Neighbourhood Parks and Health Outcomes

Recent research from geography, epidemiology, and public health suggests that "where you are" affects your health outcomes as much as "who you are". Researchers are now studying everyday health-relevant features within the immediate neighbourhood context, such as stores to purchase nutritious food, and facilities for exercise.

Green space has been linked with better measures of self-discipline and ability to concentrate among children, and stronger social ties in adults. Parks provide important opportunities for children’s outdoor play in the urban environment particularly in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Results of a recent study of neighbourhood parks and contrasting health outcomes in Montreal by Cohen and Ross suggest that park quality varies by neighbourhood-level health status and is generally lower among poor health neighbourhoods and higher as health status improves. Parks in poorer health neighbourhoods have limited provision of facilities for physical exercise, and location drawbacks due to nearby industrial sites and multilane highways. Parks in the healthiest neighbourhoods contain more high-quality features, specifically facilities for recreation and physical activity.

Poor park quality in poor health neighbourhoods may be an example of what MacIntyre (2000) identifies as deprivation amplification – in places where people are poorer, more ill, and have fewer personal resources such as money or private transport, local facilities that may encourage people to lead healthier lives are also poorer.

The ways in which these parks vary may have serious implications for the utility of facilities and the promotion of healthy behaviours. These consequences could be mediated by community social norms guiding park use or individual mobility in terms of accessing facilities further from home.