Place-Based Efforts to Improve Health: Will They also Address Health Disparities?

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ABSTRACT

Our surroundings have potential to undermine or to support health. While considerations for social justice have been prominent in research on toxic environmental exposures, attention to health disparities is also needed when focused on amenities that may advance population health. Urban greening efforts, such as massive tree planting campaigns or park improvements, have been proposed as supporting both health and health equity. However, several of our investigations into air quality and physical activity in lower income populations in New York City which call into question assumed links along pathways from greenspace to health. Likewise, initiatives targeting the distribution of medical facilities and retail outlets, including the neighborhood food environment, have been used to address socioeconomic and spatial disparities in access to goods and services. Our efforts to categorize and map approximately 58 million business establishments across the continental US for the period from 1990-2014 are providing new opportunities to understand how retail affects health and health disparities. Once again, facile explanations are giving way to a more nuanced understanding and to newly emerging avenues of investigation.