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1.http://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/series/?sn=200005

European Commission

Science for Environment Policy

Green spaces can have positive, long-term effects on mental health

Moving to an area with good access to green spaces has a positive, lasting effect on residents' mental health, new research suggests. The study shows that people who move to greener areas report considerably improved mental health three years after leaving their previous neighbourhood.

Access to green spaces, such as parks, has been linked to improved mental health. These 'natural' areas are thought to contribute to stress reduction and an increase in general wellbeing. However, much of the research on this topic has been carried out by comparing the mental health of residents in areas with green spaces to the mental health of people who do not live near green spaces. It can be difficult to be sure of cause and effect in studies such as these, because various factors could confuse the results. For example, are people happier because they live in areas with green spaces, or are happy people more likely to move to such areas?

It is also important to consider whether the effects of access to green space on mental health are long-term. It may be, for example, that although individuals initially feel the benefits of local greenery, they adapt over time and their mental health returns to its original state.

The authors of this UK study examined data collected over five years which allowed them to compare changes in the mental health of two groups of individuals living in urban areas. One group had moved house from an area with little green infrastructure to one with more green spaces, and the second group had done the opposite.

The data came from the British Household Panel Survey[1] and included 1 064 individuals who had moved house between the second and third years of the five-year period. Each year, the participants completed a questionnaire regarding their mental health. The researchers calculated the amount of green space surrounding their homes, both before and after the move, using land use data. They were also careful to account for other factors that might affect mental health, such as income, marital status, employment status and house size.

Individuals that moved to greener areas showed no change in their mental health score for the two years before the move. However, their scores were considerably higher for all three years after moving. This suggests, say the researchers, that a greener environment has a positive and lasting effect on mental health.

The results for the group that moved to less green areas were not as clear cut, as they showed that participants did not experience a decline in mental health over the three year period after moving. A year before moving, their mental health was reduced compared to the baseline measured at two years before. However, in the three years following the move, their mental health scores returned to a level similar to the baseline. One possible explanation is that these individuals decided to move because they were becoming increasingly unhappy, the researchers say. However, further research is needed to investigate why a decline in mental health did not occur in this group.

Overall, this study has important implications for policymakers and urban planners, underlining the value of green infrastructure in combating poor mental health, one of the leading health concerns in higher income countries today.