

## Urban health: landmarks, dilemmas, prospects, and challenges

As we near the end of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a question emerges for urban health researchers: “*What progress have we made in the field?*” In a forum published in CSP ten years ago<sup>1</sup> we asked: “*What is urban health?*”

Urban health is the area of knowledge nested in public health that allows us to rethink the health impact of interventions in cities by the public sector, including interventions that do not necessarily originate in the health sector itself. The health of urban populations is a function of global, national, and local influences and of a network of interconnected determinants. The proposal’s fundamental thrust is that the social and physical environments define the urban context and are modulated by proximal and distal factors and by actors at various levels. Global trends, national and local governments, civil society, the private sector, and markets thus modulate the configurations in which these local factors operate.

Urban health is therefore a fruitful field for knowledge translation, with strong social and political ties, guided by innovative metrics (namely valid, reliable, robust, and well-constructed indicators and analyses for evaluating interventions in the city that can impact health), and close association with the public administration and its inter-sector relations, including governance.

This special thematic edition of CSP on urban health focuses on milestones, dilemmas, perspectives, and challenges, featuring innovative concepts and metrics for measuring urban and social determinants and public policies originating both within and outside the health sector.

The majority of the articles in this special edition consider the interconnections between urban and health determinants. In addition to theoretical approaches that involve an interesting debate on complex systems, considering that they can potentially range all the way from epigenetics to health iniquities in the urban environment, this volume includes empirical studies with innovative concepts and methods, including those designed to evaluate urban public policies and developed with an inter-sector approach. This special issue also features a high-level forum on the work of urban observatories, developing and testing potential urban health solutions to local problems based on international experiences and health intelligence.

Maintaining the focus on the exposure to urban living conditions represents a strong argument backed by a growing body of evidence, according to which the underlying causes of disease in the urban context can be found in the physical and socioeconomic environments. Important strides have been made in discerning poverty as a poison, the built-up environment as one of the principal determinants of health, and the social environment as helpful or harmful, capable of modulating our capacity to stay healthy.

Considering that urbanization is global, that global is universal, and that the universe relates to our planet<sup>2</sup>, we have a gigantic and complex jigsaw puzzle before us, interweaving urban determinants. Recognition and shared understanding are essential to improve the health of city dwellers and reduce the terrible social disparities in the majority of urban

contexts. As highlighted by David Vlahov (p. S7), “*There are times in history that are pivotal moments. Now in 2015-2016 is one of those times.*” Stay tuned and enjoy the read.

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  2. Whitmee S, Haines A, Beyrer C, Boltz F, Capon AG, Dias BFS, et al. Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene epoch: report of The Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission on planetary health. *Lancet* 2015; [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(15\)60901-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)60901-1).