



To: Neighbourhoods and City Development

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Date: 13/07/2012

Subject: Essential Evidence on a page: No. 85 The health impacts of reducing short car trips

Top line: High car dependence is related to low physical activity, and low physical activity is related to major economic losses through premature deaths. Just replacing one short car trip a day by walking could avoid many deaths per year and gain huge economic benefits through such interventions.

There is robust evidence that physical activity is essential to maintain good health. Moreover, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic physical activity undertaken throughout the week is sufficient in adults, aged 18–65 years. Walking as a means of transport is considered a moderate physical activity, suitable for achieving recommended activity levels. Despite its numerous reported health benefits walking has mainly been studied as a leisure time activity, most studies of mobility conducted in Europe have been undertaken by the transport sector, with the aim of planning motorised transport.

Due to the difficulty of promoting health through policies which are under the control of other sectors, an effort is being made to develop tools from the health sectors, which could provide methodological guidance to policy makers in these other sectors. Within this context, the WHO developed the Health Economic Assessment Tool (HEAT) ¹ in order to facilitate the quantification of the economic savings resulting from the health benefits derived from cycling and walking. As HEAT provides economic arguments, it can be useful to highlight and quantify the health effects of interventions resulting in changes to walking and cycling and to gain support in other sectors involved in policy decisions, perhaps most notably in the domains of transport and urban planning.

In a study in Catalonia (Spain) researchers quantified the number of adults making motorised trips on one day in 2006.² 77% of men and 68% of women did not achieve the recommended physical level using walking as transport. In the population there is a high dependence on private cars among people not meeting the physical activity recommendations. Of those not meeting the recommendations, 16% of men and 14% of women, could achieve recommended levels by physical activity if they were to replace at least one motorised trip of 5 minutes duration or less by walking. The increase in walking would result in 579,066 adults in Catalonia consequently achieving the recommended daily levels of physical activity through walking as a means of transport and in so doing reduce premature death by 187 per year.

The researchers then estimated the annual economic benefit due to reducing deaths as a result of walking instead of using a car for at least one of those short motorised trips per day through HEAT. According to those estimates, this change would bring a financial saving of over €207M (approx £167M) gained from the level of walking accumulated over one year.

¹ www.heatwalkingcycling.org accessed 13th July 2012

² Olabarria, M. et al 2012 Health impact of motorised trips that could be replaced by walking, European Journal of Public Health, June, 1-6.