

## BELIZE CITY &amp; CLIMATE CHANGE: PLANNING BRIEFS

# HEALTH & WELLNESS



## Unstable family environments are contributing to high rates of domestic and gang violence in Belize City, which has become known as the epicenter of violence in Belize.

The south side of Belize City is considered an extremely dangerous place to raise young children. The gang violence in this area and throughout Belize City has been increasing steadily. While there is no single documented cause of the increased violence, studies have shown that volatile family dynamics and absentee fathers contribute to an increase in gang-related activity. These factors are associated with a lack of emotional stability, increased aggression, and violent behavior, particularly in young boys and male adolescents. Belize City also suffers from high rates of domestic violence and child abuse, a problem often made worse when the country experiences environmental shocks. Violence can influence child development and cause unhealthy behaviors to be perpetuated. These volatile home environments may be contributing to the high level of gang-related violence among young males, which extends to the city's streets, making it unsafe for residents and visitors.

## Schools lack reliable access to potable water and sanitation supplies that are vital for childhood development and hygiene.

According to UNICEF, 35% of Belize's schools reported they do not provide toilet paper and do not have any soap for children to use while washing hands. Girls particularly are at a disadvantage due to the lack of sanitary supplies in schools. Children are extremely vulnerable to diseases from a lack of access to clean, safe water, and proper sanitation. Children are also at high risk for both physical and cognitive damage to development, or even deadly illnesses, from untreated and contaminated water. Without access to clean water, children are prevented from washing their hands properly or as often as they should prevent disease transmission. According to UNICEF, schools on the south side of Belize City have reported untreated and unreliable water for their students and staff. Schools are unable to implement proper hygiene and children are less likely to make long commutes to school because there is improper sanitation. Unsafe water, sanitation, and hygiene have also been linked to dropout rates and poor academic performance.

## Climate impacts will further disrupt potable water access.

Belize City is extremely vulnerable to hurricanes, storms, and other impacts of climate change due to the country's coastal location. Natural disasters, such as hurricanes and tropical storms, can contaminate and damage the water supply. During storm events, pollutants from the ground, infrastructure, homes, and cars can end up in the water supply. This increases exposure to minerals, metals, and other toxins, and potentially makes the water unsafe for consumption. As a result, families, and schools may not have access to potable water after storm events.

## Belize City is particularly vulnerable to health-related complications due to inadequate healthy food access, lifestyle education, and exercise.

Obesity has increased in Belize, and across Latin America and the Caribbean. This is attributed to unhealthy eating habits due to the lack of access to healthier foods and low levels of exercise. In Belize, foods high in sugar and salt are more accessible and more affordable than healthier foods. Often, food packages do not include a complete list of ingredients, which inhibits the understanding of nutrition. Unhealthy eating habits as a child may contribute to health complications in adulthood, such as obesity, gastrointestinal problems, cardiovascular diseases, and diabetes. Culturally, health is associated with a larger body frame, especially in children, but this may have long-term health implications in cases of obesity. Belize City has the highest concentration of children under five suffering from obesity.

While exercise can help address these potential health problems, accessing safe space for exercise can be difficult. Belize City's subtropical climate, with extremely high temperatures during the dry season, can discourage walking, biking, and exercise. Public spaces and streets are not designed with heat mitigation considerations, such as trees to provide shade. Many streets also lack sidewalks and are vulnerable to flooding and poor drainage. Climate change will increase both temperatures and the severity of storm events, making it even more challenging to exercise outside.

# ECONOMY IN BELIZE PLANNING GUIDANCE

## **Partnerships with organizations to provide resources and educate children and families on hygiene.**

Bringing awareness and resources through partnerships can help promote and educate communities on healthier hygienic practices. Partnerships with private and nonprofit organizations can lead to funding to maintain hygienic supplies, including sanitary supplies, soap, and toilets, in schools and in communities of need. Providing these resources in homes and at school will increase children's knowledge of good hygiene and facilitate good hygiene practices. Additionally, integrating awareness and education programs into school curriculums can help to educate a larger number of children. Hygiene education learned at school can influence home habits as well.

## **Increase access to healthy food options through community gardens and other food delivery services to promote a healthy lifestyle.**

Open spaces like parks can be redesigned to accommodate sustainable community gardens and places to exercise. This will help to increase the availability of healthy food and promote healthy lifestyle choices. Community gardens can also create social, educational, and nutritional benefits across a neighborhood or city. Through these spaces, access to healthy food is increased, as well as awareness of the importance of proper diet and nutrition in everyday life. Educational community gardens could also be created in schools allowing children to participate in expanding access to nutritious foods in their diets. Resources can also be provided to help families start home vegetable gardens. Home gardens help parents provide healthy food options for their children, and can be especially helpful for single-parent households that could not otherwise afford more expensive, healthier foods. Home gardens can also serve as a source of income as excess vegetables and fruits can be sold at community markets. Partnering with organizations that work to provide resources to improve the quality of food in schools and across other delivery services, could also be a way to increase access to healthy food across Belize.

## **Implement urban design techniques to promote mental and physical wellbeing.**

Urban planning measures can be implemented to make public spaces safer and more resilient to heat and water. Redeveloping or creating more parks and open spaces, and redesigning or implementing multimodal infrastructure through the creation of bike lanes, sidewalks, and crosswalks can improve the community's ability to exercise outdoors. Introducing more green infrastructure elements into the built environment such as increased vegetation, rainwater retention basins, and bioswales can help turn to make neighborhoods and public spaces more environmentally friendly and resilient. Green infrastructure also helps to mitigate extreme temperatures and improve air quality. Good urban design helps to promote vibrancy and walkability and helps to improve mental wellbeing.

## **ABOUT BELIZE ASSOCIATION OF PLANNERS**

Belize Association of Planners is a proactive professional planning organization committed to assuring social justice and promoting sustainability in the natural and built environment. We work to address relevant planning and development issues in Belize by working in partnership with the public and private sector and civil society organizations, and the people of Belize through research, education, advocacy and action. For more information, visit [belizeplanners.org](http://belizeplanners.org).

These planning briefs were made in partnership with students from New York University's Wagner School of Public Service.

## **Prevent gang violence through the implementation of programs and supportive services for children and parents.**

Research has linked gang violence and aggression in home environments. Providing parents with training and support programs can help them manage challenging family dynamics, such as the demands of running single-parent households. After-school and community programs for children and teens can help them stay engaged, productive, and for some, escape a volatile home environment, all of which can benefit their development. Targeting the most at-risk youth to provide them with tools to manage their aggression and develop essential job skills can contribute to healthier lifestyle choices among this population. Youth who are able to gain employment can help contribute additional income to their families, which can help to address violence, which is heavily linked to poverty. Lastly, focusing resources on underserved communities to improve housing, schools, and public spaces can help expand opportunities and make the community safer for neighborhood residents contributing to better mental wellbeing.