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# The Menzies Centre for Health Policy

## The Impact of the Urban Environment on Health

### Brief Fact Sheet

#### The issues

- 90% of the Australian people live in urban settlements.
- Urban living affects health by influencing levels of physical activity, food choices, safety, social connection and participation, and exposure to pollutants. These are all determinants of common health problems such as obesity, diabetes, heart disease, cancer, depression, injury and asthma.
- Currently there is inequity in the distribution of infrastructure and other resources in Australian cities. This applies to transport (mass transit, in particular), healthy food outlets, health services, education, parks and other shops and services. This inequity creates barriers to good health.
- Recent research has shown that people are more likely to walk or cycle (thereby getting incidental physical activity) if there are destinations of interest in the community, such as shops, services and parks. Street connectivity is another determinant of the likelihood of walking. Safe pathways to walk and cycle are essential. It is not practical to walk or cycle to work or school if these places are a long way from home.
- Research from North America has shown that people who live in spread out urban areas, that lack jobs and essential infrastructure such as mass transit, are less active and weigh more than people who live in more compact, mixed-use environments.
- Plans for large-scale urban development usually include plans for infrastructure, such as transport, schools, higher education institutions, health and other services. The timetable for delivery of infrastructure is an important issue in urban development because delays in construction of transport infrastructure, such as a railway line, will affect people's transport choices. Transport patterns are difficult to change once they are established. If mass transit is provided from the outset, it is likely to increase the proportion of no-car and one-car households, with benefits for the health of people and the health of the environment.
- Urban food systems affect health. The Mayor of London has recently promulgated a food strategy: *Healthy and Sustainable Food for London*. Relevant issues include sustainable agriculture, food manufacture, transport and distribution, food retail, food preparation, diet and waste disposal.



## Suggested areas for policy action

### 1. Australia needs a national policy for healthy and sustainable cities.

There is a pressing need for national urban policy in Australia. Any national policy should take an integrated approach to the development of healthy and sustainable cities.

The House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage Committee recently reported on the sustainability of Australian cities. <http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/enviro/cities/report/fullreport.pdf> It is important that population health is a central consideration in the response to this inquiry because cities cannot be sustainable unless they are healthy places in which to live.

### 2. Improved opportunities for incidental physical activity.

To improve conditions for walking and cycling in cities, it is necessary to re-conquer the city, pushing back cars. Jan Gehl, the Danish urban planner, has demonstrated what can be achieved in Copenhagen and in other cities around the world. Melbourne has made some progress, but there is a long way to go in most other Australian cities.

It will not be possible to reduce urban car use without improving mass transit. Successive Australian national, state and local governments have not funded essential urban mass transit infrastructure. The Australian government should provide leadership and funding for urban mass transit.

### 3. Planning for healthy food choices and sustainable food production.

Urban plans should address food supply by promoting sustainable food production and improving access to healthy food at the neighbourhood level. This is particularly important for young, elderly and disabled people who may not have access to motor vehicles.

### 4. Suburban economic development and a return to localism.

Historically, there was a public health imperative for separating residential areas from employment zones in cities. In particular, industrial point-sources of air pollution were adversely affecting health. In Australia this is no longer the case. There are now public health imperatives to bring jobs closer to home. The three levels of Australian government should work together with the business community to ensure jobs are dispersed across urban regions, including in new outer suburban areas. Again, this will require improved transport and education opportunities in these areas.

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*This paper was developed in collaboration with the urban health team at the Australian Health Policy Institute (Professor Tony Capon, Professor Stephen Leeder, Anne Marie Thow, and Michael Ward)*