Recent Research on Urbanisation
Green Spaces and Well-Being of City Dwellers

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Reducing the Negative Effects of Urbanisation

As the world rapidly moves towards urbanisation, researchers and policymakers are hurriedly conducting studies to explore the ways of mitigating its negative effects. Recent research, for example, has found that people living in urban areas with more green space tend to report greater well-being than city dwellers that do not reside near parks, gardens, or other green spaces. The paper was published in the journal Psychological Science by Association for Psychological Science, which is a highly ranked empirical journal in psychology.

CITYGREEN looks into the details of this research, led by Dr. Mathew White from the University of Exeter Medical School, Cornwall, England.1

Methodology

The impact of green space was examined through a positive, evaluative measure of well-being, life satisfaction, as well as a more experiential marker of psychological ill-health, the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) scale. By using a fixed-effects analytic approach that is more common in economic analyses, the effect of green space was estimated without bias from survey respondents.

Data was derived from the British Household Panel Survey, a nationally representative longitudinal survey of households in the UK that ran annually from 1991 to 2008, comprising data collected from over 5,000 households and 10,000 adult individuals.

Local area green space was derived from the Generalised Land Use Database, which classifies land uses at high geographical resolution across England, and applied to 32,482 Lower-layer Super Output Areas (LSOA), which is a standard geographic unit used to report small area statistics.

Results

The analyses suggest that people are happier when living in urban areas with greater amounts of green space. In these cases, they show significantly less mental distress (GHQ scores) and significantly higher well-being (life satisfaction), compared to instances when they are living in areas with less green space.

The analysis also made it possible to compare the beneficial effects of green space with other factors that are usually associated with well-being. In comparative terms, living in an area with higher levels of green space was associated with improvements in other known indicators of well-being. For example, it is roughly equal to a third of the difference in well-being that is gained from being married, or a tenth as large as the difference in well-being between being employed and unemployed.

Dr. White and colleagues were able to solve that problem by using longitudinal data, which was gathered from the repeated observation of participants over time, from the national survey.

The new research does not prove that moving to a greener area will necessarily cause increased happiness, but it does fit with findings from experimental studies showing that short bouts of time in a green space can improve people’s mood and cognitive functioning.

“This research could be important for policymakers when trying to decide how to invest scarce public resources, such as for park development or upkeep, and figuring out what ‘bang’ they’ll get for their buck,” says Dr. White.

Findings from previous studies have suggested a correlation between green space and well-being, but those studies were unable to rule out the possibility that people with higher levels of well-being simply moved to greener areas. Dr. White and colleagues were able to solve that problem by using longitudinal data, which was gathered from the repeated observation of participants over time, from the national survey.

The expected outcomes of the project include advances in knowledge of direct relevance to environmental and health policy, developments in methodology and theory, and increased research capacity.

The outcomes will be of interest to academic and other public or private research end-users. The evidence produced will allow Natural England, Forestry Commission of Great Britain, the local authorities, and other organisations that manage the natural environment for human benefit to develop nationally and locally appropriate context-relevant responses to policies. This research will facilitate the effective allocation of resources and development of targeted interventions and programmes resulting in maximised benefit to the environment, society, and individual.