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Consumer lifestyle approach to US energy use and the related CO₂ emissions

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Abstract

Historically, a sectoral approach (based on the industrial, transportation, commercial, and residential sectors) has shaped the way we frame and analyze issues of energy conservation and CO₂ mitigation. This sectoral categorization, however, is limited in its capacity to reveal the total impacts of consumer activities on energy use and its related environmental impacts. In this paper, we propose an alternative paradigm, called the Consumer Lifestyle Approach (CLA), to explore the relationship between consumer activities and environmental impacts in the US. Estimates based on our methodology reveal that more than 80% of the energy used and the CO₂ emitted in the US are a consequence of consumer demands and the economic activities to support these demands. Direct influences due to consumer activities (home energy use and personal travel) are 4% of the US GDP, but account for 28% and 41% of US energy use and CO₂ emissions, respectively. Indirect influences (such as housing operations, transportation

operations, food, and apparel) involve more than twice the direct energy use and CO₂ emissions. Characterization of both direct and indirect energy use and emissions is critical to the design of more effective energy and CO₂ emission policies. It may also help erode the false dichotomy of "them versus us" (industrial polluters versus consumers) references to the locus of responsibility for control of energy use and CO₂ emissions.



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Keywords

Household; Consumption; Embodied energy

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