

POLICY BRIEF

THE IMPACT OF URBAN DESIGN ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING



Urban design impacts mental health and wellbeing

Good mental health is pivotal for individual wellbeing and a thriving, resilient society. The physical and social environments of urban life can contribute both positively and negatively to mental health and wellbeing. Good mental health can improve our enjoyment, coping skills, and relationships, our educational achievement, employment, housing and economic potential, help reduce physical health problems, ease healthcare and social care costs, builds social capital, and decrease suicides. Cities are associated with higher rates of most mental health problems compared to rural areas. City dwellers have an almost 40% higher risk of depression, over 20% more anxiety, and double the risk of schizophrenia, in addition to more loneliness, isolation and stress. Globally, 1 in 4 people will experience mental health problems: mental health disorders account for 7.4% of the burden of disease, and are now the leading cause of long-term disability worldwide. There can be **no health without mental health**, so given the influx of the population into urban settings, sustainable city design is needed to promote and support good mental health and wellbeing.

Mental health and wellbeing is within the remit of urban planners, managers, designers and developers, so mind the GAPS:

Green places – There are important relationships between accessible green spaces and mental health and wellbeing. Access to natural settings in neighbourhoods and in the course of people’s daily routines is likely to improve and maintain mental health and wellbeing.

Active places – Positive, regular activity improves mood, wellbeing and many mental health outcomes. Embedding action opportunities from active transport to outdoor gyms into places helps integrate exercise, social interactions, and a sense of agency into daily routines.

Pro-Social places – Urban design should facilitate positive, safe and natural interactions among people and promote a sense of community, integration and belonging. This includes potentially vulnerable groups like refugees, migrants, young and older people, with multi-faceted engagement from passive observation to active participation. Creating interesting, flexible public places should involve citizens at each stage of design and development.

Safe places – A sense of safety and security is integral to people’s mental health and wellbeing. Urban dangers include traffic, getting lost, environmental pollutants, and risks posed by other people. Appropriate street lighting and surveillance, distinct landmarks, and people-centric design of residential, commercial and industry routes are important. A balanced approach is necessary: a safe environment improves accessibility but risk-averse city design can reduce action opportunities and people’s sense of agency and choice.

NEXT STEPS

Citymakers must consciously mind the GAPS for sustainable improvement of population mental health, putting the research into action through policies, plans, design, development and management. Meanwhile, funders need to invest in this high impact field. This is a moment of great opportunity, and action is needed today.