Healthy Foods for Communities: Research evidence and implications for policy & practice

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Healthy Foods for Communities: Building Local Partnerships Forum
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Outline

1. Introducing the Healthy Built Environments Program
2. Research evidence for access to healthy food as part of a healthy built environment
3. Key role of community gardens
4. Implications for policy and practice
The Healthy Built Environments Program is a consortium linking planning and health leadership in urban planning and public health. Core funding from NSW Department of Health of $1.5m over 5 years. Situated in the City Futures Research Centre, Faculty of the Built Environment at UNSW. HBEP partnership includes academics, Heart Foundation, NSW health professionals, local councils, planning consultants.
The HBEP **vision** is that built environments will be planned, designed, developed and managed to promote and protect health for all people.
Three Strategic Areas of Work

Leadership and Advocacy
Capacity Building
Research
Research Evidence for HBEs

Healthy Built Environments: A review of the literature

Major scholarly research project

Systematic, comprehensive and rigorous review of literature

Proposes three main ‘domains’ of built environment influence on health

Links research and policy to underpin actions
The structure and contents of the review

- Aims and Parameters
- Methodology (Appendix 1: Diary of Database Searches)
- The Evidence (Appendix 3: Annotated Bibliography)

Glossary
Three key domains of the built environment and health:

- The Built Environment and Getting People Active
- The Built Environment and Connecting and Strengthening Communities
- The Built Environment and Providing Healthy Food Options

Address major risk factors for chronic disease:

- Physical inactivity
- Social isolation
- Obesity
Breakdown of references after categorisation

- Getting People Active: 62%
- Providing Healthy Food Options: 18%
- Connecting and Strengthening Communities: 9%
- Professional Development: 11%
Key issues in providing access to healthy food

- Urban agriculture
  - Farmers’ markets and community gardens
  - Larger scale food production
  - Food related land use near schools
  - Healthy food accessibility in lower SES areas
There is a clear link between exposure to healthy food options and healthy eating.

Most convincing research concerns the co-location and advertising of unhealthy food options near schools.

Reduce fast-food exposure in the vicinity of school environments, including the advertising of fast food and the use of land for fast food outlets.
SES is a very important factor in access to healthy food – a complex issue.
Community gardens

Research shows significant physical and mental health benefits
Community gardens provide food for survival
Growing vegetables in refugee camps

Images: UNSW Refugee Research Centre, 2004
Community gardens have important physical health benefits

Growing fruit and vegetables for a healthy diet

Growing medicinal herbs for healing

Physical exercise as a direct benefit of working in the garden
I’ve got a high blood pressure problem. I go into the garden in the morning and I work over there and then I come back home. I feel much better. I feel more energetic and my blood pressure goes down.

Gardener, *Bountiful Harvest*, 2003
Community gardens create a social, caring place – friendships develop and blossom.

Foster acts of generosity and sharing.

Create a sense of belonging – in the garden and beyond.
Community gardens provide opportunities for social and cultural expression

Part of the home making process

Continuing traditions from homeland
Community gardens have important mental health benefits

Enrich community and social life – especially important in diverse communities

Engage disadvantaged, marginalised individuals

Contribute to notions of community and feelings of connection

Contribute to feelings of safety in the community
I think it gives you a feeling of belonging more...this is mine...you have something to own. And you’re not just another little person in another little box

Gardener, *Bountiful Harvest*, 2003
Community gardens have important environmental sustainability benefits

Education role about gardening and composting

Education about nutrition, food preparation and food systems

Understandings of biodiversity
Increasing importance of urban agriculture
Guerilla gardening in Adelaide and community connection
Policy implications – zoning controls

Restricting numbers and locations of fast food restaurants and advertising – especially near schools

Similar to other problematic uses – gambling, alcohol??

Encourage healthy food outlets - floor space requirements
Development control plans and policies

Community gardens
Edible verges
Outdoor eating
Roadside stalls
Farmers’ markets
Retain viable agricultural lands close to population centres to ensure a nearby healthy source of food.
Conclusion

Research evidence supports the role of the built environment in providing access to healthy food.

Complexity around location and number of food outlets.

SES is a key indicator of healthy food access.

Community gardens provide multiple physical and mental health benefits.

Importance of understanding local context.
Download the HBEP Literature Review

http://www.be.unsw.edu.au/healthy-built-environments-program/publications