

WORKING P A P E R

Neighborhood Effects and the Role of Communities in Restructuring

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Key Findings

- Neighborhoods with concentrated poverty are unhealthy.
- Providing diverse, desirable destinations within walkable distances from residences promotes physical health.
- Appropriate street design can bring people onto the street, increasing the likelihood that they will become acquainted and thus also increasing public safety.
- Public spaces that are well maintained and feature planned events attract people and promote community cohesion.
- Neighborhood health can be promoted by increasing the availability and visibility of healthy products and decreasing the availability and visibility of unhealthy ones such as alcohol and fast food.

Importance of Neighborhoods

The extensive infrastructure damage that New Orleans has suffered will require extensive rebuilding. However, the need to rebuild also provides an opportunity to create environments that promote health. Neighborhoods are the fundamental geographic units in which people are located. Since the mission of public health is to assure conditions in which people can be healthy, every effort should be made to use knowledge of what constitutes a healthy neighborhood in order to create a healthier New Orleans.

Neighborhoods play a critical role in health. They 1) determine exposure to a wide variety of opportunities for healthy and unhealthy behaviors, 2) offer the sights, sounds, inputs, and information about what is normal and tolerated, and 3) are the most common settings in which people interact with others, and in which helpful and trusting relationships and ties can be developed. Neighborhoods are particularly important to youth, who are largely confined to their immediate neighborhoods, and also to the elderly and low-income residents, who may have less mobility. Neighborhoods are the source for housing, but they should also be a source of clean air, provide access to healthy foods, and facilitate daily exercise.

Concentrated Poverty

It is well known that neighborhoods with a high percentage of persons living below the poverty level are unhealthy and breed anti-social behaviors. Concentrated poverty has been consistently associated with poor educational outcomes, high crime, excessive cardiovascular deaths, and increased incidence of asthma, homicide and mental illness. Scattering housing for low-income individuals throughout middle and high-income neighborhoods “de-concentrates poverty” and provides opportunities for low-income individuals to be integrated into the mainstream. The State of Louisiana should strongly consider policies that avoid reconstituting neighborhoods with exclusively low-income individuals.

Importance of Access to Facilities/Proximity of Routine Destinations

The design of a neighborhood is closely correlated with health-related activities and pro-social or anti-social behaviors. For example, people are more likely to litter when there is already litter on the ground, and less likely to do so when an area is clean, and garbage cans are readily available.

Walking promotes health, and people are more likely to walk on a routine basis when there are many diverse services and destinations within a ½ -mile radius. According to the Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey of 2001, the typical walking trip for adults is 0.4 miles and for children under 12 is 0.3 miles. Ideally, reaching parks and outlets for fresh foods and produce should require a walk of less than 0.3 miles. Parks can consist of a small playground and green space—the size may be relatively unimportant. Having many small parks within easy walking distance is probably better than having a single large urban park that only a limited number of people can regularly access.

Daily physical activity is associated with a reduction in weight, but also lowers the rate of osteoporosis and cardiovascular risk (by decreasing blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and incidence of diabetes) and increases general psychological well being. In addition, promoting access to public transit within a ¼ mile radius of the residence may be more likely to encourage its use; public transit use may also reduce traffic and pollution, which are associated with asthma, and reduces automobile use, which is associated with obesity.

Physical Design of Structures: Housing, Streets, Parks

A stellar feature of traditional New Orleans neighborhoods is the porch in front of residential houses. It provides an opportunity for people to observe what goes on in the street and facilitates informal monitoring of street activities. A neighborhood where people can keep their “eyes on the street” may have less need for police and law enforcement.

Studies of housing design have shown that people who live in high-density residences are unlikely to become acquainted or to monitor the street, especially when there are too many units in a single entryway. Oscar Newman was able to show a reduction in crime and vandalism when the number of units per entry way did not exceed three. A smaller number of residents will encounter each other often, making it more likely that they will become acquainted and develop helpful and trusting relationships. Having windows and porches facing the street and good street lighting have also been shown to reduce crime. When people have a sense of ownership of their blocks, their homes, gardens and streets, they are more likely to keep them safe and clean.

Street design is important because it determines the distance to important destinations. Shorter distances increase the probability that people will walk, thus bringing more people onto the street. This in turn increases the potential for interactions among neighbors and others. A grid street design is preferable to winding roads and cul-de-sacs because it promotes routine walking. Bike paths and pedestrian infrastructure (i.e. safe,

well-lit, well-maintained and well-connected sidewalks and crosswalks) will facilitate regular physical activity, safety and also contribute to reducing traffic and pollution.

Parks provide a venue for physical activity, but they are also places where people go to relax or meet others. People often get their physical activity walking to a park, but once there they are frequently sedentary. Therefore, parks planners may want to consider providing benches, tables, and trees or covered areas for shade. Parks that contain facilities such as fields, basketball courts, playgrounds, and walking paths encourage more vigorous physical activity. Areas of beauty and interest, such as gardens or fountains, also draw people to parks.

Social Factors, Programs, Maintenance, and Support

How places are managed, scheduled, and maintained is also important. How attractive a place is depends on how well it is maintained, how friendly it seems, and what kinds of programs are scheduled there. Places that are not maintained will not draw people. What New Orleans has done so successfully for tourism should be extended to local neighborhoods and residents in terms of maintaining facilities and planning events. Regular efforts to maintain and reinvigorate neighborhood destinations and public spaces have multiple beneficial consequences. More people visit parks where there are events and other planned activities such as sports competitions than they do parks that are unscheduled. Staffing and outreach can increase community participation through sports leagues, classes, and clubs.

When places have multiple uses at various times of the day and across the days of the week, they tend to be safer. Simply having more people increases monitoring and reduces the risk of anti-social or risky behaviors. Schoolyards can become staffed parks after school hours and on weekends, increasing the usefulness of public spaces. Local events and activities increase connectedness among local residents. And feelings of neighborhood trust, cohesion, and helpfulness have been shown to be associated with lower mortality rates.

Alcohol Outlets

Alcohol outlets have been associated with a wide variety of negative health outcomes, including motor vehicle crashes, sexually transmitted diseases, assaults, and homicide. Alcohol is a drug that increases aggressiveness, reduces judgment and coordination, and is associated with the use of illicit drugs. The State should consider limiting alcohol licenses when rebuilding residential neighborhoods.

Exposure to Advertising, Consumer Goods, and Services

What people see on a daily basis influences them consciously and subconsciously and informs them about what is normal and expected. Thus one way to promote neighborhood health is to increase the availability of products that are healthy and decrease the availability of products that are unhealthy. Wealthier neighborhoods often have few billboards advertising unhealthy messages and fewer alcohol and fast food outlets; they are disproportionately concentrated in low-income neighborhoods. In all

neighborhoods, the number of healthy messages about diet, exercise and community service could be expanded, and alcohol, and tobacco advertising and other unhealthy messages can be limited through use of zoning.

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