



To: Neighbourhoods and City Development

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Subject: Essential Evidence on a page: No 78 Neighbourhoods and mental well-being

Top line: While addressing physical and social disorder is a priority in neighbourhoods where this is a problem, mental well-being at large is dependent on a broader range of characteristics including facilities for active travel, public transport and green space.

The last decade has seen an acceleration in research examining the impact of neighbourhood characteristics on health outcomes. Yet, identifying specific means by which neighbourhoods affect mental well-being has received less attention. One innovative study described findings from qualitative work in Toronto, Canada.¹ This examined the means by which neighbourhood characteristics are related to mental well-being via concept mapping. Participants identified over 100 neighbourhood characteristics grouped into 6 clusters (see diagram) that were important for either good or poor mental well-being. Clusters were rated in terms of their importance to mental well-being.

Participants reported that some of the most important items for good mental well-being included friendliness of neighbours, sense of community, interaction between neighbours, neighbourhood governance, and residents being involved in neighbourhood change. Participants also noted that trees, bike paths, parks, and walkable areas were strongly related to good mental well-being. These findings were consistent with previous studies illustrating that green areas have positive effects on both physical and mental health or that absence of well-maintained green areas contributes to stress and negative mental well-being. In addition, and less well noted in the existing evidence base, participants reported that health and social services such as community centres, good public transport, recreation centres, day care for adults and children, affordable and well-maintained housing, employment training or placement programs, grocery stores, schools, and crisis intervention programs were all highly important for good mental well-being.



The findings suggest that for programmes concerned with reducing high levels of mental health problems among residents, focusing on eliminating neighbourhood problems and physical and social disorder would be a priority. If the neighbourhood has few mental health problems then focusing on facilities and resources to promote support amongst neighbours or ensuring that communities have ample green space, bike paths and walkable areas would be a priority. Finally, the data suggest that such approaches can be used equally in dense inner urban areas as well as in lower density neighbourhoods.

¹ O'Campo, P. Salmon, C., Burke, J. 2009 Neighbourhoods and mental well-being: What are the pathways? *Health and Place*, 15: 56-68.