Green space

Indicator overview

VicHealth Indicators Survey

VicHealth Indicators are used to measure community wellbeing with a focus on social determinants of health.

Survey topic areas include: wellbeing, healthy eating and sedentary behaviour, use of green space and safety, smoking policy, alcohol, using of social networking, participation in arts activities and the community, social attitudes, and work, life and time.

Introduction

Globally, more than half of the world's population lives in urban areas (UNFPA 2007). In Australia, the vast majority of people (almost 98%) live in major cities or regional areas, with most of the current growth in Australia's population occurring in the major cities (ABS 2008). The increasing number of people living in urban areas means that more people face the prospect of living in residential environments with poorer quality or quantity of green space (Maas et al. 2006). Green space is any area within an urban environment that is dedicated to nature and can be used as a space for play, recreation and socialisation. Green space can take a number of forms, including urban wetlands or forest canopy, parks, public gardens, playing fields, children's play areas, foreshore areas, bushland and linear reserves, national parks, state forests and conservation reserves (Byrne and Sipe 2010).

Green space and health

The benefits of green space for health and wellbeing have long been recognised (Maas et al. 2006, Mitchell and Popham 2008, Groenewegen et al. 2006). The positive link between green space and health and wellbeing is most apparent among the elderly, people who spend most of their time at home, and those from lower socioeconomic groups (De Vries et al. 2003). However, people of all ages and socioeconomic status can benefit from exposure to green space and views of nature (Groenewegen et al. 2006).

Residents of neighbourhoods with abundant green space tend to enjoy better general health (Maas et al. 2006). Neighbourhoods with comparatively more walkable green space have been correlated with a lower mortality risk (Takano et al. 2002). The percentage of green space in people's living environments, and its proximity to people's homes, are positively associated with self-perceived health (Maas et al. 2006). Contact with green space has been found to be 'restorative', both psychologically and physiologically, reducing blood pressure and stress levels (Hartig et al. 2003, Pretty et al. 2005) and potentially promoting faster healing from surgery (Ulrich 1984).

Increased green space can also promote physical activity (Kaczynski and Henderson 2007). Undertaking physical activity in the natural environment may have greater psychological and physiological benefit than physical activity in other settings (Pretty et al. 2005).

Too much time spent in artificial environments may lead to fatigue and a reduction in vitality and health (Katcher and Beck 1987, Maller et al. 2006). Deskbound workers who can see nature from their desks experience less time off sick and greater job satisfaction than those who cannot (Wolf 1998). Increased green space can also improve perceptions of neighbourhood safety and lead to an actual reduction in crime rates as measured by police reports (Kuo and Sullivan 2001).

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Find out more

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