

Mental Wellbeing

Summary of Key Findings

Residents report that they feel stressed and worried in their daily lives due to a number of environmental factors:

- Strong odors and loud noises generated by industries and trains are a daily presence in the neighborhoods.
- Trains crossing streets at railroad crossings often stop vehicular and pedestrian traffic, impeding residents' ability to get to their destinations.
- Heavy trucks use residential streets to serve businesses, including streets adjacent to elementary schools.
- Perceptions about crime and safety impact residents' movements around their neighborhoods.
- Perceptions about pollution linger despite substantial environmental cleanup activities.
- The pending I-70 highway reconstruction and other large redevelopment projects add to residents' stress, since any impacts of construction are still unknown.

Responding to these factors on a daily basis can lead to feelings of anxiety, irritability, distress and mental fatigue.

How the Neighborhood Plans Can Improve Mental Wellbeing

Reductions in noise and odor pollution, improvements in street connectivity and pedestrian safety, increased lighting, and positive additions such as new retail goods and services can lead to improvements in residents' mental wellbeing, without which negative impacts to mental wellbeing are likely to persist.



Mental Wellbeing

People react to environmental stressors in different ways, and what is considered stressful to one person may not be for another person. However, environmental factors are considered to be stressors when three elements are present: 1) a person has a physiological reaction to the stressor (for example, blood pressure or pulse increases); 2) the person would avoid the stressor if they could; and 3) the person has no control over the stressor.¹

The challenging conditions in environmental quality, connectivity and mobility, access to goods and services, and community safety in the neighborhoods – discussed in previous chapters – can lead to a feeling of lack of control of one’s daily environment, and can contribute to stress and poor mental health for residents.² Discussions with community health promotion workers who interact with residents on a regular basis provide glimpses of the challenges that residents of Globeville and Elyria Swansea face in their daily lives (Figure 34):

FIGURE 34:
Interviews with Community Health Promotion Workers in Globeville and Elyria Swansea

Bad odors and pollution

- “There’s the train, and Purina, and the rendering plant...it smells pretty [bad] in the summertime. It’s been an issue for a long time.”
- “We’ve had all kinds of [pollution sources]; the steel mill, the railroads, the industries, and now the marijuana (grow)houses...”
- “People don’t let their children play outside because of the air pollution and odors. People don’t want to jog in unclean air.”
- “I’ve heard there are all kinds of pollutants here, I don’t know if it’s true, but I hear that from people. People say that there is still contaminated soil because residents didn’t trust EPA to come on their property and clean it up.”

Noise from trains and trucks

- “You can hear the trains three times in the middle of the night, every night, at 1:30, 3:20, and 4:10...that’s not good for kids.”
- “We worked with [business] to change their truck routes from near the school, but that just pushed the trucks a few blocks east, which is still residential neighborhoods. That creates a lot of traffic and noise.”

Graffiti/vandalism/auto thefts

- “There is a lot of graffiti on public buildings and houses. People don’t want to come out at night because they don’t feel safe. A car was broken into during the daytime in [our] parking lot...I see the concern.”

Public Drug Use

- “People who use drugs hang out in the parks... Even if a park was right in front of your house, you wouldn’t let your children go out and play, which is pretty sad.”

Lack of connectivity/barriers including RR tracks, dead ends, I-70

- “If you have to go somewhere you have to either cross the highway, the RR tracks, or industrial. It isn’t adequate for people to walk around too much, except close to their house.”
- “You just can’t get there...there are so many barriers. The railroad tracks are not safe to cross; there have been serious accidents.”

Lack of sidewalks

- “You have [moms] pushing kids in strollers and all of a sudden the sidewalk ends and they’re pushing strollers in the street.”
- “[because of poor lighting], people are afraid of crime and don’t like to be out at night.”

Lack of healthy food

- “We have corner stores but the prices of vegetables and good foods are higher and there’s not a lot of variety. Also, there is old food that has expired.”
- “Lots of households only have one car; if the husband takes it to work, the wife can’t get to the grocery store. It’s too far and inconvenient on RTD to get to a grocery store...it becomes a field trip just to get groceries.”

Major construction coming including I-70 and stock show:

- “People are extremely worried and feel a huge amount of stress about the I-70 highway construction ...they don’t know if the government is going to take their property. They don’t trust the government. ... people just don’t know what’s going to happen. They don’t want to spend money to make their yards look nice if their house will be demolished.”
- “You have so many projects and programs going on in this neighborhood that it is really confusing for the normal person to take it all in and keep it straight.”

SOURCE: Denver Department of Environmental Health 2014

Mental Wellbeing continued

Given these neighborhood elements that contribute to stress, those things that relieve stress and promote feelings of wellbeing become even more important to strengthen. Residents cite a feeling of strong community cohesion due to a stable longtime population (some going back generations), knowing their neighbors, and the unique character of both neighborhoods as valuable assets. They mention the schools, churches, recreation centers, parks (Argo Park), and The GrowHaus (a nonprofit greenhouse and education center) as places that they feel safe to gather, spend time together, and get to know their neighbors.



How Mental Wellbeing Affects Health

Mental health describes a level of psychological well-being. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines mental health as “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively...and is able to make a contribution to his or her community.”³

The built environment can promote or hinder mental health.⁴ The quality and characteristics of the settings we inhabit – the places in which we live, work, and play – influence our mental health.⁵ Well-maintained, safe places with exposure to green space promote positive feelings of wellbeing. Conversely, places that are dangerous, crowded, and dark or lack exposure

to natural settings can lead to irritability, anxiety and distress.⁶ Studies have shown that such environments can impact the cardiovascular, endocrine, and central nervous systems.⁷

Perception is vital in the stress-to-illness process.^{8,9} Those who live in neighborhoods with physical deterioration or crime may spend much more time worrying about their personal safety on a daily basis than those who live in neighborhoods without those factors. If one feels a lack of control over one’s environment, or doesn’t have sufficient coping resources to deal with those feelings, stress may result at sufficient levels to produce negative physical health outcomes.^{10,11}

Prediction: How the Neighborhood Plans Can Affect Mental Wellbeing

Residents of Globeville and Elyria Swansea experience numerous challenges to their sense of mental wellbeing due to physical conditions in the neighborhood.

The recommendations of the neighborhood plans have great potential to alleviate many of these conditions. An improved street grid and zoning to separate industrial users from residents can reduce noise and odors and create an environment that is more inviting for outdoor activities. Creating connectivity through a

more complete street grid will help with traffic safety, appropriate trucks routes, access to goods and services, and pedestrian and bike safety for adults and children.

Other improvements such as improving the street lighting can serve to reduce criminal activity and increase residents’ sense of safety and security in their neighborhood. An increased sense of personal safety can lead to more physical activity as adults and children spend more time outside, walking and playing.

Recommendations to Improve Mental Wellbeing

Health Recommendations that Can Be Addressed by the Globeville and Elyria Swansea Neighborhood Plans

1. Connect streets as prioritized in the Globeville and Elyria Swansea Neighborhood Plans' "Street Grid Connectivity Map" (See Section 8, Recommendation 3.A)
2. Explore solutions to reduce the negative health impacts from trains. These could include "Quiet Zones" or grade separation of trains from other modes of transportation. (See Section 8, Recommendation 7.A)
3. Minimize negative impacts of industrial uses on residential neighborhoods through land use designation, buffering, or other means. (See Section 8, Recommendation 1.A)
4. Prioritize street infrastructure improvements, including sidewalks, bike lanes, bus stop furnishings, and intersection. (See Section 8, Recommendation 2.A)

5. Install new and upgraded street lighting. (See Section 8, Recommendation 15.A)
6. Review truck routes in the neighborhoods to improve environmental quality, safety and connectivity. (See Section 8, Recommendation 11.A)
7. Enforce regulations regarding graffiti, vandalism, public drug use, stray animals and property maintenance to increase safety. (See Section 8, Recommendation 21.A)

Health Recommendations that Can Be Addressed by Other Means by the City, private sector, or nongovernmental organizations

8. The City and community partners should continue and strengthen bilingual and culturally appropriate outreach and communication with residents about upcoming public construction and development. (See Section 8, Recommendation 10.B)

References & Endnotes

- ¹ Dr. Carl Clark, Executive Director of the Mental Health Center of Denver (2014). "Overview of the Built Environment" roundtable, North Denver Cornerstone Collaborative Mid-Year Town Hall Meeting, July 22, 2014.
- ² Tenney, M (2014). Stress and the Built Environment Key Informant Interviews in Globeville and Elyria Swansea, February 2014.
- ³ World Health Organization (2014). Mental health: strengthening our response (Fact sheet N°220). Accessed at: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs220/en/>
- ⁴ Dannenberg, A, Frumkin, H, and R Jackson (2011). Making Healthy Places. Washington, D.C.: Island Press, p. 106.
- ⁵ Ibid., p. 107.
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 108.
- ⁷ Cohen, S, Hamrick, N, Rodriguez, MS, Feldman, PJ, Rabin, BS, and SB Manuck (2000). The stability of and intercorrelations among cardiovascular, immune, endocrine, and psychological reactivity. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 22: 171-179.
- ⁸ Lazarus, R, and S Folkman (1984). Stress, Appraisal, and Coping. New York: Springer Publishing Company.
- ⁹ Cohen, S, Hamrick, N, Rodriguez, MS, Feldman, PJ, Rabin, BS, and SB Manuck (2000). The stability of and intercorrelations among cardiovascular, immune, endocrine, and psychological reactivity. *Annals of Behavioral Medicine*, 22: 171-179.
- ¹⁰ Aneshensel, CS (1992). Social stress: Theory and research. *Annual Review of Sociology* 18: 15-38.
- ¹¹ Kobasa, SC (1979). Personality and resistance to illness. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 7: 413-423.

