

Improving Population Health in a Rapidly Urbanizing World

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Abstract

In 2008, for the first time in history more than half of the world's population (over 3.3 billion people) was classified as living in urbanized places as distinct from rural areas. By 2025, 57 percent of the population will live in urban settings. By 2050, the urban population will be an estimated 6.4 billion people – or almost 70 percent of the world's predicted total population of approximately 9 billion. It will be the urbanizing areas in the developing world¹ that will absorb almost all of this growth. Over the next four decades, the urban population of these places is expected to increase by more than 120 percent (from 2.4 billion in 2007 to 5.3 billion in 2050).² Urban population growth is expected to be most rapid in Africa and Asia, which are currently only about 40 percent urban (United Nations Population Division, 2008). This global urban transformation and its most rapid advance in the least developed portions of the world means that unless measures are taken to reduce gaping inequalities accompanying this urban transformation, much of urban population growth will result in a significant increase of the number of urban poor, many of whom will live in slums. About one billion people already live in slums today. These are places of concentrated extreme disadvantage, which concentrate health risks. The health of populations on our rapidly urbanizing planet depends to a large extent on how we address the issue of urban poverty to achieve health equity. To begin, we need to more fully understand the ways that urban life aggravates or mitigates threats to population health.

Keywords: population health, Africa, Asia, population growth, urban poor, urbanizing

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For further reading: http://www.amazon.com/Urban-Health-Perspectives-Vulnerable-Populations/dp/0470422068/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&s=books&qid=1302206190&sr=1-1

¹ By developing world we mean those countries classified as low or middle income by the World Bank. These countries are often referred to as the “Global South” and distinguished from the “Global North” which is comprised of the world's high income countries the bulk of which are in the northern hemisphere. We use the terminology of Global North and South in this paper.

² These projections come with a word of caution – there is no standard definition for urban areas across countries. While this definitional heterogeneity applies mainly to smaller settlements, these settlements are numerous and therefore can strongly impact urban totals reported at national levels (Montgomery and others, 2003).