



The effectiveness of interventions in the built environment for improving health by addressing fear of crime

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Abstract

Understanding environmental conditions of the neighbourhoods can play a critical role in maintaining residents' health. This study examines a model that attempts to explain the direct and indirect influences of the design of street networks on residents' health and wellbeing. A total of 279 households participated in the study. The findings show that permeability can account for a significant proportion of the variance in residents' health and wellbeing. This study suggests that the design of street networks influences how people interact within the neighbourhood and consequently affect health. Residents living in highly permeable street layouts are statistically more likely to have a high perceived fear of crime and low social cohesion, thereby negatively impacting personal health than those living in less permeable streets. Although the presence of a stranger in the street leads one to

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have more pessimism about his/her own health, social cohesion enhances optimism about an individual's health.

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1. Introduction

Neighbourhood plays a critical role in health (Ellen et al., 2001). In the last few decades, research has identified the built environment as a significant potential contributor to public health (Cerin, 2011; Handy and Clifton, 2007). The World Health Organization launched a Healthy Cities Project Office in the late 1980s aimed at improving health and urban living conditions through controlling hazards in the built environment and creating nurturing communities and thereby contributing to sustainable development (WHO, 1995). A report by the American Planning Association also indicated that design and planning processes that neglect human behaviour and basic needs result in neighbourhoods that fail to provide the ingredients for positive interactions between people in communities (Ziegler, 2007). The report further observed that future development must take into consideration the interrelationships between human and the built environment to protect public health, safety and the character of residential neighbourhoods.

Research has identified many aspects of the social and physical environments that increase or decrease health and wellbeing. Our primary interest here is the influence of community design and social cohesion, objectively measured and subjectively perceived, on self-rated health in residential neighbourhoods in Malaysia. The structure of the built environment has gained prominence as one way to mend what ails our communities (Cohen et al., 2000). Social scientists have increasingly probed the alleged negative consequences of urban growth and population density for urban residents. One of the pathways through which aspects of the built environment might affect residents' health and safety is neighbourhood layout as it plays a significant role in residents' safety, perceived cohesion and physical activity (Leitzmann et al., 2007). This is an interesting realization of the architects and urban planners that the design of the built environment plays a significant role in human behaviour. It is believed that community design can foster greater social capital production by providing opportunities to interact and build trust in neighbourhoods. Increased interaction enhances cohesion allowing design to overcome outcomes associated with crime and fear of crime such as social isolation, and disparity among citizens from different ethnic backgrounds.

Finding ways to increase health and wellbeing may be especially important in Malaysian society which composed of different ethnic background. Malaysia is a multiracial, multi-cultural and multi-religion country with the majority of the population embracing Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism or Christianity. Malaysia needs to drastically reduce the incidence of crime and improve safety and quality of life while achieving rapid economic growth and maintaining racial harmony. Therefore, understanding the patterns of neighbourhood layout, social cohesion and individual wellbeing within this multiracial society can provide new insights that would be beneficial towards heterogeneous societies like Malaysia wherein the potential for intergroup conflict is inherent. Using survey data collected from racially and

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