



## HEALTH IN ALL POLICIES: HOUSING

# Mental Health and Social Cohesion

Housing conditions and neighborhood characteristics have the potential to benefit or harm our health in significant ways. For example, an established body of scientific evidence links unhealthy home environments with physical illnesses such as lead poisoning.<sup>1</sup> More recently, researchers have been exploring the connections between home and community environments and mental health. This policy guide will highlight some of the research connecting housing and mental health and identify opportunities to advance mental health and community cohesion through improvements in the built environment.

### The Home Environment

Living conditions play a large part in our physical, mental, and social health, although the total impact of the built environment on well-being is difficult to quantify.<sup>1</sup> Attributes of the built environment may impact our health directly, like exposure to tobacco smoke leading to asthma, while other attributes like exposure to noise pollution may not have a causal relationship with a specific health outcome.

Established research points to a variety of housing-related factors that could negatively impact mental health.<sup>2</sup> The presence of health hazards like lead, mold, and pests is linked to stress.<sup>3,4,5</sup> Similarly, living in cramped, loud, or unaffordable housing can lead to chronic stress.<sup>6,7,8</sup> Stress plays a critical role in both physical and mental health.<sup>9</sup>

Because people in the United States spend an average of 70 percent of their time in their homes, it is not surprising that living in an unhealthy or unsafe home is associated with increased depression and anxiety.<sup>10,11</sup>

### Ongoing Research

Ongoing research aims to help identify strategies to improve mental health through improvements in the built environment. One such study is the Boston Public Health Commission's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). Modeled after CDC's BRFSS, the Boston Public Health Commission conducts a citywide BRFSS survey every other year to collect information

about the self-reported health of Boston residents.<sup>12</sup> According to data collected by the 2010 Boston BRFSS, 9.4 percent of Boston residents reported experiencing persistent sadness.<sup>12</sup> Of those, 16.9 percent reported living in public housing while only 7.6 percent reported living in non-public housing.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, of the 17.3 percent of adults who reported experiencing persistent anxiety, more reported living in public housing (19.5%) than in non-public housing (16.3%).<sup>13</sup>

To further examine the link between housing conditions and mental health the Boston Public Health Commission, Boston Housing Authority, and the Committee for Boston Public Housing launched the [Integrated Pest Management \(IPM\) Impact Study](#).

This ongoing study will examine the relationship between the intensity of IPM efforts, an effective and environmentally sensitive approach to pest management, and health outcomes at several Boston Housing Authority properties. The hypothesis is that more intensive IPM activities will be associated with greater health outcomes.<sup>14</sup> Researchers will examine self-reported depression and anxiety, among other health outcomes.<sup>13</sup>

### The Neighborhood Environment

Low-income neighborhoods provide fewer opportunities for residents to access healthy foods and safe space for physical exercise,

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which in turn increases the prevalence of obesity and other chronic diseases.<sup>15</sup> Poverty, obesity, and physical inactivity are all associated with poorer mental health outcomes.<sup>16</sup> Other community-level factors that may negatively impact mental health include: crime, violence, graffiti, and the presence of vacant properties.<sup>17,18,19,20</sup>

Systemic factors like racial, economic and political dynamics also impact mental health. For that reason, it is important to consider the community-level impact of these far-reaching systemic dynamics.

### Social Cohesion

The degree to which we identify with our neighbors and feel safe within our neighborhoods can also impact our overall health. Social isolation has been implicated in poorer health outcomes for low-income, minority, and elderly populations.<sup>21</sup> According to findings from the 2003 California Health Interview Survey, low-income residents were more likely than those in other income brackets to describe the people living in their neighborhood as untrustworthy and unwilling to help each other.<sup>22</sup>

Low social cohesion makes it even more challenging for residents to come together to advocate for community improvements. On the other hand, research shows that higher social cohesion can mitigate stress and illness at the individual level.<sup>23</sup> At the community level, social cohesion plays an important role in mitigating the impact of broad economic and political dynamics like concentrated poverty and racism.<sup>24</sup> Programs and policies that aim to improve social cohesion may be beneficial as both public and mental health interventions.



### Moving toward Health Equity

Residents living in low-income and minority communities often lack access to basic goods

and services like affordable housing, public transportation, healthy food, high quality schools, and jobs. Fortunately, there are a growing number of interventions and strategies that can improve access to safe, affordable housing and bolster communities. Federal agencies, the private sector, civic institutions, states, and localities all have an important role to play in this goal.



### National Initiatives that Promote Mental Health and Social Cohesion

#### Healthy People 2020

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services sets 10-year goals and objectives for health promotion and disease prevention. Its newest iteration, Healthy People 2020, identified the social determinants of health as a priority.<sup>25</sup> CDC defines social determinants of health as, “the circumstances in which people are born, grow up, live, work, and age, as well as the systems put in place to deal with illness.”<sup>26</sup>

Healthy People 2020 identified the five basic determinants of health as:<sup>27</sup>

- Economic stability.
- Education.
- Social and community context.
- Health and healthcare.
- Neighborhood and built environment.

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Among the critical components of the neighborhood and built environment, Healthy People 2020 has developed national objectives for housing quality, crime and violence, environmental conditions, and access to healthy foods.<sup>27</sup>

### *White House Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative*

The White House Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative (WHNRI) is an interagency effort launched in September 2010.<sup>28</sup> The federal agencies involved include the U.S. departments of Education, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Justice, and Treasury.<sup>28</sup>

The WHNRI aims to positively transform communities through cross-sector collaboration. The Choice Neighborhoods Program, one of WHNRI's centerpiece programs, makes housing a catalyst for healthier communities.<sup>29</sup> Choice Neighborhoods aims to engage residents in the redevelopment process, simultaneously building social cohesion and social capital. Once built, safe, healthy, and affordable housing further supports community transformation.<sup>30</sup>

## Using Health Impact Assessment

### *South Lincoln Redevelopment HIA*

The South Lincoln Homes neighborhoods in downtown Denver are more than 50 years old and were in a state of decline in 2009.<sup>31</sup> With neighborhood redevelopment plans in the works, EnviroHealth Consulting conducted a health impact assessment (HIA) of Denver Housing Authority's redevelopment master plan.<sup>31</sup>

The HIA identified social and mental well-being, the natural environment, the built environment and transportation, access, and safety as key health determinants. As a result, Denver identified and adopted 37 health-related recommendations for the South Lincoln Homes redevelopment site, including:<sup>32</sup>

- New streetscapes
- Pocket parks
- Noise barriers
- New tree plantings.
- A walking loop
- Space for a farmers market

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