Neighborhoods and Health

Edited by Ichiro Kawachi and Lisa F. Berkman
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The purpose of the comprehensive and thought-provoking book *Neighborhoods and Health* is to promote open discussion about the centuries-old question concerning the influence of places on people's health. The editors present a contemporary examination of the issues, highlighting the need to simultaneously consider multiple levels of aggregation as well as the opportunity to make use of advanced statistical analytical procedures. In view of renewed interest in social determinants of health, widening gaps between the affluent and the poor, and legislative developments in many parts of the world, this text is a timely one indeed.

The book is divided into three sections: the first eight chapters deal with methodological and conceptual approaches to studying the topic; the next three chapters examine neighbourhoods and health outcomes related to infectious diseases, infancy, and asthma; and the final four chapters explore issues such as residential segregation, networks, aging, and public policy. The emphasis on multilevel analysis, theory development, and empirical testing serves to underscore the importance of generating useful and relevant data within an ecological framework that will advance research and policy agendas. The exploration of health issues throughout the life span demonstrates the essential nature of comprehensive and contextual application of neighbourhood research strategies. The intriguing question of whether people with a specific health status "sort" themselves into certain neighbourhoods, or are subject to that health status because of the neighbourhoods in which they live, is one that will engage scholars and practitioners in a fascinating and lengthy pursuit of knowledge that may ultimately lead to improvements in health, provided society is willing to make the necessary investments.

Of the 30 contributors, five are from the United Kingdom and the rest are from the United States (the Harvard School of Public Health is home to 11 authors). A wide range of disciplinary backgrounds is represented in the book, including social epidemiology, medical geography, clinical medicine, urban sociology, policy studies, and educational statistics. Congruent with the current acknowledgement of the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration and exchange, this book is a very good example of a diverse sampling of perspectives. Had contributions been

included from a wider variety of geopolitical jurisdictions, the impact would have been even greater. For example, integration of the significant work being accomplished by Canadian investigators would have added depth to the richness of this text. Addition of the rural and small-town perspective would have enhanced the usefulness and value of the book, and would have opened the discussion to a wider audience. Nevertheless, the issues and challenges raised are fundamental to our understanding of the etiology of health outcomes in many settings.

Although the focus of the book is neighbourhoods, several contributors acknowledge the difficulty inherent in attempting to define the concept. Attempts to differentiate neighbourhoods from communities reflect the early stage of research into the complex, multilayered construct that represents where people live and their health outcomes. Many of the contributors point out that although there is substantial evidence of the independent effects of neighbourhoods on health outcomes, much more remains to be done, not the least of which is to begin consideration of policy responses.

Despite the numerous typographical, syntactical, and grammatical errors in the text, *Neighborhoods and Health* is a valuable and useful resource for students, practitioners, and researchers who are interested in the unravelling and articulation of the relationships between environment and health. The emergence of new research frontiers that enhance the potential for improving outcomes and reducing disparities is sure to challenge and stimulate public health practitioners, researchers, and indeed society for a long time to come.

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