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Energy

A Skinnier, Safer America

Christopher Steiner, 07.16.09, 6:00 PM ET

The following is adapted from $20 Per Gallon: How the Inevitable Rise in the Price of Gasoline Will Change Our Lives for the Better *by Christopher Steiner, Grand Central Publishing (2009).*

The United States, by just about any measure, has managed to make itself fat. Since 1979, the percentage of U.S. adults who can be classified as obese--the condition of weighing substantially more than the medical optimum--has risen from 15.1% to 32.2%. That's more than a doubling, an astounding rate of change. Moreover, a full two-thirds of American adults are now overweight, perhaps on their way to becoming medically obese. Our fatness costs us a lot of money: $117 billion per year in early mortality and extra medical expenses, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. That's enough money to buy all of Nike, Yahoo!, Boeing, and Starbucks with billions to spare. And, of course, our fatness costs lives: 112,000 deaths related to complications and diseases stemming from obesity. That's the same number of people who live in Ann Arbor, Mich., or Peoria, Ill., people who die every year because they're fat.

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There's a bevy of factors behind the surging waistlines of Americans: processed foods, television, videogames, computers, fewer laborious jobs, more service-oriented jobs. But one factor floats just below the oily surface of our largesse: cheap gas. Charles Courtemanche, an economist at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, has produced a study suggesting that permanent hikes in gas prices may slash obesity rates. The amount is hardly nominal: A sustained $1 increase in the price of a gallon of gasoline equals a 10% dip in the nation's obesity rate--that's about 9 million fewer obese people clogging up health care systems and costing society (and themselves) money. "The price of gas is a powerful lever when it comes to medical expenses and mortality rates," Courtemanche says. "There's a savings in this for all of us."

Courtemanche's study used a common federal government data set that has sampled citizens' health care statistics every year since 1984. He divided the data by state and compared each set of health and weight statistics to gas prices in each of their respective states. By breaking it up by state, Courtemanche could parse the relationship between obesity and gas prices even further, because gas prices can vary state by state and can be affected by local taxes. A gas price increase in Missouri may be more or less pronounced in Tennessee or Arkansas. When Courtemanche finished, he had more than 1 million different data samples. "I feel confident in saying that it's a causal relationship," he says of gas prices' effect on obesity rates.

Courtemanche found evidence in his data that rising gas prices resulted in more Americans walking and more Americans bicycling. Perhaps just as important, he noticed that, as gas prices increase, people eat out at restaurants less. In addition to more strolling and cycling, people use public transportation more, Courtemanche says, and that, too, burns far more calories than sitting in a bucket driver's seat, sipping coffee, and flipping through radio channels. People who use subways, buses, trolleys or commuter rail services need to get to and from mass transit stops, and that probably means more walking on both ends. A $1 rise in gas means 11,000 fewer lives lost to obesity-related causes and $11 billion per year saved on health costs, Courtemanche says.

Something even more interesting may happen, Courtemanche thinks, when gas prices climb from $4 to $5 to $6 and up. "As we go up from $4, the effect gas prices have on obesity might even accelerate," he says. "Now you're not only talking about more biking and walking, you're talking about people actually starting to change where they live and more people moving into cities." Courtemanche, for one, has cast his lot with the urban crowd. He and his wife have decided to buy an attached townhome in central Greensboro rather than a larger single-family home a little farther out. "We want close-by shops and restaurants that are walkable and bike-able," he says. "I think that's the direction we're all going in."

The Return of the Foot Patrol

Companies and governments with large car fleets will be the first to adjust their behaviors to account for high gas prices. When you have 1,000 cars instead of just one, $1,000 extra for gasoline per car means $1 million.

Who drives thousands of cars at all times of the day and night? If you said the post office, you're right. But the post office can raise prices for their stamps, and they've done exactly that many times in the past several years as the price of moving our mail and packages has steadily climbed. Police departments, however, can't raise prices; they can only ask municipalities--the budgets of which are already stretched--for more money. And those new funding allocations, if they come at all, take time. Police departments need to cut spending now, so many have started to reduce their gasoline use immediately. The Houston Police Department blew past its gasoline budget of $8.7 million in 2007 and spent more than $11 million on gas in 2008. San Diego figures to spend more than $3 million more than it budgeted on gasoline.

Americans may be seeing fewer police cars, but they're not seeing less police protection. Police have taken to the sidewalks once again, much like they did a century ago on America's tight and dense city avenues. The modest police department in Suwanee, Ga., budgeted $60,000 for gasoline in fiscal year 2008. Its 2009 budget ramped up its gasoline allowance to $163,000. Michael Jones, chief of the Suwanee Police Department, which has 36 officers, says rising gas prices have enabled him to change the way Suwanee is patrolled for the better. "When my father had his beat fifty years ago in Rome, Ga., he walked it. Everybody knew him. He got Christmas gifts from just about every person in his patrol area. They didn't give him gifts because he was a police officer, they gave him gifts because he was part of the community and he was their friend. That's the kind of thing we want to get back to here," Jones says in his Southern-soaked drawl.

"Years ago nobody thought about conserving gasoline, but now we're forced to do things differently. When all we do is drive around, you have an effect that we call the legless police, because people only see their officers from the shoulders up. But now we're putting people on the ground where we need them instead of having them just randomly riding around. Whereas before people only saw officers in negative situations, when something has gone wrong, now they see us every day, in positive, normal situations," Jones says. "Even if gas goes back down to a buck, I want my officers to get out of their cars and to be amongst the community."

These types of changes have rippled across the country. Some sheriff's deputies in Illinois's Cook County have ditched their squad cars for bicycles in and around Chicago. The Chicago Police already have a large contingent roaming the streets on Segway scooters and horses. New York City has upped foot patrols and bought 20 hybrid police vehicles last summer. Police in Shelby, N.C., have been ordered to park their cars for fifteen minutes every two hours; police there have also been asked to stop taking patrol cars on lunch runs.

"If you add more foot patrols, citizens notice right away. And they feel more at ease and safer, even if, in total, there aren't more police on the streets," says George Kelling, a professor of criminal justice at Rutgers University. Officers on foot are able to pick up all manner of knowledge that they wouldn't be able to pick up in a car. They duck into stores, restaurants and bars, learning the managers' names and what they're concerned about. "I think the days of police sitting in their air-conditioned or heated cars and watching society from afar are ending. People want the police amongst them, involved, and these high gas prices have made that possible," Kelling says. "The idea that patrolling can be done by car is a bad idea, and it just doesn't work."

Kelling recently spent a day pedaling about the Boston Common with two Boston police officers. "They're on those bikes anytime the weather allows it and the citizens are very aware of them being there," Kelling says. "Once you get the police walking or biking around, citizen appreciation goes way up and their fear of crime goes down. When the fear of crime is low, people reclaim ownership over property. Drug dealers get forced out, marginal characters get forced out, and pretty soon there's families and children on the streets again."

Kelling says research suggests that people don't notice when police departments add or take away car patrols driving around. But they notice foot patrols right away. "I don't care where you go--Boston, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Los Angeles--more departments understand the benefit of getting the officers onto the pavement and out of the car. I would expect to see more of it," Kelling explains. "And the gas savings is a nice benefit. It gets our officers in great shape, too."

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