

# CANADIAN GEOGRAPHIC IN THE CLASSROOM

## Article: The Geography of Obesity



“The Geography of Obesity” (April 2015, pp.56-60) is a great example illustrating that the discipline of geography is so much more than most people realize. One of the greatest challenges geography teachers face is overcoming the stereotypical view that geography is all about memorizing the location of countries, their capitals, and other mundane facts. Geography can provide the public with an analysis of important issues and potential solutions in ways significantly different from other disciplines.

Typically the public views obesity as a medical issue and one to which doctors and scientific researchers should find solutions. This short article provides a superb example of the important contribution that geographers can make to a major societal problem.

### So, what is the connection between geography and obesity?

Consider the following definition of geography as you and the students think about obesity and geography: **What is where, why there, why care?**

- Ask your students to brainstorm *where obesity in Canada is and why the rates differ across the country*. Direct students to discuss the **spatial patterns** of obesity, as identifying and discussing the spatial pattern is the **where** that is so important to the discipline of geography.
- Discuss **why** obesity is more prevalent in some areas than in others at different scales. For example, does obesity tend to more of an issue in rich or poor countries, in more urban or more rural provinces, in suburban neighbourhoods or in inner city neighbourhoods?
- Your students may introduce ideas such as genetics, lack of exercise, availability and quality of food, economic status. What are the geographic aspects of these suggestions? Is healthy food more easily available in some areas than in others? Are people in some areas more able to afford healthier food than in other areas? Is getting exercise easier in some areas than in other areas?

### In addition to identifying the spatial patterns of obesity and suggesting some reasons for these patterns, what else can geographers contribute to the problem of obesity in a meaningful way?

This article looks at obesity at the community level, and discusses how urban design has an impact on obesity rates in communities. Some urban designs lend themselves to citizens being more active as part of their normal daily routine, and as a result, obesity is often less of an issue in communities utilizing these types of designs. Consider suburban living where it seems as if the residents depend upon their cars for many of their daily excursions, compared to a situation where citizens can easily walk or bicycle to their destinations.

We can leave the medical aspects of obesity issue to the appropriate professionals, but indeed geographers can make a significant contribution to the battle against obesity through appropriate urban planning. Many geography and social studies courses contain an urban component, and this article can act as great stimulus to engage the students in the study of urban design and planning.

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## 10 Teaching Ideas that Connect Obesity and Urban Geography

1. What does an obesogenic landscape, a food desert, and a food swamp look like? Have students create a presentation with 5 -10 landscape images that illustrate each concept.
2. Look at some urban plans from the past. Although they were designed for purposes other than combatting obesity, the designs allow, and even promote, exercise through walking and biking as part of the citizens' everyday activities. Look specifically at the Radburn Plan designed by Clarence Stein and Henry Wright of the late 1930s, and Clarence Perry's Neighbourhood Units of the early 1930s. Wildwood Park in Winnipeg is one of very few Radburn Plan communities ever built. (see "Wildwood Childhood" pages 54-61, in the July/August 2005 issue of *Canadian Geographic*) As well, several Canadian military bases such as Greenwood, NS were developed using the Radburn Plan as a model. What did Stein and Wright see as the benefits of the Radburn Plan? Why were so few Radburn style communities developed?
3. Have students research Frank Lloyd Wright's Broadacre City concept and compare it with the Radburn Plan, Neighbourhood Units, and New Urbanism. Wright's plan focuses on the use of the automobile and the idea that each family has a one acre piece of land. As a result, the city is very spread out, and walking to various destinations is not practical.
4. Examine the New Urbanism movement that started in the 1980s. Many aspects of these developments are compatible with the goal of creating a non-obesogenic landscape. Celebration, Florida, created by the Disney Corporation, is a great example.
5. Have the students create a list of things that are already part of their communities' infrastructure that encourage/promote an active lifestyle. Then they can suggest 5 – 10 additional things that could be done to allow for even greater incorporation of exercise into the residents' daily life. Don't forget things such as urban parks, playgrounds, and zoos.
6. Examine the recently developed walkability and bikeability indexes. Have students determine how their communities would rank and what changes could be made to improve their ranking? Find creditable information at the following websites:
  - o "The Bike Factor" page 27, *Canadian Geographic*, June 2012
  - o "Clean Commute" pages 40 – 50, *Canadian Geographic*, June 2012
  - o "Bicycles as City Transportation" pages 8 – 15, *Canadian Geographic*, June/July 87
  - o "This town is made for walking" page 28, *Canadian Geographic*, October 2008
  - o "Back-to-the-future urbanism: Is New Urbanism the answer to suburbia's dying communities?" <http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/magazine/mj06/indepth/communities.asp>
  - o "Montreal among top bike sharing cities" *Canadian Geographic*, December 2013 <http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/blog/posting.asp?ID=978>
  - o A lesson plan developed with the BC Grade 9 curriculum in mind, but it could easily be used within the context of activities linked to the Geography of Obesity. "Cycle Therapy: Healthy Energy" [http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/atlas/LessonPlan\\_Pdf/BC\\_9-12\\_CycleTherapy.pdf](http://www.canadiangeographic.ca/atlas/LessonPlan_Pdf/BC_9-12_CycleTherapy.pdf)

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7. Examine the top 50 biking cities in the US, the worst biking cities in the US and the best in the world at the following website: <http://guide.bicycling.com/ride-maps/featured-rides/2014-americas-best-bike-cities>. What makes a community a good biking community? What are some of the best and worst biking communities in Canada?
8. Invite a town planner in to talk with the students about local efforts to make their community more exercise friendly.
9. Examine Canadian cities to see what has been done to encourage biking in the city. For example new developments must provide bicycle parking and shower/change rooms for the people who work in the building.
10. Examine the move to the suburbs in Canadian and American cities. What are the push and pull factors that have caused so many people to flee the inner city in favour of the suburbs? How important was our love of automobiles in the suburbanization process? What problems arise for the city when many residents and businesses move to the suburbs? How are cities trying to maintain vibrant downtowns?
  - o “Wheels, The Car as a Cultural Driving Force” pages 44 – 53, *Canadian Geographic*, Dec89/Jan90
  - o “Driving Ourselves Sane” pages 54 – 62, *Canadian Geographic*, May/June 98
  - o “Futureville” pages 44 – 60, *Canadian Geographic*, June/July 2006
  - o “Neighbourhood Fusion” pages 62 – 63, *Canadian Geographic*, July/August 2005