

Key Questions: Background and Instructions



Ann Forsyth

Version 2.0

DESIGN FOR HEALTH is a collaboration between the University of Minnesota and Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota that serves to bridge the gap between the emerging research base on community design and healthy living with the every-day realities of local government planning.

Design for Health
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The following people were involved in the development of the Key Questions Series:

Series Editor: Dr. Ann Forsyth

Contributors: Dr. Ann Forsyth, Dr. Kevin Krizek, Dr. Carissa Schively, Laura Baum, Amanda Johnson, Aly Pennucci

Copy Editor: Bonnie Hayskar

Layout Designers: Anna Christiansen, Tom Hilde, Kristen Raab, Jorge Salcedo, Katie Thering, Luke Van Sistine

Website Managers: Whitney Parks, Joanne Richardson

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Introduction

The key question series consists of research summaries that comprise the backbone for the rest of the Design for Health (DFH) project. They form the research base for the health impact assessment (HIA) series, the information sheet series, and the case study series. As with all of the DFH materials, these evidence-based summaries are targeted to personnel in community planning and design, but also to health officials, elected officials, and professionals with more specialized niches (e.g., transportation, water quality) who are interested in the connection between the built environment and human health.

Topics and Factors Affecting Health

There are a number of ways to group the determinants or factors that cause health or health problems. Epidemiological research and practitioners specifically look at how and why diseases occur in different groups of people; some of these factors include (BMJ 1997; CDC):

- biological factors (e.g., age, sex, genetic factors),
- lifestyle factor (e.g., tobacco use),
- personal circumstances,
- social and community influences,
- natural environmental conditions,
- economic conditions.
- access to facilities and services, and the
- built environment.

How Topics Were Identified

The key question series focuses primarily on the built environment and some social topics, specifically those within the domain of the city-planning profession. In other words, we focused on areas where planners are in a position to act as a catalyst for change either in policy work or in plan implementation. The topics addressed in this series are:

- Accessibility
- Air Quality
- Environment and Housing Quality
- Food
- Mental Health

- Physical Activity
- Safety
- Social Capital
- Water Quality

This set of topics is based on similar lists in other references. Frumkin et al.'s (2004) book, *Urban Sprawl and Public Health*, for example, contains chapters on air quality, mental health, physical activity, social capital, special populations, and traffic injuries.

The DFH series adds food, accessibility, and environmental and housing quality; and integrates special populations under each topic.

How the Key Questions Are Organized

The key questions are designed to be short and digestible and they are divided into the following sections: 1) general overview of the topic, 2) what we know for certain (or semi-certain), 3) what we don't know, and 4) working threshold/s for the other DFH documents.

Some of the research provides thresholds, which are numerical targets for health development. These are derived from a careful reading of existing literature, taking into account where several research studies agree on a particular phenomenon. Some of the research points to a certain set of associations where there may be agreement on the nature and direction of a particular area that may not lend itself well to the numerical precision suggested in the thresholds.

How Planners Should Use the Key Questions Series

Urban planners already undertake a wide variety of environmental impact assessments, fiscal impact assessments, visioning processes, and sustainability and livability assessments. This tool is designed to be an easy way to supplement these activities and focus attention on human health.

This series was particularly developed in response to the busy life of planners, who frequently do not have time to read and decipher existing literature, particularly in fast-moving

and sometimes contradictory fields related to physical activity, food, social capital, etc. These key summaries can be used independently or in conjunction with the rest of the tools available in the DFH Technical Assistance Library.

This work feeds into the HIA tools, for example, by providing the rationale/intent for the selection of each topic. It is important to note that DFH's evidence-based approach is designed to supplement community discussion about human health and the built environment.

For more information about our Technical Assistance Library, please visit www.designforhealth.net.

References

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