The health gap between richer and poorer residents is halved in areas with access to green space such as parks, river corridors and playing fields, according to new research. Mortality rates were clearly linked to levels of exposure to green space in this large scale study.

The researchers investigated records on more than 360,000 deaths from all causes in England, in the period 2001-2005. Deaths among those above retirement age (60 for women and 65 for men) were excluded. Income-related deprivation and access to green space was assessed via area of residence. Access was defined as the proportion of green space in a resident’s local area, excluding gardens and income was stratified into quartiles, with the study concentrating on income quartiles 2-4 (middle income to lowest income groups).

The results revealed links between levels of income and the degree of exposure to green space in relation to deaths from all causes. The link was particularly strong for deaths from circulatory diseases, such as heart disease. In the 20 per cent of the population with the greatest exposure to green space, an estimated 1328 lives were saved per year in the three income groups that form the focus of this study when compared with the 20 per cent of the population in the same income groups but with the least exposure to green space.

According to the researchers, green spaces benefit health by encouraging local residents to undertake physical activities, such as walking or sports. There is also evidence that being in green environments can reduce blood pressure and relieve stress. While not everyone has equal access to green spaces, those who do have access tend to use them, regardless of socioeconomic status.

The study demonstrates that substantial differences in health inequality can exist between populations who are exposed to the same welfare state, health service and national income distribution, but who live in different types of physical environment.

The authors conclude that physical environments that promote good health could be crucial in the fight to reduce socioeconomic health inequalities and that this should be taken into account when planning urban areas in the future.


Contact: r.mitchell@clinmed.gla.ac.uk

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