

Access to green space reduces rich-poor divide in mental wellbeing

April 21 2015, by Stuart Forsyth

Having access to green spaces significantly reduces the gap in wellbeing between richer and poorer people a European study has found.

Socioeconomic inequality in mental wellbeing was 40% narrower among people reporting good access to green / recreational areas compared to those with poor access.

The research team say that green space is 'equigenic' because it appears that it may help in creating [health](#) equality between richer and poorer people.

The research showed that access to green / recreational space was the only neighbourhood characteristic tested which had this link to narrower inequalities in wellbeing. The study concludes that green space could have an important part to play in reducing socioeconomic health inequalities.

The study is published today in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* and was carried out by the Centre for Research on Environment, Society and Health (CRESH), which is shared by the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Researchers looked at data on 21,294 urban residents from 34 nations recorded in the 2012 European Quality of Life Survey (EQLS). They then measured mental wellbeing using the WHO-5 wellbeing index – which asks respondents five questions on how they have been feeling in

the preceding two weeks.

The measure of socioeconomic position distinguished between those who reported that they were able to make ends meet at the end of the month very easily or easily, fairly easily, or with some difficulty, and with difficulty or great difficulty.

Respondents also reported on how easy it was for them to access to five different neighbourhood facilities or services: recreational/green spaces, postal services, banking services, public transport and cultural services (like cinema, theatre or a cultural centre).

Adjustments were made to account for respondents' age, sex, illnesses limiting daily activities, education level and employment; as well as adjusting for reported neighbourhood problems such as noise, air quality, crime, violence, vandalism, litter and traffic congestion.

Socioeconomic inequality in mental wellbeing was 40% narrower among respondents reporting good access to green space, compared with those with poorer access. None of the other neighbourhood characteristics or services were associated with narrower inequality.

Study leader Professor Rich Mitchell of the University of Glasgow, said: "Our research supports the idea that environments could play a part in reducing inequalities in health, either in tandem with other social policies, or independently."

Previous studies have shown that greenspace has physiological and psychological benefits for an individual's health.

However, these studies did not compare green space with other features of the environment. This study was the first to compare different neighbourhood characteristics or services to see which were associated

with narrower socioeconomic health inequalities.

Professor Jamie Pearce of the University of Edinburgh said: "Many experiments have identified that contact with nature can be a balm to those who are stressed or fatigued. It seems that the beneficial effects of using green areas are stronger for those under greater levels of financial stress"

"While this kind of study could not prove greenspace was the cause of the reduced inequality there are two reasons why the effect is plausible: the narrowing of inequality did not occur among those not using their [green space](#); and experimental studies have proven that contact with nature can cause improved mental wellbeing."

Prof Mitchell added "We believe that some environments can reduce [health inequalities](#). We call these 'equigenic' environments, because they seem to create equality. If societies cannot, or will not, narrow the financial gap between richer and poorer people, research should explore whether these environments can help stop that wealth gap becoming a health gap."

Provided by University of Glasgow

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