

research snapshot

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Health Inequities Researchers Need to Engage Municipal Governments

What is this research about?

There has long been a connection between the way that a city is planned and the health of its residents. In the 19th century, urban planning led to sewage and water management systems that helped improve public health. But throughout the 20th century, the relationship between urban planning and public health was often ignored. Researchers tended to focus on short-term fixes to health problems (such as laboratory medicines and immunizations). Urban planners, on the other hand, facilitated the creation of sprawling, automobile-based cities. Today, “urban sprawl” has come to be associated with high rates of obesity and mental illness, among other things.

Since the 1970s, however, there has been a renewed interest in the role that social factors – like urban planning – can play in public health. It has been found that municipal governments can have an impact on our health, based on the kinds of living spaces they plan and develop. And yet the extent to which researchers have urged these governments to address health inequities remains unclear.

What you need to know:

The body of research on health inequities doesn't offer enough guidance to municipal governments. Too much emphasis is placed on individual behaviour and biomedical solutions (like access to health care services and drugs). Researchers need to offer governments more policy advice on health inequities.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers based in British Columbia looked at over 1000 studies of health inequities, going back to 1986. Their focus was research in the areas of health promotion, “Healthy Cities,” population health, and urban health. The goal? To study trends in health inequities research and to determine the extent to which scholars have called for municipal governments to take a greater role in improving our health.

What did the researchers find?

The amount of research on health inequities has increased a lot over the last 20 years. But these studies still tend to emphasize the importance of “healthy lifestyles” and “healthcare.” In other words, they tend to focus on individual solutions – “behavioural” and “biomedical” fixes. Only 17% of studies called for municipal governments to take a role in addressing health inequities in their cities. Some of these studies proposed that governments: launch public health campaigns; partner with other governments and organizations to work on health interventions; and deliver on existing responsibilities to improve public health. Studies out of Europe – and focusing on “Healthy Cities” and urban health – are the most vocal about the role that municipal governments can play in our health.

How can you use this research?

More funding and translation of research may help policymakers, especially at the municipal level, to stamp out health inequities in their cities. Future research may wish to look at how different political systems govern the health of their constituents. Such work could explain the lack of action on health inequities at the local level – in Canada and elsewhere. Future research may also wish to assess the extent to which municipal policymakers focus on health inequities. Regular efforts to review the body of knowledge on how social factors shape health will help policymakers make better decisions.

About the Researchers

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