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Reading - The Wealth Connection in Public Health

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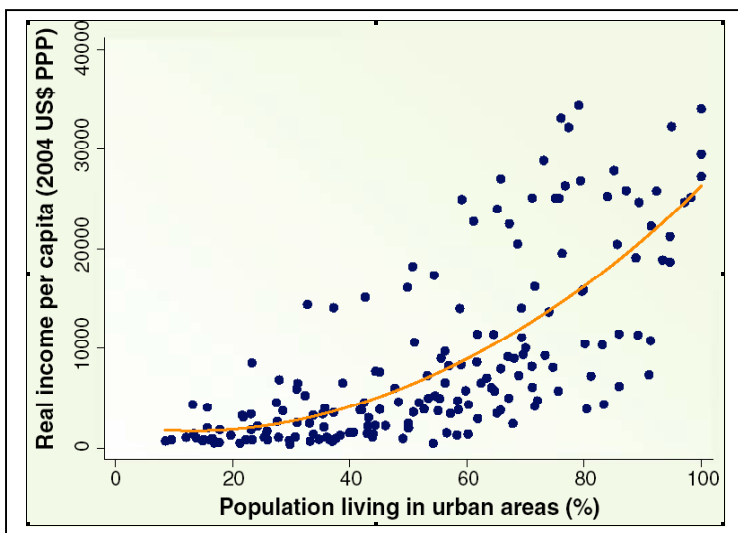
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Module 5 – Lesson 6: *The Wealth Connection in Public Health*

In general, residents of cities fare much better than people who live in rural areas. City dwellers tend to live longer, have lower infant mortality and experience fewer diseases. Average per capita income also rises in cities as seen below. People living in cities from the 180 countries sampled in the study have a much better chance of earning high wages. The data below are adjusted to U.S. rates so that they can be compared.



However, urban neighborhoods vary considerably with respect to measures of public health. Some urban communities are among the most dangerous places to live anywhere on earth with respect to disease risk, violence and malnutrition.

The challenge of understanding why public health measures vary so much among neighborhoods has been the focus of study by health researchers for decades. One variable that keeps rising to the surface is wealth. The data suggest that wealthier neighborhoods enjoy higher measures of health. While this may not be surprising, the factors that enter into the connection of health and wealth are intriguing. In fact, many researchers suggest that the way cities are organized may be even more important than the wealth itself. In this lesson, we explore this complex relationship.

Take, for example, food choices. The data are clear that the food you eat has a huge impact on your long-term health. The right diet can lower your lifetime risk of cancer, heart disease and diabetes. However, access to stores selling healthy foods is one of the factors linked to wealthy neighborhoods.

Researchers from the University of Michigan found that poor urban neighborhoods had little access to supermarkets selling healthy foods. They studied urban communities in Maryland, New York and North Carolina and found that only 19% of the food stores in poor African American neighborhoods were big enough to have a full range of healthy foods. This compares to 42% of stores in more affluent neighborhoods. Sadly, the only advantage poor communities had over their wealthy neighbors was an excess of liquor stores selling mostly alcohol and cigarettes.

How does a city manage such an inequality? Education programs on healthy eating won't work if the residents can't get to the stores that sell such foods. Clearly, municipal governments must create incentives to encourage large supermarkets to locate in poor neighborhoods.

The connection of wealth to food choice is just one example. Other impacts of wealth disparity in neighborhoods leads to reduced access to hospitals and doctors, fewer public parks with lower biodiversity and an increase in high-risk facilities such as trash transfer stations and municipal bus storage barns.

As daunting as these problems may seem, the good news is that they are all related to infrastructure. In sustainable city design, wealth is not a factor in placing hospitals, supermarkets and public transportation hubs. As cities continue to grow, the more equal distribution of these amenities will act to lessen the wealth gap for healthy neighborhoods.

Closer to Home Boston
Metropolitan Area: *Boston Grows Its Own!*
Local Food for Underserved Neighborhoods

The health gap between rich and poor neighborhoods is often most evident when it comes to supermarkets and food availability. We all know how important it is to make healthy food choices. However, if your neighborhood is poor and has very few supermarkets, you are forced to buy your food at convenience stores or fast food restaurants. Definitely, not a healthy set of choices.

Concerned residents of Boston and nearby communities are responding to this lack of healthy food by growing their own. One organization involved in this effort is **The Food Project**.

Started in 1991, their mission is to “*grow a thoughtful and productive community of youth and adults from diverse backgrounds who work together to build a sustainable food system. They produce healthy food for residents of the city and suburbs and provide youth leadership opportunities. Most importantly, they strive to inspire and support others to create change in their own communities*”. Local residents and students, like those pictured below do the farming.



Cultivating 31 acres on a farm outside Boston and also in urban gardens, The Food Project produces 250,000 lbs. of food that is sold throughout Boston in farmers' markets. Half of all that is grown is donated to homeless shelters.

The philosophy of the Food Project is to grow food products in an organic and sustainable practice that will enhance the environmental health of the communities. They are even growing food on a rooftop garden at the Boston Medical Center as well as three terrestrial gardens in the Dudley Neighborhood. They hope that by engaging young urban dwellers like yourself that they can help empower you to be a neighborhood steward. They hope that working at the Food Project will help you take an active role in solving the food inequality in Boston neighborhoods.

You can find out more about the Food Project by going to their website or calling their information hotline:



<http://www.thefoodproject.org/>