

In what ways do spatial environments affect health? What kinds of policy implications are suggested by research on neighborhood effects?

The quality of spatial environments has serious implications for health at both an individual and collective level. Sociologists have demonstrated that the meso-level impacts health across the lifespan from birth weight (Morenoff) to mortality in elderly populations (Klinenberg). These effects are produced not by the individuals who inhabit different neighborhoods but by institutional and structural features of neighborhoods themselves. In a review of the literature on “neighborhood effects” and social processes, Robert Sampson, Jeffery Morenoff and Thomas Gannon-Rowley note that meso-level social problems are often interrelated. Poverty, crime, educational advancement, joblessness, and health interact dynamically—creating neighborhood ‘hot spots’ where the sum total of these effects can often mean poor health at best and death at worst for those that inhabit them.

Klinenberg describes how neighborhood factors combined to create a perfect storm for the elderly, urban, poor during the Chicago heatwave of 1995. The majority of these deaths were preventable simply by an air conditioner (and the ability to pay for its attendant costs). Yet, over 700 people died than normally do during this time of year. Social isolation resulting from neighborhood demographic changes, fear of the devastating financial and/or physical effects of crime in violent neighborhoods, lack of safe public spaces, and changes in the provision of social services resulted in the high death toll of seniors.

For example, seniors that lived in violent and even marginal neighborhoods were afraid to go out on the street because they knew that an attack, however unlikely, could result in death given their fragile health status. Along these lines, a robbery could have devastating financial consequences for those living on a limited income. Seniors that had access to shared public space that they perceived as safe where they could go to stay cool were more likely to survive. In this way, the conditions of the neighborhood had a clear causal influence on the whether a senior was able to survive the heatwave.

James Kirby's work further supports the link between health and spatial environments by demonstrating that access to health care is related to the rate of flux in neighborhood populations.