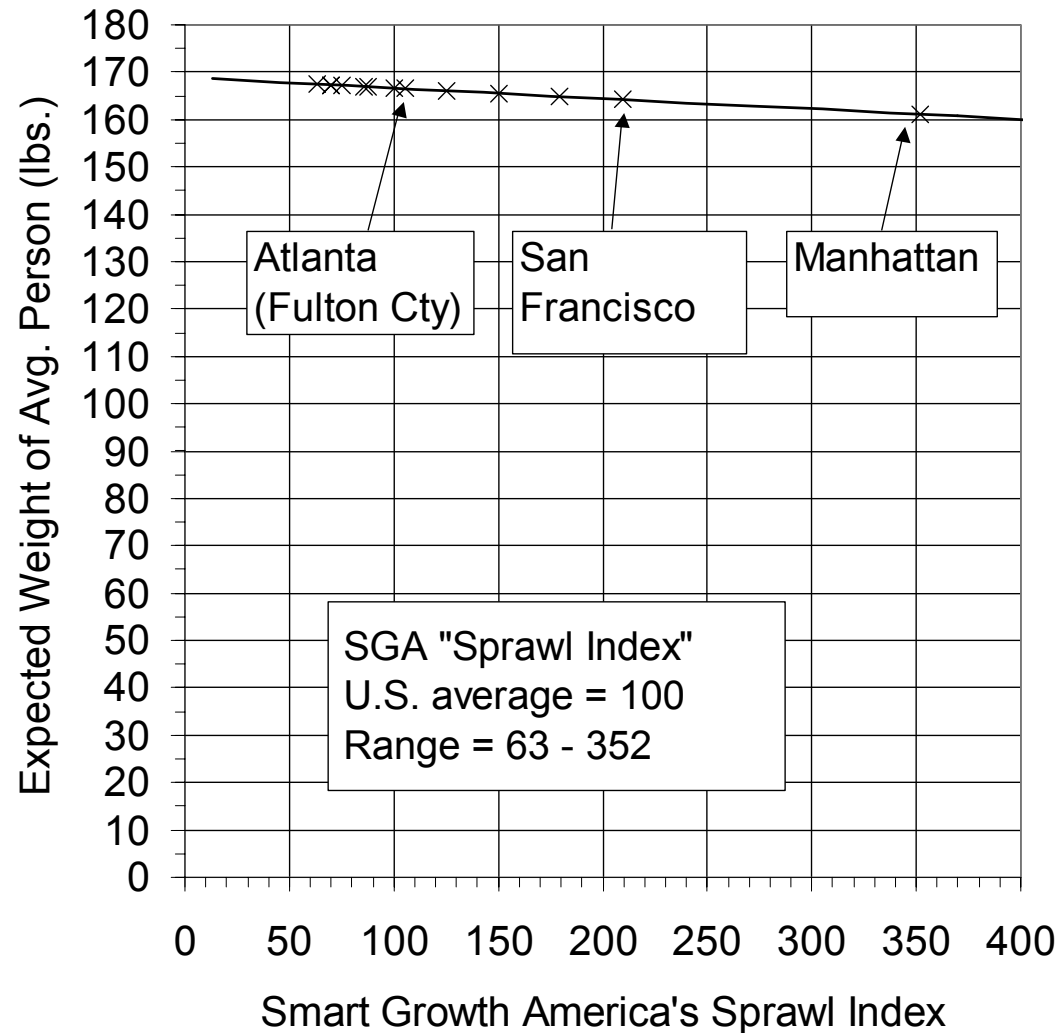
— "Urban Sprawl Endangers Public Health," Joint press release from Denver Department of Public Health, Colorado PIRG, Sprawlwatch, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Sierra Club, and CDC



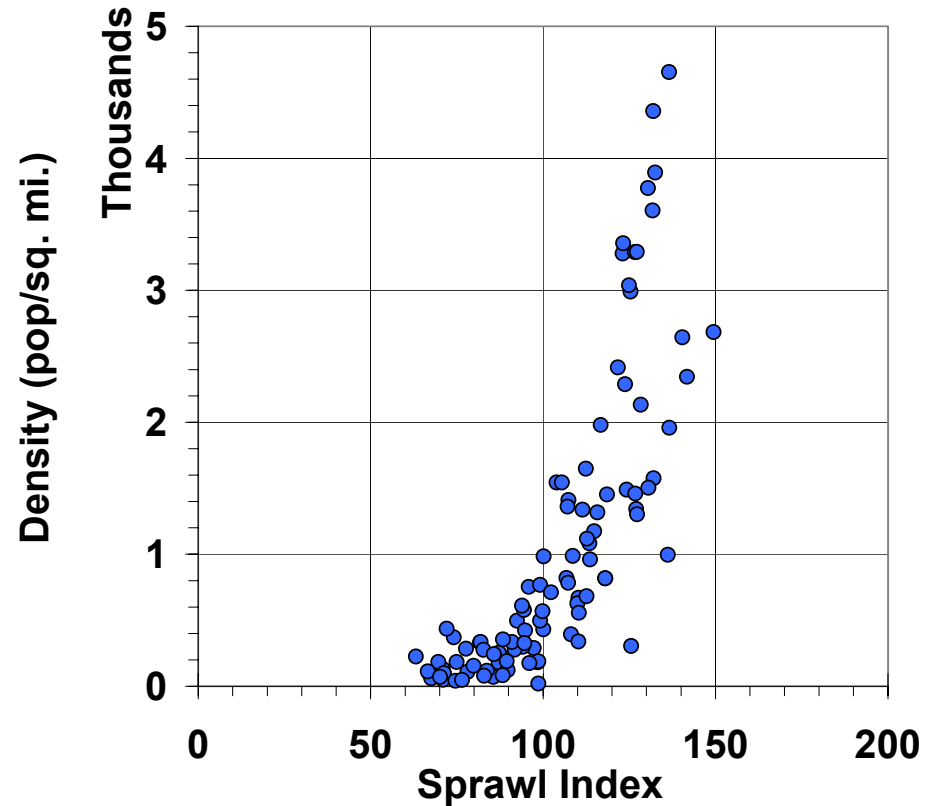
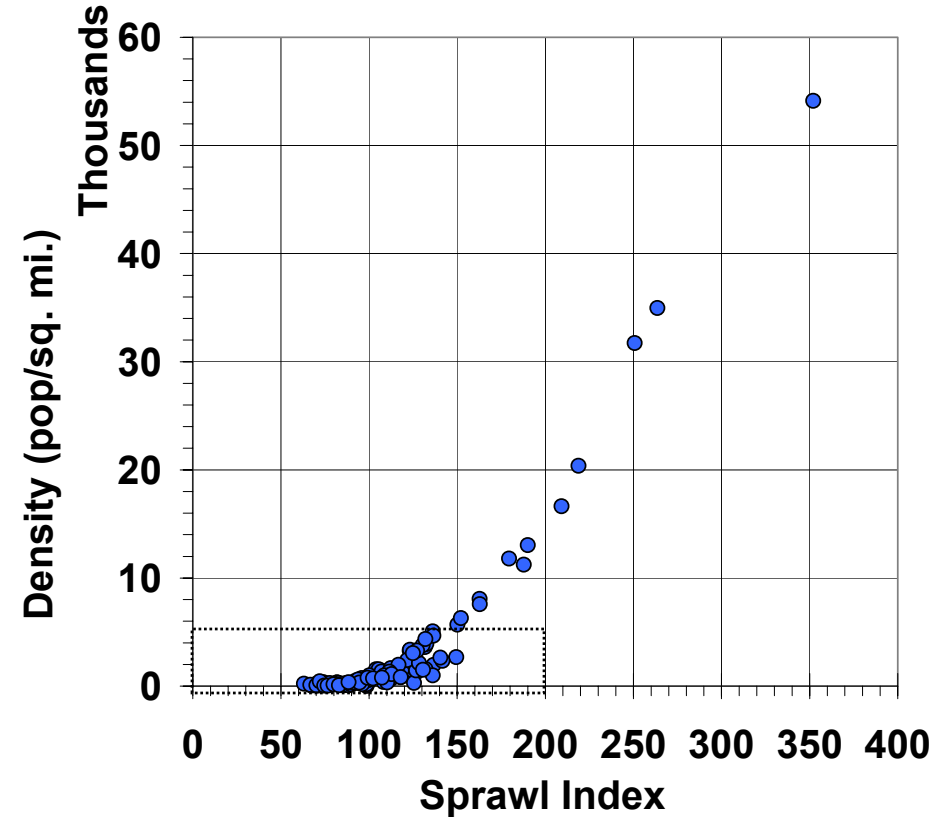
Taking SGA's Own Results at Face Value, Sprawl Has Hardly Any Relationship to People's Weight

According to SGA's results, turning Atlanta into San Francisco would reduce the average person's weight by 2.3 pounds, or 1.4%.

Data source: Smart Growth America, "Measuring the Health Effects of Sprawl"

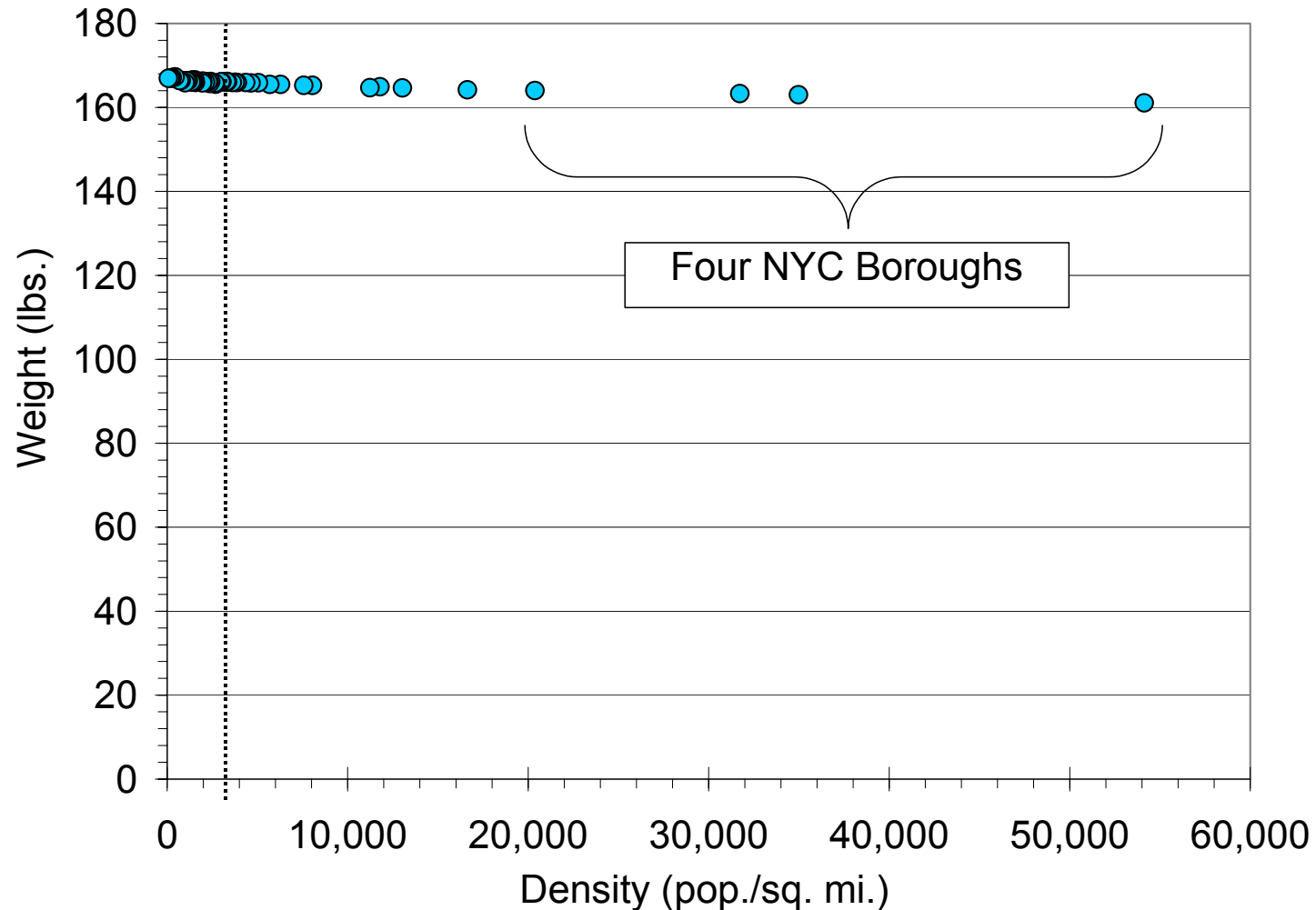


Sprawl Index Is Driven Mainly by Density



Small Increases in Sprawl Index Mean Huge Increases in Density

Huge density increases = tiny weight decreases



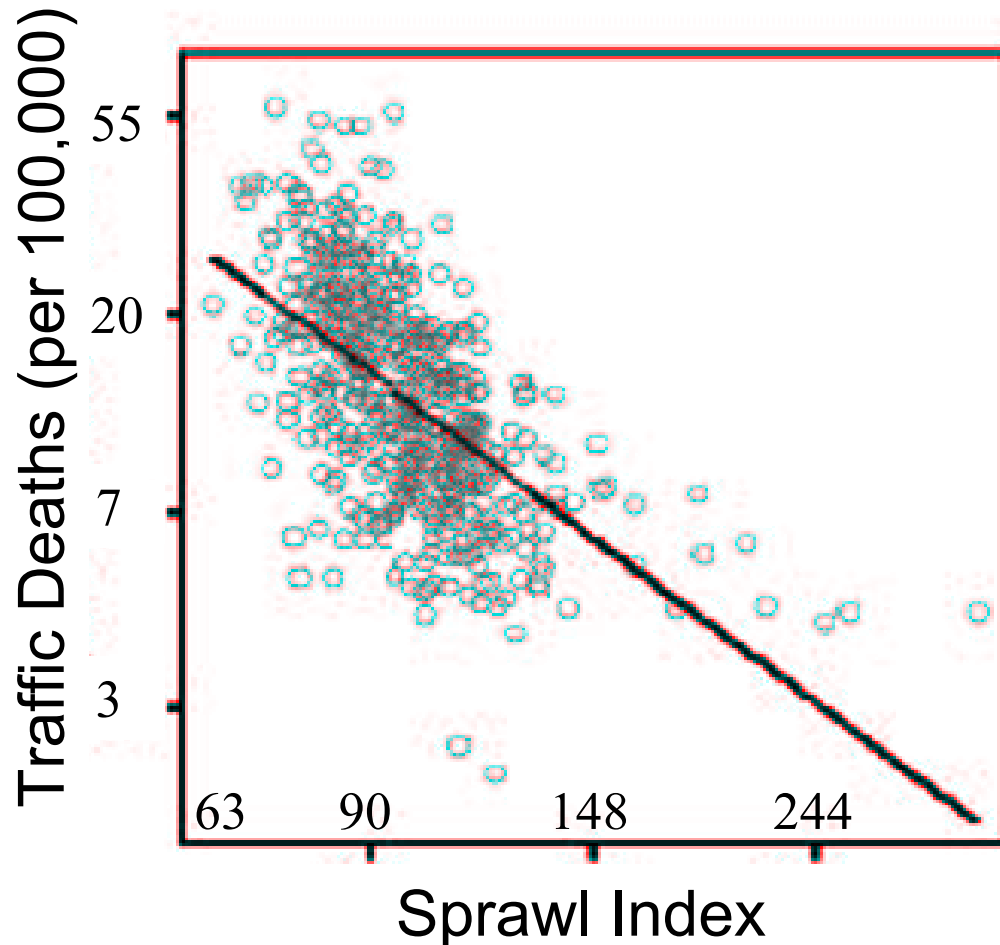
Other SGA Results

- Turning Atlanta into San Francisco would...
 - Reduce average weight by 2.3 lbs. or 1.4%
 - Increase recreational walking by 1 minute/month
 - Requires 10x increase in density
- 25 most sprawling vs. 25 least sprawling
 - Hypertension rate: 25% vs. 23%
 - Obesity rate: 21% vs. 19%
 - Requires >20x increase in density

Sprawl and Pedestrian Safety

- From 1975-2000, pedestrian injury rate dropped 50% for adults, 75% for children
 - 47% of pedestrian deaths involve pedestrian and/or driver blood alcohol $\geq 0.01\%$
 - 32% of pedestrians, and 14% of drivers had blood alcohol $>0.08\%$ (both $>0.08\%$ in 6% of cases)
- Improvement in pedestrian safety occurred at same time as suburbanization and 2.5x increase in VMT

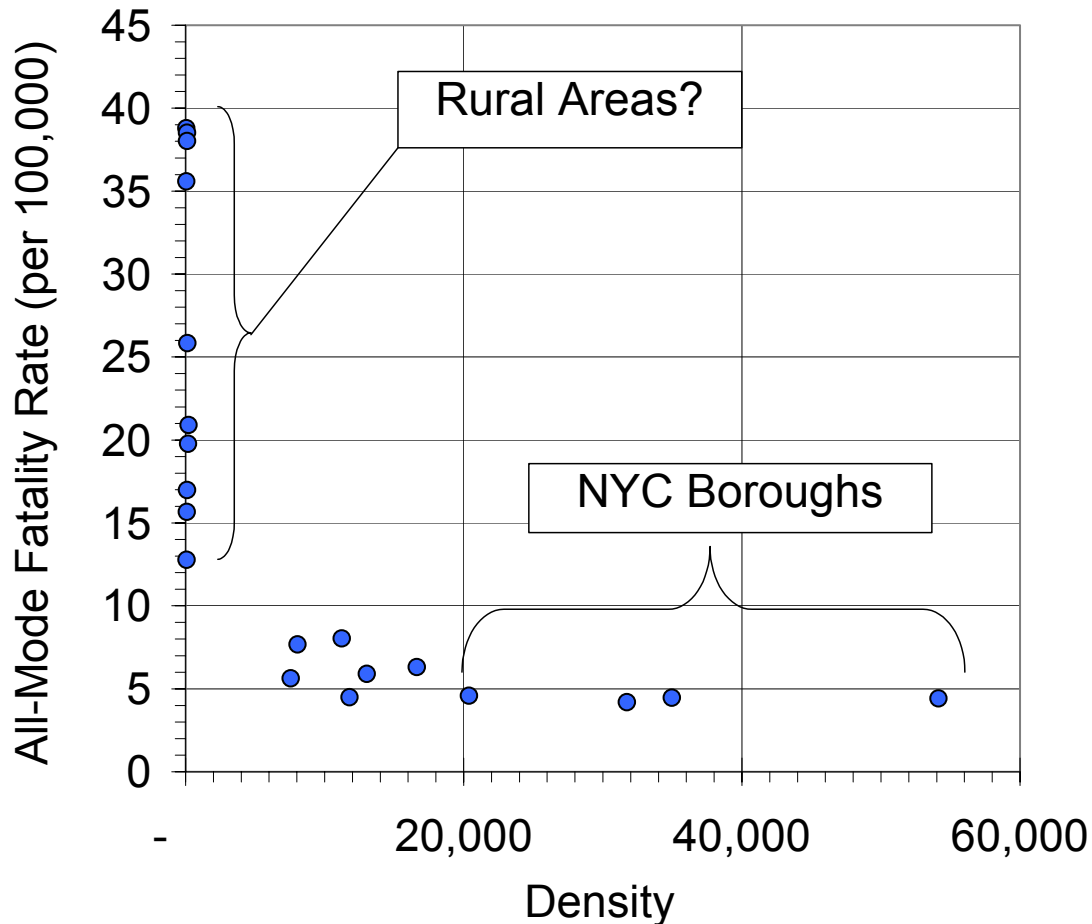
SGA study: Sprawl Index vs. traffic fatalities, claims sprawl associated with increased risk.



Log-Log plot of traffic fatality rate vs. sprawl index from Ewing et al., AJPH, September 2003

Recall that increasing sprawl index from 100 to 200 means more than a 10x increase in density

But What Is SGA Measuring?



SGA provides results for only a few counties. Results suggest supposed sprawl/pedestrian-death relationship is driven by extremes: a few rural counties and four NYC boroughs.

No relationship between sprawl index and pedestrian deaths when looking only at urbanized counties.

Other Data Show Suburbanites Are Healthier and Safer

- City dwellers were 40% more likely than suburbanites to die during 8-year cohort study
 - Also 27% more likely to be in lowest 20% of physical activity levels
 - However, suburban blacks had relative mortality risk as great as city dwellers
 - Study controlled for income, education, race, sex, marital status, health at entry (AJPH, December 2000, p. 1898)
- CDC: “Health, United States, 2001” reported suburban women are least likely to be obese.

Economists on Sprawl: Glaeser and Kahn, NBER Paper

- Sprawling cities have shorter commutes
 - Greater density increases transit commute times more than auto times
- Sprawling cities are less segregated
- Technology is solving auto pollution
- Automobiles reduce the costs of transportation
 - Time-savings, greater access to jobs and social opportunities.
 - Autos are subsidized, but lion's share of costs still born by driver. That people choose cars despite high cost suggests autos confer substantial benefits.
 - But those who can't afford cars can't participate in benefits.
- Time-study diaries show little difference in time-per-week in social activities between cities and suburbs
- Homeowners may be using zoning to restrict supply and drive up home values

Two Views of the Choices People Make

- Public health practitioner's view of sprawl:
 - “People just don't know what's good for them. If only they'd listen to us experts, their lives would be so much better.”
- Economist's view of sprawl:
 - “People are choosing cars-based, suburban lifestyles. What do they know that we don't?”

“The Vision of the Anointed”

- The Nanny Perspective on Urban Policy
 - People make foolish lifestyle choices that aren't in their best interests, or are forced into sprawling suburbs by powerful greedy interests, politics, and poor planning
 - Experts can/should determine what's best for other people
- Coercive directives favored over systemic, decentralized approaches
- Selective and patronizing view of human welfare
- Pretense of knowledge
- Disregard for risks of political control

Are Economists the Real Public Health Experts?

- Most useful knowledge is dispersed, dependent on local circumstances, and contingent on the particular goals and values of each individual
- People try to make the best tradeoffs they can, given their knowledge, values, tastes and means, and the opportunities available
- The person who bears the costs and reaps the benefits of her decisions is more likely to make good decisions than a third party who works under very different incentives

Virtue is more to be feared than vice,
because its excesses are not subject
to the regulation of conscience.

— Adam Smith