

Rethinking transportation would greatly improve the health of Americans

By [Ana Little-Sana](#) - November 8, 2018

Long commutes and sedentary lifestyles are damaging to personal and public health, but while there is no one-size-fits-all approach to creating a healthier United States, our transportation network itself can serve as preventive healthcare.

The United States spends more money on healthcare than any other country. In 2016, total healthcare spending exceeded \$3.3 trillion dollars – a whopping 17.9 percent of the gross domestic product. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 75 percent of the nation's total healthcare costs come from chronic but largely preventable diseases, such as heart disease and diabetes.

Number of deaths for leading causes of death

- Heart disease: 635,260
- Cancer: 598,038
- Accidents (unintentional injuries): 161,374
- Chronic lower respiratory diseases: 154,596
- Stroke (cerebrovascular diseases): 142,142
- Alzheimer's disease: 116,103
- Diabetes: 80,058
- Influenza and pneumonia: 51,537
- Nephritis, nephrotic syndrome, and nephrosis: 50,046
- Intentional self-harm (suicide): 44,965

Leading causes of death in 2016 in the United States, according to the CDC.

For many commuters, daily exercise is limited to walking from their front door to the car, and then from the parking lot to their desk. The more we drive, the less we walk, which explains the link between time spent in the car and higher risk factors for disease and obesity. Driving alone, particularly in rush hour, is also associated with higher blood pressure, anxiety, and feelings of isolation. Meanwhile, transit riders are less vulnerable to these social and physical costs of commuting.

Before I moved to Washington, DC, the few steps I earned on my Fitbit even on my busiest days demoralized me. Thankfully, movement is now integrated into my everyday work, school, and recreational routines because of DC's transportation network and

dense land use. Even if I opt to take transit over biking home, I walk to and from the Metro, instead of driving door to door.

In the U.S., 29 percent of those who use transit were physically active for 30 minutes or more each day, solely by walking to and from transit stops, and transit users were 3.5 times more likely to achieve the desirable goal of 10,000 steps.

The good news is, small steps add up. Walking to the bus stop or biking home from work can positively impact health and wellness, and reduce stress and anxiety. Many people utilize commuting as a time to catch up on pleasure reading, podcasts, music, or even just to “zone out,” all good strategies to promote good mental health.

In addition to the health implications of stressful and sedentary lifestyles, air pollution from fossil fuel-burning vehicles and car crashes are major threats to public health. Air pollution is the introduction of toxic substances into the air that are damaging to human and ecological health, and according to the World Health Organization, it's responsible for an estimated 7 million deaths per year. Car crashes are responsible for 1.3 million deaths globally each year.

Another health implication of our car-dependent transportation network is that oftentimes people without cars cannot conveniently access grocery stores that sell healthy food. These areas – where transit connections and safe walking and biking routes to grocery stores are hard to find – are called food deserts.

Safe Routes to Healthy Food is an initiative (Mobility Lab is part of the initiative's task force) by the Safe Routes to School National Partnership to overcome the transportation barriers to healthy food. Across the country, transit providers, such as Atlanta's MARTA, have adopted initiatives to connect community members to healthy food, by either providing transit service to local grocery stores, or by bringing fresh food to transit centers through pop-up farmers markets.

These types of initiatives by transit agencies and non-profits, in coordination with urban planners, can play a big role in designing communities for walking, biking, and good public-transportation options.

Transportation is no longer just about transportation. It's about our livelihoods.