



Examining the role of urban street design in enhancing community engagement: A literature review



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ABSTRACT

Streets are an integral part of the built environment with the capacity to promote community engagement, as one aspect of health and well-being. However, there have been few attempts to synthesize published studies and interventions to gain a broader understanding of what street design features hinder or facilitate community engagement. Data was extracted from 30 eligible articles into 16 key topic areas or themes. The most frequent topic areas were 'Aesthetics and Upkeep' (18), 'Access to Resources/Facilities' (15), 'Security and Safety' (15), and 'Walkability' (14). This review advances our understanding of how streets can be designed to enhance community engagement.

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1. Introduction

The street is a prominent feature of the built environment that delineates space, enables movement and characterizes neighbourhoods. In an urban setting, the street is one of the most public of spaces and has the potential to foster community engagement. However, little is known about what aspects of street design facilitate or impede these beneficial outcomes. This literature review seeks to synthesize the current evidence and knowledge in this area.

1.1. Built environment

The built environment can be defined in a number of ways but essentially encompasses not just the availability but also the quality of parks, green spaces, sidewalks, public spaces, zoning, traffic, drainage systems and all the other “human-made space” where people live, work, play and commute (Renalds et al., 2010; Roof and Oleru, 2008). Over the past 20 years, the literature has increasingly documented the relationship between the built environment and chronic non-communicable diseases, including higher rates of obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular diseases (Renalds et al., 2010). A specific issue is how the physical design of many neighbourhoods has increasingly been seen as detrimental to social interactions, civic participation or community engagement (Semenza and March, 2009; Leyden, 2003). This is important because reduced community engagement is linked to poorer health, including chronic non-communicable disease and mental health issues (Bowling et al., 2006; Richard et al., 2009; Renalds et al., 2010).

This review addresses urban and suburban street design as a specific aspect of the built environment. Design elements (material, pavements, sidewalks, landscape, connectivity, lighting, shade, etc.) that influence interactions between vehicles, pedestrians and cyclists are a particular focus.

1.2. Community engagement and social capital

Within the literature, there is a myriad of terms used to discuss concepts similar or related to community engagement. For instance, civic engagement is often discussed as a form of community development that has political inclinations (Semenza and March, 2009). For the purposes of this review, we define community engagement as the ability of a group or network of people, bound either by interest or by geography, to interact with one another for support, to promote inclusivity and to organize social activities (Middleton et al., 2005; Bauman, 2001).

Community engagement can be seen as a social determinant that influences the health of individuals (World Health Organization (WHO), 2008). Higher community engagement within neighbourhoods can be linked to better physical and mental health of the community (Araya et al., 2006; Bauman, 2001). Social safety network and social inclusion are specific, documented social determinants of health that mutually influence community engagement and interaction (Mikkonen and Raphael, 2010).

Community engagement is often discussed within the context of social capital. Social capital can be defined as the social interactions, networks and relations that underlie perceived trust, reciprocity and action (Renalds et al., 2010; Semenza and March,

2009). The World Bank defines social capital as “the ability of individuals to secure benefits as a result of membership in social networks or other social structures” (Middleton et al., 2005, p. 128). One of the key components of social capital is strong social and community ties (Leyden, 2003). High social capital is linked with higher community engagement politically and socially (Leyden, 2003). There is evidence that higher social capital among individuals and communities is associated with better physical and mental health (Leyden, 2003). This review focuses on community engagement as one aspect of social capital that plays an important role in how communities living within a neighbourhood interact and organize with one another, whether socially or politically.

Overall, community engagement and social capital are indicators of quality of life and well-being. Furthermore, social participation is central to increasing social capital and cultivating empowerment, which is a central principle of the health promotion movement (Richard et al., 2009).

1.3. Research question

The relationship between the built environment and community engagement is at the intersection of health promotion and urban planning, and critical to developing healthy and engaging communities. However, there is little research on how different aspects of the built environment (e.g., street design) influence community engagement. We conducted a literature review in response to the question, “What is the role of street design in enhancing community engagement?”

2. Methods

2.1. Approach and scope

2.1.1. Search strategy

This literature review focuses on published articles in the following databases: MEDLINE, PsycINFO, Scopus, JSTOR, Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals and Canadian Periodicals Index Quarterly. The search was conducted in February 2014 and included academic articles that are peer-reviewed, in English and after January 1995. The search was further restricted geographically to the developed countries: Canada, United States, New Zealand, Australia and those in Northwestern Europe. Grey literature, such as books, reports and policy documents, was not included in this literature review to ensure peer-reviewed standard for each of the articles.

As there are a number of terms related to community engagement that discuss issues relevant to the research question, synonyms were included in the search to ensure that any important publications were not overlooked. Synonyms included “community engagement” OR “community involvement” OR “community development” OR “social capital” OR “social cohesion”.

The search was not limited by street typology and consequently synonyms of the term “street” (such as boulevard, avenue etc.) were included (Creating Complete Streets, 2010). In all search strategies, the keyword “street design” had a number of related synonyms searching the title, abstract and keywords of the text as

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