

Unsafe neighborhoods disable the elderly

May 27 2009

Elderly people who live below the poverty line and perceive their neighborhoods to be dangerous are more likely to have a mobility disability. Researchers writing in the open access journal *BMC Public Health* suggest that even perceiving one's neighborhood as unsafe can 'get into the body' and, ultimately, prove hazardous for elder health.

Cheryl Clark MD, ScD, from Brigham and Women's Hospital, Boston, led a team of researchers who studied 1,884 people aged 65 and older. They measured both the individuals' perceptions of danger and the levels of violent crime actually reported in the areas where they lived. Although these measures correlated quite well, it was the elder's sense that the neighborhood was unsafe that was most strongly associated with the development of a disability. Clark said, "Our results suggest that dangerous neighborhoods get from the mind into the body and engender mobility disability through psychosocial or psychological processes".

The researchers suggest that lower income elderly who live in unsafe neighborhoods may have fewer resources to cope with neighborhood stresses. Moreover, neighborhoods with high crime rates or a reputation for being dangerous may have more difficulty attracting businesses that provide material resources and services. Of course, the correlation between perception and reality also suggests that elders may have been reacting to actual crime events in their neighborhoods.

Clark concludes, "Our findings underscore the importance of neighborhood safety to healthy aging. Specifically intervening to improve perceptions of neighborhood safety at retirement age may be an

important step to reduce the risk of mobility disability among elders".

Perceived neighborhood safety and incident mobility disability among elders: the hazards of poverty; Cheryl R Clark, Ichiro Kawachi, Louise Ryan, Karen Ertel, Martha E Fay and Lisa F Berkman; [BMC Public Health](#) (in press), www.biomedcentral.com/bmcpublichealth/

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Citation: Unsafe neighborhoods disable the elderly (2009, May 27) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-05-unsafe-neighborhoods-disable-elderly.html>

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