Children, Youth and Families and Smart Growth:
Building Family Friendly Communities

David Goldberg wrote this paper in collaboration with the Funders’ Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities. The author is a journalist who spent nine years writing on growth-related issues before taking his current position as communications director for Smart Growth America. This is the ninth in the series of translation papers published by the Funders’ Network to translate the impact of suburban sprawl and urban disinvestment on issues of importance to people and communities and to suggest opportunities for progress that would be made possible by smarter growth policies and practices. Other paper topics include social equity, workforce development, open space, civic engagement, agriculture, transportation, aging, education, biodiversity, health, arts, and energy.

Abstract

For many years, the funders of programs to lift up disadvantaged children, youth and families have seen their efforts subverted by the deeply entrenched pattern of metropolitan expansion now commonly referred to as sprawl. The sprawl development process perpetuates concentrated poverty and urban decline by shifting investment and jobs away from the central city and aging suburbs to fringe areas all but inaccessible to low-income families.

The negative effects on poor and minority families by now are well understood. But now the evidence is mounting that sprawl has begun to take a toll on middle class children and families, too. While conventional suburban design has been marketed, and largely perceived, as an environment created especially for families, concern is growing that its extensive focus on the dictates of the automobile and neglect of some basic human needs may actually come at the expense of children.

Growing commute distances among two-worker families are stealing parental time (and supervision) from children. The combination of unwalkable neighborhoods, sedentary lifestyle and drive-through diet means one in four of today’s kids will suffer from diabetes as an adult if trends continue. Auto-oriented sprawl is causing people to drive more, reversing gains in controls on...
‘This is for the kids’

“This is for the kids,” Liz Punch told a CNN reporting crew working on a 2000 documentary on suburban sprawl. Echoing the feelings of millions of middle-class, American parents, Punch was explaining why she and her husband, Brad, had bought the large house in the Atlanta suburb of Cherokee County, which requires both to make an hour-plus commute to their jobs.

The CNN report on the Punches goes on: “I feel safe out here,” Liz continues. “I feel like my kids are safe. I feel like they can play outside. I’m not worried about a drive-by shooting.”

Brand Punch agrees. “This is a big reason why we like the cul-de-sac… I think this same house, with the same kind of property, in a close, in-town neighborhood, you’re looking at probably $600,000.”

The Punch’s paid about a third that price. “Every day when I pull into that subdivision, it’s just a big feeling, ‘Yeah, this is why I’m doing this,’” Brad Punch explains. “You’ve got to make your peace with the drive.”

But despite their acceptance of the lengthy commute, their son Ben sees the long hours in the car taking an emotional and physical toll on his parents. “They’re stressed out sometimes,” says Ben, who is 12. “They’re mad when they get home because they’ve been driving so much and the traffic’s been so bad. And also it’s also tiring for them, I think, because sometimes when they get home, they’ll go straight up to bed and start sleeping.”

The smart growth movement, which seeks to address both social and environmental issues, some of which we address below. Advocates for smart growth argue that parents of all income levels and backgrounds deserve better choices among neighborhoods that are safe, convenient and affordable. They believe that thoughtful, more-inclusive planning efforts can help.

air pollution at a time when asthma rates among children are soaring; smog is known to trigger potentially life-threatening attacks, and to exacerbate other ailments. In fast-developing areas on the metro fringe, kids must be driven to huge, anonymous schools that often are overcrowded when they open.

Overview

Over the last 40 years or so, metropolitan regions in the United States have developed land-use and transportation patterns that have had profound effects on families of all socio-economic strata, but none more so than low-income families of color. Affordable housing is clustered in the central city and at the extreme metropolitan fringes. Job growth is happening mainly in the suburbs, great distances from social services and the entry-level labor pool, while the cities’ share of jobs shrinks. In most metropolitan areas — especially in the fast-growing Sunbelt — public transit does not connect this labor pool with the job growth. Unlike their more-affluent fellow citizens, low-income parents don’t have the option of shopping for a high-performing school when they decide their children’s school is failing them. These conditions translate into depressed life chances for far too many families, of which people of color make up a disproportionate number.

Other papers in this series have described the government policies and industry practices that control the growth game, and how those practices tend to abet the isolation of the least-advantaged minorities in hardened concentrations of poverty. They have discussed, for example, the abuse of zoning for race and class exclusion; the prohibitions on mixed-income housing in many jurisdictions; and the subsidies for locating jobs in auto-only environments in distant suburbs.

Many of these conditions arose over the previous four decades as middle class families, with government encouragement, sought the comfort of suburbs that were thought to offer better schools, a safer environment and higher quality of life overall. For many years, the trade-offs seemed relatively painless – longer, but still-tolerable commutes and reduced proximity to city amenities. Now that a standardized pattern of suburban development has covered vast swaths of the landscape, even as older suburbs have acquired "urban" ills, the negative side effects are beginning to become clearer, not just to planners, researchers and public officials, but to a growing number of parents. Those include the much-discussed challenges of seemingly insoluble traffic woes and loss of open and natural areas, as well as less well-understood issues, some of which we address below.

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Health and safety issues

Wherever they in live in today’s metropolitan areas, whether the inner city or outer suburbs, American children face health and safety threats arising from the effects of automobile-oriented design. In central cities, many neighborhoods have been bisected by high-speed freeways and arterial roads designed to speed commuters to the suburbs, making it dangerous for children to walk. Even the suburban neighborhoods ostensibly designed for children turn out to be almost hostile to their needs. Most modern subdivisions lack sidewalks and are so isolated from other activities – school, the library, shops, recreational centers – that children are captives of the cul de sac without a parent and a car. Streets are made wide, with sweeping corners, to accommodate speeding automobiles, increasing the danger to children who do walk. The need to drive everywhere for everything drives up automobile emissions, offsetting many of the gains made in automobile technology. There is also growing evidence that an obesity epidemic among children is compounded by a lack of physical activity, a portion of which may be associated with neighborhood designs that discourage getting around by foot.

Community design and traffic safety

Many perceived risks to our children, such as that of violent crime, are actually lower than parents tend to believe. In fact, one researcher found that the outer suburbs, often seen as the safest places to raise children, are in fact far more dangerous than the inner city; that’s because the likelihood of becoming a traffic fatality is far higher in areas where people drive farther and faster, while the likelihood of being murdered by a stranger is remote in either place.

"Land use decisions are just as much public health decisions as are decisions about food preparation. If a kid is killed when they’re walking down the street because there’s no sidewalk, should the cause of death be listed as a car accident or lousy urban design? We must begin, in earnest, to frame those decisions in light of the well-being of children." —Richard Jackson, director of the National Center for Environmental Health at CDC.
Parental fears around the automobile, however, appear to be justified, given the risks to kids both as pedestrians and as new drivers. In 1997 and 1998, the subject years of a recent study, 13 percent of all traffic fatalities occurred among pedestrians, even though only 6 percent of trips were made on foot. Sixteen percent of those who died were children.

Families are drawn to cul de sacs primarily because the dead-end streets are thought to be safe havens from traffic. But because subdivision streets are engineered to be safe for speeding drivers, with wide lanes and swooping corners that may be rounded without slowing significantly, most actually encourage speeding. Speed is the critical factor in the chances of a pedestrian’s surviving an encounter with an automobile.

The proliferation of cul de sacs makes the world beyond the subdivision entrance doubly dangerous. The lack of interconnected streets means every subdivision and shopping center empties onto the same overloaded arterial road, which inevitably is widened and reconfigured to accommodate a higher volume of speeding vehicles. As a result, even young adolescents, who need a degree of autonomy for their development, are all but barred from leaving the subdivision without a chauffeur-chaperone.

When teen-agers achieve the liberation that arrives with the driver’s license, the peril rises. Car accidents account for more than a third of teen-aged deaths, by far the largest single cause. More than 40 percent of 16-year-olds have an accident bad enough to warrant a police report in their first year of driving, and the majority of young people 16 to 20 will be involved in at least one serious accident. But the car also becomes a means of evading supervision and is frequently involved in risky behaviors, from drinking to sex. Most parents realize this, but they feel they have little choice but to provide driving-age kids a set of wheels. After all, they’re understandably anxious to end their chauffeuring duties, and they know their children are right when they argue that their community is designed so that few activities are available without a car.

**Air pollution by design**

As auto-only sprawl causes people to drive more, the increased automobile emissions are reversing gains in controls on air pollution. At the same time asthma rates among children are soaring: the number of children with asthma more than doubled, from 2.3 million to 5.5 million, from 1980 to 1995. Though the role of air pollution in causing asthma is unclear, its ability to trigger potentially life-threatening attacks is well documented.

Air pollution presents a cruel irony: We know kids ought to be spending more time outdoors in vigorous exercise. But for the 27 million children under 13 who live in places with violating levels of ground-level ozone (a component of smog), parents are faced with weighing whether exercise during the summer ozone peaks might be as harmful as failure to exercise. All of these factors bear especially hard upon economically disadvantaged minorities, among whom rates for asthma and other respiratory ailments have been soaring in recent years.

Recent studies also have indicated that air pollution can harm children even in the womb. A UCLA study released at the end of 2001 for the first time connected the components of smog to birth defects in Southern California. More than a dozen of the newest studies in six countries now seem to have linked smog to low birth weight, premature births, stillbirths and infant deaths.
Community design and the obesity epidemic

Since a weight-gain trend took off in the 1980s, the rate of overweight kids 6 to 17 has more than doubled, to well over 10 percent. Children not only are enduring the peer-group punishment associated with being chubby, they're displaying signs of long-term, serious health consequences at earlier ages.

About 60 percent of overweight 5- to 10-year-old children already have at least one risk factor for heart disease, including elevated blood pressure or insulin levels. Today about 30 percent of newly diagnosed diabetic children have "adult-onset" diabetes, a disorder triggered by poor diet and a sedentary lifestyle. Before 1990 it was rarely seen in people younger than 40. By the time today's kids are entering middle age, if current trends continue, one in four Americans will battle diabetes and the potential consequences of blindness and kidney failure. More and more kids are being diagnosed with depression and other mood disorders that can be exacerbated by poor diet and lack of exercise.

No one knows exactly what set off the weight-gain trend of the last two decades. But several factors suggest themselves: Consumption of fast food has soared, along with the trend to "super-size" meals and drinks. Time-strapped parent-chauffeurs, racing from one child's soccer practice to the other's Boy Scouts meeting, increasingly rely on drive-through meals. Even as the calorie count is rising, most kids are getting less exercise. Physical education has been scaled back while time devoted to TV and computers has grown.

Meanwhile, a large share of American families have moved to neighborhoods designed only for cars, where kids often are prohibited from walking to school or anywhere else for fear of the high-speed traffic beyond the cul de sac. That means children don't often get the incidental exercise they once did, such as running to the corner store for Mom, hiking to the library or walking to school. In 1995, kids only made about 10 percent of their trips by foot or bicycle, a drop of nearly 40 percent from 20 years before. Forty years ago, half of all kids walked to school. Today only 10 percent do, says the CDC.

"We have engineered activity out of our daily lives and we are overwhelming kids with rich, fattening foods and marketing like crazy to get them to desire that food," says James Sallis, a psychology professor at the University of San Diego who researches the effects of physical inactivity among children.

Through a failure of local and regional planning, the modern suburban landscape provides plenty of opportunities to stop for burgers, pizza and fries, but few community playgrounds. This offers yet another avenue for fast-food marketers. "As American cities and towns spend less money on children's recreation, fast food restaurants have become gathering places for families with young children," writes Eric Schlosser in his book, "Fast Food Nation."

The scenario is perhaps bleaker still in central cities, where concentrated poverty and urban disinvestment have combined to trap poor children in neighborhoods with limited options. In areas with high proportions of poor families and people of color, shopping opportunities can be limited to convenience snacks and fast food. In addition, the soccer and other recreational programs available to more-affluent kids often are off-limits to children in these neighborhoods.

"Communities can help when it comes to health promotion and disease prevention. When there are no safe places for children to play, or for adults to walk, jog, or ride a bike, that's a community responsibility."

—U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher, December 13, 2001
Quality of life issues

The Parent Trap: Commuting and the Chauffeur-Driven Lifestyle

The growing amount of time spent behind the wheel is stealing parental time from children. While the number of hours in a day holds steady, the hours devoted to driving continues to rise as the number and distance of car trips required for daily living has grown along with congestion. In 1995, Americans spent an average of 43 more hours in the car than they had in 1990, an increase of 11 percent; every indication is that the forthcoming update of those statistics will show a continued rise. Americans in the 1990s drove 88 percent farther than in 1969 to go shopping and 137 percent farther to accomplish family and personal errands.

Married women with children, who make the lion’s share of trips to chauffeur dependent children or elderly relatives, are bearing the brunt of these increases. The Surface Transportation Policy Project best documented the extent in the 1999 report "High Mileage Moms." The study found that, on average, the typical mother spends well over an hour driving each day (and that’s not counting the time at each stop on her route), traveling 29 miles and taking more than five trips, 20 percent more than either single women or men. Women make about two-thirds of the trips made to pick up and drop off other people. For both men and women, going to work now accounts for only one in five trips, whereas shopping, chauffeuring, and conducting other errands accounts for nearly half of all trips.

Drive time, occurring as it often does under stressful, time-pressed conditions, is hardly quality time. In many ways, of course, middle class kids are the lucky ones, because their parents have the means to drive them to activities in our auto-dependent cities. Lower-income families, with one or fewer cars, are not able to haul children to sports, music or other enrichment activities. When walking, biking or transit do not provide viable options, kids just miss out.

Less-than-smart schools

Planners and school districts inadvertently contribute to traffic problems and their students’ physical inactivity by siting their ever-larger schools along or near busy highways. Some school districts prefer to put schools in commercial or light industrial areas in order to fetch a good resale price should the school fall into disuse. In DeKalb County, one of Atlanta’s oldest auto-oriented suburban counties, 57 percent of school principals rate the area around their schools moderately to extremely dangerous for kids on foot or bicycle, according to a survey by the DeKalb health department. A South Carolina study found that students were four times more likely to walk to schools built before 1983, than to the larger, more-isolated schools built since.

State and local policies favoring large schools on multi-acre sites, with ample parking, all but outlaw neighborhood schools. Often they prevent rebuilding on sites formerly occupied by historic schools. Funding formulas favor building anew over renovation, and building codes written for new construction, absent regulatory flexibility, often make rehab impossible. Meanwhile, new school sites selected by local districts too often force a
municipality to speed up the construction of new roads, water mains, and sewer lines. [These education-related issues are more fully explored in Translation Paper #8: "Education and

Smart Growth Solutions

Each of the above issues offers an opportunity to enlist both middle class parents and advocates for disadvantaged families in the effort to reshape metropolitan growth patterns to the benefit of both. Below are some examples of the kind smart-growth solutions that offer hope for improved choices for all families; it is by no means a comprehensive list.

Each solution discussed contributes to one or more of these goals:
• Protect and improve child health;
• Promote educational achievement;
• Support and empower families; and
• Strengthen community bonds.

In addition, each is intended to be scaled appropriately for the task at hand, whether at the level of the metropolitan region, municipality/school district or neighborhood.

Regional Approaches

Regional housing plans: The Portland success story

At the regional scale, the accessibility of attainable housing near job centers is among the most critical issues. The lack of affordable neighborhoods in jobs-rich suburbs that are often isolated from public transportation shuts many low-income families out of those jobs, and deprives them of the option to choose among school districts. For other working families, a dearth of lower-priced housing often means a much longer commute, which further compounds congestion and air quality problems.

In many regions, prices are rising both in the classic in-town neighborhoods that are experiencing so-called gentrification and in newer suburbs that deliberately shut out the less affluent with "exclusionary zoning", including minimum lot and houses sizes and apartment moratoria. One of the few toeholds still remaining for low-income families can be found in the older, inner ring of working-class suburbs. There is a risk, however, that a re-concentration of poverty and declining taxing capacity in these suburbs could replicate the distressed conditions that foundations and advocates have been working so hard to address in the inner city. In the end, addressing both the mismatch of jobs and affordable housing and the decline of inner-ring suburbs will require a regional approach, smart-growth advocates argue.

The 2000 Census recently offered new evidence of the power of regional, smart-growth planning to counter the trend toward economic segregation. In Portland, OR, where metro-wide fair-housing requirements are administered through the nation’s only elected regional government, poor families are less concentrated in the central city than a decade ago, while upper-
income, middle-income and working-class families are more likely to live near each other than in separate enclaves. Writes Betsy Hammond in the The Portland Oregonian: "The residential mingling of haves and have-nots can be traced to a state land-use rule put in place nearly a quarter-century ago, local developers and planners say. Called the metropolitan housing rule, it required every suburban city and county to zone for a lot of apartments. When those apartments went up fast in the 1990s, it enabled moderate- and low-income people to live practically all over, not only in Portland or the most bedraggled suburbs."28

Addressing air pollution through smart growth: Atlanta's Atlantic Station

For 40 years, the transportation and other investment policies pursued by the state of Georgia, and funded in large measure by the federal government, focused on enabling development in Atlanta's suburbs, often at the expense of the city. By the late 1990s, the sprawling development had left Atlanta's children an unfortunate legacy: concentrated poverty; underfunded schools, thanks to a declining tax base; polluted industrial brownfields; and health-damaging air pollution caused largely by the region's over-reliance on the automobile.

It was the air quality issue that nearly brought Atlanta to a standstill, when the metro region in the mid-90s was unable to craft a transportation plan that met the federal mandate to clean up its smog, or lose federal transportation money. Local officials had attempted to circumvent the law, but were stopped by determined non-profits who had allied to promote smarter growth. It was at that moment that a group of developers proposed to redevelop the contaminated, 138-acre site of an old steel mill into a huge new "downtown" that would be walkable, transit-accessible and combine housing (some affordable) with offices, shopping and amenities from a park to a movie theater. City officials and regional planners both were highly supportive of the project, dubbed Atlantic Station: it would reclaim a polluted brownfield, expand the city's tax base, bring more riders to the rapid rail system and expand housing and recreation options for city residents. But first, it had to be shown to yield regional air-quality benefits; otherwise, federal law would prohibit construction of a bridge that was essential for access to the site.

Recognizing that it could provide both environmental and social benefits, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency studied how the project's mixed uses, walkable streets, transit accessibility and regional centrality might lessen car dependence, and thereby air pollution. Using computer models, experts tested Atlantic Station's likely emissions against three, more-conventional suburban developments. The comparisons showed that Atlantic Station would likely produce half as much driving – and in turn much lower emissions that create smog. Assuming a similar degree of growth would go to the suburbs if it weren't allowed in the region's center, the EPA pronounced Atlantic Station a net benefit and endorsed the project, which is now under construction.

Meanwhile, the regional planners who were trying to craft an approvable transportation plan concluded that there was no way to clean up Atlanta's air without adopting the "Atlantic Station" approach toward less car-dependent growth throughout the region; indeed, incorporating those measures ultimately allowed a plan to pass muster. Even so, it remains illegal in most jurisdictions to build compact, walkable, mixed-use development; even Atlantic Station, for all city officials' support, required dozens of zoning variances.
The Municipal/School District Level

Educating school officials on planning

The failure of school systems to integrate the development and use of their facilities with the larger community is both a missed opportunity and a key driver of sprawl. In the belief that the size, design, and location of school facilities can play a significant role in a child’s school experience, advocates both for schools and smart growth have identified a significant opportunity for collaboration.

In Los Angeles, New Schools — Better Neigh- borhoods was created in 1999 to press the L.A. Unified School District to begin planning with the larger community in mind. According to NSBN, smarter planning for education means designing schools that serve as centers of their communities with gymnasiums, play fields … libraries and health clinics that double as community facilities. It also means working with the municipality to improve mobility, preserve green space and provide teachers and other school workers with more affordable housing options nearby.

NSBN helped to coordinate a community engagement demonstration project with the Beverly-Kingsley Neighborhood Association, which brought together nearly 100 citizens with planning and design firms and the school district to craft an alternative to the district’s plan for a 1500-student school. That plan would have displaced 30 families and destroyed 21 older homes and an 8-unit apartment building. Instead, the collaborative effort recommended three smaller schools built on formerly blighted commercial sites. In another effort, NSBN has worked to persuade schools officials to permit the use of obsolete shopping center buildings as a charter school, saving enough money in construction to make a new educational alternative available while reclaiming what threatened to become an abandoned "greyfield".

Elsewhere, joint school-community planning is beginning to be institutionalized. In Maryland, smart-growth planning rules now require that school projects meet specific criteria, such as: they should not encourage "sprawl" development or be located in agricultural preservation areas unless other options are not viable; they should encourage revitalization of existing facilities, neighborhoods, and communities; and they should be located in developed areas or in a locally-designated growth area and served by existing or planned water, sewer, and other public infrastructure.
Neighborhood Initiatives

Making it safe to walk again

Because so many children go to school in areas where being a pedestrian is less than safe or pleasant, there is a growing movement to retrofit neighborhoods to safe routes to school. California now leads the nation in that effort, thanks to legislation that was developed by the state office of the Surface Transportation Policy Project and brought to passage through the efforts of a number of state quality-of-life groups, and with funding support from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

Originally passed in 1999 and renewed in 2001, the Safe Routes to School pilot program dedicates up to $25 million a year of federal transportation safety funds for local bicycle and pedestrian safety projects. Eligible projects include new crosswalks, pedestrian and bicycle paths, bike lanes, new sidewalks, and "traffic calming" to slow cars for children walking and bicycling to school.

In Atlanta, Pedestrians Educating Drivers on Safety, or PEDS, has helped parents create "walking school buses", wherein groups of children walk together, chaperoned by parents who take turns with the duty. Perhaps more creative still is the Neighborhood Pace Car program. To discourage speeding on residential streets and raise awareness of pedestrian safety, PEDS signs up residents to mark their vehicles as "neighborhood pace cars" and promise to drive within the speed limit and obey traffic signals. These consciousness-raising programs are done in conjunction with efforts to build a constituency for reprioritizing transportation spending to retrofit areas for pedestrian safety and comfort.

Turning parkways into parks: Transportation equity in the Bronx

When the New York State Department of Transportation proposed to spend $420 million to reconstruct portions of the Sheridan Expressway that run through the South Bronx, three affected groups banded together to insist that their neighborhoods no longer bear the brunt of such regional plans. Youth Ministries for Peace and Justice, The Point Community Development Corporation and Nos Quedamos worked to create their own alternative, which would remove an overpass to create a 28-acre park, while returning light to an area that is bisected by highways and lacks play places, and whose kids suffer disproportionately from asthma. It also would allow reclamation of industrial brownfields along the Bronx River to accommodate the extension of bike and pedestrian paths and reconnect to the waterfront.

To get the attention of the DOT and regional planners, the groups had to educate themselves on the planning process and hire their own experts to demonstrate that their plan would not create inordinate congestion on local streets. Victory is not assured, but whatever the outcome, community groups are now engaged in a formerly remote transportation planning process and insisting that transportation projects inure to the benefit of the neighborhood’s children and families, as well as motorists.
The opportunities for funders to make a difference in the lives of kids and families affected by the spin-off effects of auto-centric development and urban sprawl are legion. In many cases, the impacts on children simply offer another compelling reason to support the existing efforts of non-profits working in smart growth-related areas, whether aimed at greenspace preservation, air pollution reduction or neighborhood redevelopment.

Obviously, no single foundation can address the full array of daunting issues raised in this paper. But there are many opportunities to support both large and small-scale smart-growth efforts that can protect and improve child health and safety; promote educational achievement; support and empower families; and strengthen community bonds.

Research on urban design and the obesity epidemic

First, there is a need for further research that can help make the case for more child-friendly approaches to planning and urban design, and to discern what works and what doesn’t. For example, it makes intuitive sense that kids who walk to school and have ready access to parks and recreational areas would be more physically active, and thus less prone to being overweight. But is that true, and to what extent do other factors – diet, access to electronic entertainments, other environmental conditions – outweigh neighborhood design?

Granted, neighborhoods that are safe and pleasant for walking are desirable whether or not their economic and health effects can be quantified; likewise, it is important to address traffic

A Child’s "Neighborhood Bill of Rights"

"If you can design a neighborhood that makes a nine-year-old kid happy you can make everyone happy," says William Gietema, CEO of Arcadia Realty, developers of mixed use, planned neighborhoods in North Texas.

His firm has developed a "child’s bill of rights" that guides their design process. According to Gietema: "It’s built around where you can go in a short walk or bike ride." For the smallest kids and their parents, a five-minute walk should reach a playground. A park with ball fields should be within 10 minutes, "so you can go to soccer or baseball practice without having Mom drive you." An elementary school of no more than 250 students should be within a 15-minute walk.

"This is about giving children autonomy," Gietema says. "If you do this it is incumbent on the local government to allow streets that are safe, interconnected and calm. Kids have to be able to get where they’re going without ever having to cross a busy collector street." Other elements include sidewalks wide enough for two strollers, and street trees to cool the walk and act as a barrier from the cars.

Funders tend to segregate their grantmaking - children and families is a completely separate program from neighborhoods, is separate from environment. these issues. It’s hard to strengthen families if you ignore their physical surroundings, and the daily environment that affects quality of life, health, and opportunities that are available. Funders can help their grantees to think, and act, more comprehensively. Also, they can help organizations (and people) that are working on schools, or children, or family, or community development, or improving the environment to COME TOGETHER. It’s really time for a whole new approach. Ultimately we need systemic change for smart growth to really work for everyone."

—Betty Weiss, executive director, National Neighborhood Coalition
congestion and commute hassles whether or not children benefit from more-available, less-stressed parents. But it is important to substantiate the claims made by the smart-growth and other quality-of-life movements, where possible, and to emphasize the data when they prove true.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is among the funders who have taken a lead in supporting research to link community design to health and physical activity. The foundation is working to improve public health through strategies and environmental changes that encourage active living. In addition to supporting particular research projects, the foundation has convened leaders in community design and public health to offer insights on the issue and has produced a white paper, "Active Living Through Community Design."31

**Build a constituency for kid-friendly planning**

The next task for that effort, as for the broader issues around children and sprawl, is to support the development of communications strategies to help concerned constituencies understand the interrelationships between growth patterns and child development, health and safety. Messages need to be developed and campaigns mounted to build grass roots support for building and retrofitting communities so that they are truly healthful for children. Newly empowered and motivated child-oriented activists are needed at all levels of the public process to insist that the needs of the young are included in planning and development decisions. In many situations, existing and future non-profits will have to lead fight to get a seat at the table in order to raise these issues.

**Forge cross-issue collaboration**

Funders also could play a critical role in convening groups with a shared agenda on children’s issues and in encouraging alliances and coalitions around linked issues. For example, public health and child welfare advocates working against obesity and pedestrian fatalities should make common cause with advocates for alternative transportation, regional planning, and greenspace and new urbanist developers, among others. Funders must make sure that groups that do forge joint efforts know they will be rewarded with a larger overall financial pie, otherwise perceived competition for resources could doom such efforts.

**Support transportation reform**

Next year, the reauthorization of the federal Transportation Efficiency Act, which governs spending policies and priorities for several years, offers a chance to further build on the progress of recent years. The strategies employed by places like Atlanta to link air quality improvements to transportation and development patterns should be institutionalized. The opportunities for communities of all incomes and ethnic groups to express their will in the planning process, as did the groups in the Bronx, should be strengthened. Funder support for organizations pursuing these and other goals will be critical.

**Support the movement for "smart schools"**

A nascent effort to unite the movement for smaller, community-oriented schools with that for smart growth would appear to have enormous potential. Research has demonstrated the pedagogical benefits of smaller schools for poor rural and inner city children,32 while the requirements for overly large schools in the suburbs alter neighborhood character and demand additional car trips.

In late 2001, Smart Growth America and several partners convened a sym-
posium among school-reform and
smart growth advocates that yielded
agreement on a potential for collabo-
ration. The participant’s to-do list for
reform is large. It includes more
research to make the economic case
for smaller schools; outreach efforts
among educators, school facilities
planners and interested communities,
such as business leaders; media cam-
paigns to raise the awareness of the
benefits of small, community-centered
schools; technical consultation with
the professional associations that
promulgate design standards; and
state-specific reform campaigns.

Support efforts to foster
economic integration

Greater integration among all income
groups at both the regional level and
the neighborhood levels could yield
tremendous social benefits, from
reductions in concentrated poverty
and social isolation of the underclass
to better-distributed affordable hous-
ing to reduced traffic – all of which
benefits children and families. There
are a number of levels at which the
smart growth movement could use
funder assistance in fostering eco-

nomic integration. At the federal level,
there are efforts to continue and build
upon the successful aspects of HOPE
VI, the HUD program to redevelop
older public housing projects into
mixed-income, and some instances,
mixed-use complexes. At the metro-
politan regional level, there are organi-
zations working to replicate the appar-
ett success in Portland of regional
housing polices. In many cities, promi-
nent business organizations are team-
ing with smart-growth advocates to
press for policies that promote "work-
force housing" that matches local
wage levels, in proximity to job cen-
ters. All of these efforts are aimed at
expanding opportunities for more fami-
lies to find good jobs in livable neigh-
borhoods with decent schools.

Resist reconcentration
of poverty in at-risk suburbs

In another realm, funders could pro-
vide an enormous service by conven-
ing discussions on how to help
schools in the at-risk, inner suburbs.
At the moment, the advocacy infra-
structure that exists in support of
inner-city and rural schools is not
present for these suburban areas,
which are seeing enormous changes
from immigration and their new-found
status as repositories of affordable
housing.

Questions for further study

More research is needed on issues involving transportation costs to economically
vulnerable families. In other words...
Has sprawl placed a greater strain on poor families?
Are transportation costs adversely impacting the quality of life for poor families?
Are there models, policies, or strategies in place?
Are business leaders recognizing that low paid service employees need affordable
transportation alternatives to their jobs?
If so, what has the business community offered to alter these patterns? Is there a
 corporate leader in this area?
How does race impact smart growth policies?
How does immigration relate to smart growth?

As community foundations we are heavily focused on the root causes of poverty: lack
of access to a good education, good health care, insufficient social services, poor access to
jobs, and so forth.
Our inability to move people from the poverty trap is directly related to smart
growth and livable communities. Indeed, the inability of our older cities to rebuild,
to provide sufficient housing, to provide an environment conducive for family life
has given rise to the explosion at the suburban fringe. We must
address the failure of our inner cities that
have a huge impact on families.” —John
Chapman, Trustee,
East Bay Community
Foundation
Conclusion

This paper is intended as a conversation starter and is by no means comprehensive. It is hoped that the ideas contained here will help prompt big-picture thinking about links among healthy schools, transportation choices, neighborhood design, regional planning and improved choices for families.

By and large, American children are the most materially well off in the world. But many of the other, equally important needs of kids are left out of the equation when we are designing our cities and neighborhoods.

Many of the determinants of quality of life can best be seen through the child’s eyes: Are streets and parks available and safe for children to walk, bike and play? Can a family’s daily needs be met with time left for healthy interaction? Are there ample opportunities for children to gain experience of the world through all stages of development? Is the air healthful for developing lungs? Is water safe for swimming and drinking? Are there opportunities for children and the elderly to interact, to the delight and benefit of both? Are public schools preparing most children for successful adulthood, regardless of the neighborhood they’re in? Will our children inherit cities with neighborhoods of lasting character and sufficient resources to maintain, redevelop and improve upon our built legacy?

Sadly, most communities in today’s America would have to answer "no" to the majority of those questions. The encouraging news, however, is that more and more people are starting to ask these questions and take steps to change the answer. They are the force behind the movement for smart growth and livable communities.

At its most meaningful, that movement is about giving children of all races and classes the best possible environment in which to live, play, learn and grow. It is about making conscious choices to make that vision a reality, as opposed to unthinkingly continuing with patterns and habits whose less-than-optimal results are becoming distressingly clear.

The movement will know it is successful when neighborhoods no longer fight new schools because they are assumed to be traffic generators; when it’s safe for an asthmatic kid to play outside no matter the city or the time of year; and when parents of all races and socio-economic backgrounds have the same opportunity as anyone else to move to a better school district should they deem it seem necessary. Because so many far-sighted funders have begun to recognize these issues and take action, the hope is greater than ever – even if the real work is just beginning.
1. In Atlanta, Emory researchers found that fewer than 3 percent of advertised jobs met critical criteria for welfare recipients: They were entry-level, paid wages enough to make the typical recipient self-sufficient and were accessible by transit. Emory University, The Reality of Welfare Reform: Employment Prospects in Metropolitan Atlanta, by Michael Rich, "Georgia Academy Journal," Summer 1997 (AJC 10/6/97)


5. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Transportation and Air Quality. See: www.epa.gov/otaq/invntory/overview/vmt.htm


10. For more information, see American Lung Association website: www.lungusa.org/air/children_factsheet99.html

11. According to the CDC, asthma rates have nearly doubled in the United States during the past decade. The CDC reports that emergency room and hospitalization rates for asthma are higher for black children than for white children, particularly for those under age 5. Among non-Hispanic children age 5 to 14, African-American children are five times more likely to die from asthma than white children.

12. A 1999 study by Mount Sinai School of Medicine showed that hospitalization rates for asthma in New York City are as much as 21 times higher in low-income and minority neighborhoods than for more-affluent, mostly white zip codes. www.lungusa.org/pub/minority/asthma_00.html#discriminates


17. William H. Dietz, chief of nutrition and physical activity, CDC; interview with the author, fall 2001.


19. Interview with the author, Aug. 2001; Sallis and associates have created programs for educators and parents to promote physical education and active recreation. See: http://www.foundation.sdsu.edu/projects/spark.


22. In his book, "Bowling Alone," Robert Putnam reports that surveys show that mothers spend roughly double the time driving that either parent spends as primary caregiver to children.


27. Myron Orfield, an urban policy researcher and Minnesota state representative, addresses the issues of these suburbs in his new book, "American Metropolitics" (p. 167): "With the low fiscal capacity and lack of amenities, they have little hope of improving their competitive position. ...Clearly, the at-risk suburbs will have a very difficult time surviving without
significant regional reforms. In the end, these places have no haven in America outside regional cooperation – and the sooner they realize that the better off they'll be."


30. Interview with the author, June 2002.
