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An evaluation of an urban renewal program and its effects on neighborhood resident's overall wellbeing using concept mapping



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ABSTRACT

Urban renewal programs aim to improve physical and socioeconomic position of neighborhoods. However, due to the intervention's complexity, there is often little evidence of their impact on health and health inequalities. This study aimed to identify the perception of a group of neighborhood residents towards a large-scale urban renewal program in Barcelona and to explore its effects and importance on their wellbeing using concept mapping methodology. Our results indicate that the majority of urban renewal projects within the initiative, including improved walkability, construction of new public spaces and more community programs, have positive and important effects on the overall wellbeing of participants. This study presents an innovative method that diverts from traditional outcome-based evaluations studies often used within this field.

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1. Introduction

In 2010, it was estimated that three quarters of Europe's population was residing in urban areas and it is predicted that this number will continue to grow (United Nations, 2010; World Bank, 2012). In order to accommodate these numbers, cities are continuously involved in developing areas through urban renewal projects that provide general improvements in physical infrastructure as well as boosting economic, political and cultural gains (Rydin et al., 2012; Spaans, 2004; United Nations, 2010).

Despite efforts in linking urban planning to health, there continues to be a lack of collaboration between these two sectors resulting in minimal considerations of health and health inequalities during the planning of renewal projects (Rydin et al., 2012; Thomson, 2008; Thomson et al., 2006). One of the consequences of this weak linkage is the limited research available on the evaluation of health effects of urban renewal projects due to reasons such as restrictions in the availability of data, inadequate baseline and post-intervention data, and insufficient time intervals to study the effects of projects on various health outcomes (Thomson et al., 2006). Of the existing evaluations, the Healthy Cities commission

has been successful in highlighting the importance of investment in transportation to improve accessibility, green space for physical activity, and better water and sanitation regulations to alleviate health risks (Rydin et al., 2012). Some studies focusing on smaller scale urban renewal projects have reported positive effects on the environment and economic status of the area affected in addition to small positive health impacts in self-rated health, mental health and mortality (Curtis et al., 2002; Thomson et al., 2006). However, despite this growing empirical evidence of the health effects of renewal projects, there remains limited understanding of the mechanisms causing these effects resulting in inadequate evaluations that may underestimate and undervalue the initiative as a whole (Petticrew et al., 2009; Thomson, 2008).

A possible solution to improve current evaluations would be the advancement from evaluations consisting of a single methodology, to the incorporation of various methodologies in order to explore the complex relationship between urban renewal and the health of residents. Traditionally, evaluations in this field have relied on quantitative studies looking at mortality, self-reported health status, employment status, education and household income, pre and post-intervention (Thomson et al., 2006). However, qualitative methods can contribute to these studies by providing a deeper understanding of the pathways linking urban renewal and health by capturing the resident's perspectives and experiences (Curtis et al., 2002; Muntaner et al. 2009; Petticrew et al., 2009). By studying the perceptions of overall wellbeing,

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qualitative methodologies can capture the immediate and short-term effects of urban regeneration projects while overcoming time limitation often reported by researchers conducting quantitative studies within brief time periods between the completion of the project and various health outcomes (Thomson et al., 2007; Thomson 2008). Self-perceived health or wellbeing measures have been recognized as good predictors of mortality and morbidity and a reliable indicator of overall health status (Mavaddat et al., 2011; Singh-Manoux et al. 2006). Furthermore, in a study by Simon et al. (2005), the majority of participants included aspects of health that went further than the physical dimensions of health concluding that self-perceived health is a “multidimensional concept” (Simon et al., 2005). In addition, from existing studies we know that there is an association between perceptions of neighborhood quality and self-perceived health (Haines et al. 2009; Petticrew et al., 2009).

While traditional qualitative methods like interviews and focus groups can provide some of these answers, Concept Mapping analyzes participant's perceptions on specific issues by providing pictorial depictions of the results (Burke et al., 2005; Kane & Trochim, 2007). Concept mapping (CM) was developed by Trochim (1989) as a management tool for organizations in the 1980s and later introduced in public health research in the early 2000s (Burke et al., 2005; O'Campo et al., 2005). This methodology would allow for a more objective and reliable analysis of data by using statistical tools and providing a conceptual framework that depicts how a group or a population perceived a particular population health situation (Burke et al., 2005; O'Campo et al., 2005). Furthermore, CM allows for greater involvement by participants in the analysis and interpretation of the results compared to these other qualitative methods (Kane & Trochim, 2007).

Barcelona (Catalonia, Spain), has been involved in major urban renewal projects such as the 1992 Olympics, and the revitalization of downtown areas such as the Ciutat Vella district and the Raval neighborhood in order to promote tourism while decreasing crime in the area (de Barcelona, 2011b; Borja, 2005). In 2004, the regional government of Catalonia launched one of the largest urban renewal projects to date in Europe known as the “Llei de Barris” (Neighborhoods Law) (Departament de Política Territorial i Obres Públiques (DPTOP), 2009). The initiative offered monetary resources for renewal projects within deprived neighborhoods by providing 50% of funding to the municipal governments that wanted to participate (DPTOP, 2009). Funding would go towards projects that have included the creation of parks, the improvement of traffic and transportation, the establishment of social and employment activities, and the availability of resources to reform community centers and public spaces (DPTOP, 2009). Since 2004, approximately 2 billion Euros have been invested across a total of 148 neighborhoods in Catalonia. Within Barcelona, 12 of 73 neighborhoods have participated with approximately 10% of 1.6 million people being directly affected by the changes (DPTOP, 2009). In addition, the Neighborhoods Law initiated the creation of two complementary initiatives. One being the “Health in the Neighborhoods” project that works closely with different community groups to improve the health of residents through various initiatives such as the promotion of physical activities in youth and seniors, drug intervention programs, and mental health prevention programs such as helping immobile residents have access to the outdoors (Fuertes et al., 2012). The other initiative, “Employment in the Neighborhoods”, oversaw all employment related activities by creating a space within the neighborhood where job-skill training courses are available. In addition, this program offered personalized services of Vitae preparation and job seeking within and outside the neighborhood (de Barcelona, 2011a).

Given the above considerations, the objective of our study was to evaluate the Neighborhoods Law and the perceptions of its effects on the overall wellbeing of residents from two Barcelona neighborhoods using a concept mapping methodology.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and setting

The study used CM, a mixed methods methodology, to develop a conceptual map of perceptions of residents affected by recent physical, social and economic changes that had occurred within their neighborhoods. This design combined the input by the residents followed by a series of multivariate analysis to represent the participant's views and how such views are related and are important compared to one another (Kane & Trochim, 2007). The study was completed within the first two Barcelona neighborhoods that participated in the Neighborhoods Law, Santa Caterina I Sant Pere (referred to as Casc Antic in the study) and Roquetes. The Casc Antic neighborhood consists of 1.1 km sq with a population of 22,632 residents (de Barcelona, 2011c). It forms part of the Ciutat Vella (Old Historical City with Roman origins) district located in downtown Barcelona with a population of mainly manual class workers, high unemployment rates and 37.1% of immigrants resulting in one of the largest immigrant populations in Barcelona (de Barcelona, 2011c). In recent years Casc Antic has also been involved in smaller scale urban renewal projects outside of the Neighborhoods Law in areas of reform like the Santa Caterina market. The Roquetes neighborhood, built in the second half of the 20s century, located on the outskirts of Barcelona with a population of 16,050 residents within an area of 0.6 km squares. It is characterized by its steep streets due to its location within the slope of the Collserola mountain. Similar to Casc Antic, the population in Roquetes consists of mainly manual workers and high unemployment rates compared to the rest of Barcelona and a fairly high immigrant population of 22.0% compared to Barcelona's 17.4% (de Barcelona, 2011c). In recent years, the biggest urban renewal project outside of the Neighborhoods Law in Roquetes has been the arrival of the Line 3 metro station. Table 1 provides a list of the various projects that were completed within the Neighborhoods Law, including the cost and duration.

Table 1 was used as reference in order to determine if changes mentioned by participants formed part of the projects within the Neighborhoods Law.

2.2. Participants

Purposive sampling techniques were used to recruit three groups of neighbors over the age of 18 and currently residing within one of two participating neighborhoods for minimum of 5 years continuously immediately prior to participation in the study; two within Casc Antic, and one within Roquetes. This sampling strategy was designed to identify participants that would be able to best address the focus question and not with the purpose to generalize to the whole population (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2002). Participants were recruited via existing community groups and centers in the two neighborhoods where researchers had previously established networks. In attempts to avoid response bias due to conflict of interest, participants belonging to neighborhood associations which may receive funding from the Regional or Municipal governments for their initiatives and programs, were excluded. Participants were informed and asked to attend both sessions. Because of the flexibility of the methodology, additional participants were welcomed to the second session using the same inclusion criteria and recruitment methods used in the first session in order to replace individuals who were not able to continue due to conflicting schedules or lacked commitment to the study.

2.3. Data collection and analysis procedure

Concept mapping consists of six steps; preparation, generation, structuring, representation, interpretation and utilization.

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