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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2022;378:o1663

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o1663>

Published: 22 July 2022

## NIHR ALERTS

# Open spaces and a sense of belonging improve wellbeing

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### THE STUDY

McElroy E, Ashton M, Bagnall AM, et al. The individual, place, and wellbeing—a network analysis. *BMC Public Health* 2021;21:1621.

To read the full NIHR Alert, go to: <https://evidence.nihr.ac.uk/alert/open-spaces-and-community-cohesion-improve-wellbeing/>

### Why was the study needed?

Most research into wellbeing has looked at what people can do for themselves to improve their wellbeing. It has stressed individual factors such as health and finances, which are important influences. However, wellbeing is likely to result from complex relationships between an individual, their community, and where they live. Social support, and a sense of belonging to a community (through being involved in decisions about the community, for example) could have an impact. Access to well managed open spaces and the neighbourhood environment could be important.

Community wellbeing is now included in international policies, such as the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The UK government's Levelling Up policy is designed to improve living standards and wellbeing for everyone in the UK.

Identifying the characteristics of places that influence wellbeing could inform the planning of towns and neighbourhoods. The researchers therefore wanted to explore the interactions between individual and place factors to see how they contribute to wellbeing.

### What did the study do?

The researchers looked at data previously collected in the Household Health Survey on the north west coast of England. The survey, taken 2015-16, explored health inequalities in 20 areas of high deprivation and eight of less deprivation. The 4319 adults who took part had an average age of 49, and most (89%) were white British.

Participants completed a short survey about wellbeing that explored seven items. They reported on their optimism about the future; how useful, relaxed, and close to other people they felt; how well they dealt with problems; could think clearly; and could make up their own minds.

In the same survey, participants provided information on individual factors (such as their health, finances, and marital status); and place factors (such as housing conditions, access to open space, and feeling involved in decisions about the community). The researchers looked at how these factors related to wellbeing.

### What did it find?

Overall wellbeing was most strongly linked to two individual factors: self-reported health and financial difficulty.

However, a complex network of relationships existed. Wellbeing was associated directly and indirectly with all of the individual, community, and place characteristics considered. Of the community and place characteristics, wellbeing was most strongly linked to access to open space, involvement in decisions about community (civic agency), and neighbourhood cohesion. Housing disrepair reduced wellbeing.

- Certain elements of wellbeing were linked to individual or place characteristics.
- Financial difficulties were strongly linked to feeling less relaxed; this was the strongest negative link.
- Social support and neighbourhood cohesion were linked to feeling close to other people.
- Involvement in community decisions was linked to optimism about the future.
- Using open space was linked both to feeling close to other people and feeling optimistic about the future.

### Why is this important?

This is the first study to explore relationships between individual and place factors in the context of wellbeing. The results back previous findings that individual factors are the strongest predictors of self-reported wellbeing. However, they also show that wellbeing is strongly linked to people's living environments.

The analysis allowed the researchers to show how different factors interact. Poor wellbeing was linked to place factors beyond the individual's control. It is most likely among people who lack access to open space, involvement in community decisions, neighbourhood cohesion, or who have housing disrepair. Policies should therefore have more emphasis on place factors in order to increase wellbeing.

Previous work has shown that all aspects of wellbeing improve when the community is involved in decisions about their area. Community involvement is essential.

Use of open space was strongly linked to wellbeing. Planning of towns and neighbourhoods needs to include usable green spaces, to improve wellbeing and to encourage physical activity to improve health.

More open and frequent dialogue between public health professionals and town planners is needed.

In England, just over one in four people lives close to a park (within five minutes' walk). Previous research has shown that people in the most deprived areas are more likely to live close to a park than those in less deprived areas. But if a park is unsafe or in disrepair, people will not use it. This research showed that using the space is more important than how near it is. The next steps include looking after open spaces and exploring how best to encourage their use, the researchers say.

### What's next?

Participants in this study were mostly white British, in line with the population in the north west coast region. The wellbeing of people from other ethnic groups may be influenced by different factors. The strong positive link between wellbeing and open space, for example, might not hold true for some groups.

This research was carried out in relatively disadvantaged areas. Other regions may show different trends. Qualitative studies are needed to explore the nuances of wellbeing in different areas.

The researchers hope their work will prompt discussions between public health and town planners, and include local communities. Members of the team have delivered sessions to the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) about their findings, and they hope that RIBA will take action.

Competing interests: *The BMJ* has judged that there are no disqualifying financial ties to commercial companies. The authors declare the following other interests: none.

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All authors contributed to the development and review of this summary, as part of the wider NIHR Alerts editorial team.

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