Learning from Latin America's Cities for a Healthier Future

Starting in April of 2017, the Dornsife School of Public Health at Drexel University and partners throughout Latin America and in the United States will work together to study how urban environments and urban policies impact the health of city residents throughout Latin America. Their findings will inform policies and interventions to create healthier, more equitable, and more sustainable cities world-wide. The five-year project, called SALURBAL or "Salud Urbana en America Latina" (Urban Health in Latin America) is funded by the Wellcome Trust as part of its Our Planet, Our Health initiative, which focuses on research examining the connections between the environment and human health.



For the first time in history, more than 50% of the world's population lives in

cities, and it is estimated that by 2050 that percentage will reach 70%. The ways in which cities are built, organized and governed has important implications for human well-being, health, and environmental sustainability. However, evidence on the best urban policies to promote heath, health equity, and environmental sustainability is lacking.

Latin America provides a unique opportunity to study the links between the urban environment, health, and sustainability. It is among the most urbanized regions of the world, with 80% of the population residing in cities of varying sizes. Additionally, the region has often been at the forefront of innovative urban policies with possible health and environmental impacts.



Based at the Urban Health Collaborative at the Dornsife School of Public Health, the project brings together an interdisciplinary team including 11 institutions in Latin America, 3 institutions in the United states and several international organizations. This international team will collaborate to achieve the four overarching aims:

To quantify the contributions of city and neighborhood-level factors to differences in levels of health and health inequalities among and within cities.

This aim focuses on examining how elements of a city's physical and social environment (such as infrastructure, segregation by income or education, pollution, transportation options, food availability, and violence) impact the health of that city's residents, including their health behaviors, the illnesses they experience and at what age and how they die. To do this, researchers will pull together available data (such as built environment features, pollution levels, vital statistics, and survey data) and analyze them to see how various factors relate to health and health equity.

2 To evaluate the health and environmental impact of city and neighborhood-level policies and interventions by cacpitalizing on natural experiments.

This aim focuses on examining how urban policies and interventions may impact the health of city residents and the environmental quality of cities. These interventions could include improvements to housing, the creation of bike lanes and pathways, the establishment of pedestrian-only zones, or the creation of taxes that impact how people eat or consume tobacco. Researchers will evaluate interventions and policies that were established previously, and conduct evaluations of policies and interventions that are going to be enacted in the near future.

To employ systems thinking and formal systems simulation models to better understand the dynamic relations between the urban environment, health and environmental sustainability and identify the plausible impacts of selected policies.

To achieve this aim, researchers will work with stakeholders using systems thinking techniques to build "systems maps" that describe how various factors are interrelated and jointly affect health and environmental sustainability. They will use these maps to stimulate thinking about how interventions in these systems can improve outcomes. In a second stage, they will create simulated cities and neighborhoods and use these virtual worlds to explore how various policies may affect health and the environment.

To engage with the scientific community, the public, and policy makers to disseminate findings and translate them into policies and interventions.

This aim will focus on rapidly translating research findings into clear and actionable knowledge for policymakers, the public, and the scientific community. In this way, the project can ensure that its findings are disseminated efficiently and effectively so that civil society, policymakers and governments can invest in and build cities that are healthy, equitable, and sustainable.



Our Team

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