

Health Impact Assessment: Promoting Health Across Sectors

By Andrew Dannenberg

In recent years, there has been increasing recognition in the US that land use and transportation planning decisions can have a substantial impact on the public's health. With this growing recognition has come increased use of Health Impact Assessment (HIA), a set of methods that have been used in Europe and elsewhere for many years.

An HIA is a tool to help decision-makers recognize the health consequences of their decisions and thereby contribute to healthier living environments. HIAs are modeled in part on environmental impact statements that focus on environmental issues such as air and water quality, while HIAs focus on issues such as physical activity, respiratory disease, injury, mental health, social capital, and environmental justice.

HIAs are used to objectively evaluate the potential health effects of a policy, program, or project before it

is implemented. HIAs can have a long-lasting effect by improving communication between planners and public health officials and encouraging projects and policies that promote health.

Public health professionals in Alaska, California, Oregon, and Washington are among the leaders in the US in conducting HIAs. Reports in this issue describe the use of HIAs to reduce vehicle miles traveled in Oregon, improve pedestrian facilities in Spokane, incorporate health impacts into natural resource development projects in Alaska, and examine community impacts of a rebuilt or replaced floating bridge between Seattle and its eastside suburbs.

About 60 HIAs have been completed in the US, and many are described in databases for the US (www.ph.ucla.edu/hs/hiacllc) and in Europe and elsewhere (www.hiagateway.org.uk).

The steps in conducting an HIA include screening to identify projects or policies for which an HIA would be useful, scoping to identify which health effects to consider, risk assessment to identify who may be affected and how, developing recommendations to promote positive or mitigate adverse health effects associated with the proposal, reporting the results to decision makers, and evaluating the impacts of the HIA on the decision process. Community involvement, especially during the scoping and risk assessment steps, can increase community buy-in to a project, reveal community concerns not otherwise considered during project planning, and help address social equity issues.

Some HIAs have directly affected policy, program, and project decisions, while others have had relatively little impact. Recommendations from HIAs are more likely to affect decisions if the HIA is timely, if decision makers accept the concept that health impacts should be a part of their decision-making process, and if the recommendations are practical in terms of time and resources required. At the least, most HIAs result in increased awareness of



Building bridges.
Literally & figuratively.

Seattle Municipal Archives Photograph Collection

Some HIAs in the United States

Adapted from Dannenberg 2008 and Collins 2009

Living wage ordinance, San Francisco, 1999

HIA contributed to passage of the living wage ordinance and to passage of a subsequent citywide minimum wage increase.

Trinity Plaza housing redevelopment, San Francisco, 2003

HIA findings and subsequent city decisions led to the developer providing replacement housing for low income residents being displaced by the project.

Northeast National Petroleum Reserve oil and gas leasing program, Alaska, 2007

HIA contributed to the Bureau of Land Management's decision to withdraw from leasing some land for which oil and gas development would have adversely impacted the health of native populations; on a larger scale, multiple federal agencies are now accepting health considerations in the environmental impact statement process for natural resource development in Alaska.

Lowry Corridor redevelopment, Minneapolis, 2007

HIA recommendations helped the project manager obtain pedestrian and bicycle improvements for this low-income urban corridor.

Taylor Energy Center coal-fired power plant, Florida, 2007

The development authority accepted HIA recommendations about hiring minorities and providing health benefits; the project was later cancelled due to climate change concerns.

BeltLine transit, trails, and parks project, Atlanta, 2007

The project funding advisory committee approved using assessment of health impacts as a factor in selecting proposals for specific components of this \$2.8 billion project.

State Route 520 bridge replacement, Seattle, 2008

HIA recommendations were endorsed by the project mediation team and by the Seattle City Council; impact on final project plans is pending (see page 14).



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Downtown San Francisco in 2009.



Seattle Municipal Archives Photograph Collection

Skagit Valley, Washington.

health issues among decision-makers.

HIAs for projects and policies may be required as part of an environmental impact assessment or under other laws or regulations, or may be conducted on a voluntary basis. Experience in Alaska and California has documented that HIAs can be successfully conducted within the environmental assessment required by the National Environmental Policy Act or corresponding state environmental regulations.

The first legally required HIA in the US, completed in 2008, was initiated when the Washington State Legislature mandated that Public Health - Seattle & King County conduct an HIA for the proposed State Route 520 bridge replacement (see page 14). Most HIAs in the US have been voluntary, led by academic researchers, health departments, transportation

planners, or advocacy groups. But voluntary HIAs are unlikely to be conducted in many projects or policies for which they would be useful, due to a lack of incentives, resources, and technical capacity.

More work is needed to identify best practices, build capacity, and increase funding sources for conducting HIAs. Bills encouraging or requiring the use of HIAs have been introduced at the federal level and in several states. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Pew Charitable Trusts plan to launch a national initiative this fall that will help advance the field of HIAs. ■

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