

Space for Healthy Communities:

An Exploration of the Relationship between Public Space and Health in Four Toronto Neighbourhoods

The IRONhI research infrastructure has supported the graduate work of two students from the University of Toronto's Department of Geography. The most recent of these studies looked at the relationship between public space and health in the four low-income IRONhI neighbourhoods. There is an increasing awareness that neighbourhood attributes of social, economic, service and built environments influence health. This study's objective was to investigate the relationship between access to public space and self-rated health status, specifically those aspects of public space which foster place attachment and may address urban health concerns in multicultural communities. CUHI Centre Coordinator Alexis Kane Speer and Professor James Dunn analyzed data collected from a community health survey conducted with residents in four diverse Toronto neighbourhoods with contrasting built forms for project. The project was titled *Space for Healthy Communities: An Exploration of the Social Pathways between Public Space and Health*.

The investigation was framed by a model that conceptualized the pathways between the lived experience of space and health as influenced by the physical and mental dimensions of space. The lived dimension of space impacts an individual's likelihood of establishing place attachment. The model also emphasized that there are many different ways to experience the same space.

The findings partially supported the model used. The results suggested that indicators of both physical and mental space are related to lived space. Furthermore, the results support the hypothesis that there is a relationship between the lived dimension of space and health, its most important impacts being on mental health. Mental health appears to be the outcome most affected by indicators of place attachment.

Several of these relationships were found more commonly in the densest populated of the four neighbourhoods. Variations were found between foreign- and Canadian-born residents, which suggest that each subgroup values different elements of public space. Nearly one quarter of participants indicated that public space concerns were among their top neighbourhood priorities, which suggests that residents are aware that neighbourhood public spaces play an important role in their local social environment.

Findings from this study has been submitted to the pending "Healthy Communities and the Built Environment" publication of the Public Health Agency of Canada and the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition, as well as presented at this year's International Conference on Urban Health in Vancouver.