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NEW STUDY ESTIMATES U.S. SPENDS BILLIONS OF DOLLARS ON CHILDHOOD ASTHMA CAUSED BY ROADWAY POLLUTION

AVERAGE COST $3000 PER Affected FAMILY; MANY COSTs BORNE BY TAXPAYERS

AMHERST, Mass. (November 5, 2014)—Asthma caused or worsened by living near major roadways costs Los Angeles County $441 million in 2007 dollars, new peer-reviewed research finds. In an article published today in the *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, researchers from University of Massachusetts Amherst, University of Southern California and University of Basel calculated the total costs that asthma imposes on a child and her family, including the direct costs of medical care and the problem of having to manage and live with the disease. They also measured the specific impact of two forms of air pollution on those costs: pollution that comes from living near a major roadway, and higher levels of ground-level ozone or nitrogen dioxide.

The researchers found that living near a major roadway causes new cases of childhood asthma, while regional air pollution (nitrogen dioxide and ozone) triggers breathing problems in children who suffer from asthma. These factors together impose tremendous economic costs on asthma sufferers, their families, and their communities. In Los Angeles County in 2007 alone, the burden of childhood asthma was approximately $3,000 per affected family. Near-roadway pollution and ozone together cost $441 million. Because 32 percent of children in the county are covered by public health insurance, an equivalent proportion of those direct costs are borne by taxpayers.

The researchers also illustrated how costs could vary under alternative scenarios for future urban redevelopment to reduce the pollution that causes climate change. They found that an increase in the percentage of the population exposed to near-roadway pollution can significantly undermine the benefits of lower regional air pollution levels. In order to reduce the costs of childhood asthma, it will be important not only to reduce global warming pollution, but also to take other steps, such as reducing the number of schools situated close to major roads, or installing barriers between housing and roads.

“Family and government spending to cover the direct costs of pollution-related asthma is a tragic and entirely avoidable loss to society,” said lead author Sylvia Brandt. “In 2007, the public money spent to treat pollution-caused asthma attacks in Los Angeles could have paid for 135,000 chicken pox vaccinations, public insurance for 33,000 children, or full-time preschool for 2,000. We could achieve these savings through good public policies, such as laws to prevent schools from being built near major roads.”

While the figures in this study are specific to Los Angeles County, many children live near major roadways throughout the United States. Therefore, the study’s results are relevant to other large urban areas. The authors estimate that their findings about local spending imply billions of dollars spent on a national scale.