Research to Practice Paper:

Social Isolation and its Relationship to the Urban Environment

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Lessons of Community and Compassion:
Overcoming Social Isolation and Building Social Connectedness Through Policy
and Program Development

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Introduction

The urban environment contributes to social isolation in a multitude of ways. A combination of physical barriers in the built environment and rapidly-occurring global trends has resulted in the exclusion of large cohorts of the world's population. However, there is hope. If we focus on understanding the needs of urban populations, particularly those who are vulnerable, we can build inclusive cities. Using existing programs and policies as models, this paper aims to demonstrate how we can diminish social isolation and build social connectedness through human-centered, inclusive urban planning.

1. Social Isolation and Urbanization

More than half of the global population now lives in cities, and the United Nations predicts this number will increase to two-thirds by 2050.[1] The rise in urban dwellers may be conducive to human development, as "cities can offer better access to basic services and more job opportunities … [and] can spur efficiency and innovation."[2] Furthermore, cities are "often hubs of intellectual and cultural richness."[3] However, rapid and unplanned urban growth is also linked to "poverty, environment degradation, and population demands that outstrip service capacity."[4] The increase in urban populations is thus one of the most pressing global issues today.

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[1] Kim Samuel, "Building for Belonging," *Resurgence,* 2015.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.
[4] Jitendra K. Trivedi, Himanshu Sareen, and Mohan Dhyani, "Rapid Urbanization - Its Impact on Mental Health: A South Asian Perspective," *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 50, no. 3 (2008).

Urbanization – the shift from rural to urban – is associated with mental health issues due to increased stressors and reduced social support.[5] Evidence suggests "the sheer scale of urban life"[6] contributes greatly to feelings of isolation. Furthermore, though diversity is positive, the vast range of lifestyles and cultures in cities leads to a heterogeneity that raises the chances of social isolation compared to villages.[7] Indeed, urban dwellers report having the desire for more neighbourly contacts, but find it "difficult to realize such contacts in the city."[8] Experiences of social isolation in cities are robust, and urban planning has largely contributed to the problem. Unfortunately, "many modern cities have been designed around cars, at the expense of the parks, public plazas and common spaces where people naturally congregate."[9]

Though the effects of urbanization are felt by many, they hit vulnerable populations the hardest. The elderly and people with disabilities face some of the greatest challenges in urban environments, yet their needs are rarely considered. The tendency for these populations to be overlooked in urban planning has resulted in grave social isolation.

2. Impact of Social Isolation among People with Disabilities

In 2013, Human Rights Watch released a report on the lack of accessibility for people with disabilities in Russia. The report recognizes 26-year-old Maria,

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[5] Kalpana Srivastava, "Urbanization and Mental Health," *Industrial Psychiatry Journal* 18, no. 2 (2009).
[6] Jitendra K. Trivedi, Himanshu Sareen, and Mohan Dhyani, "Rapid Urbanization - Its Impact on Mental Health: A South Asian Perspective," *Indian Journal of Psychiatry* 50, no. 3 (2008).
[7] R. P. Hortulanus, Anja Machielse, and Ludwien Meeuwesen, *Social Isolation in Modern Society* (London: Routledge, 2006), 200.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Kim Samuel, "Building for Belonging," *Resurgence,* 2015.

whose limited mobility requires her to use a wheelchair. However, Maria lives in a third-floor apartment in Sochi that is only accessible by stairs. Consequently, "she often does not leave it for several months at a time and cannot meet with family and friends."[10] This would take its toll on any human being, causing painful experiences loneliness and social isolation.

The report found that as of 2013, there were at least 13 million people with disabilities in Russia. It also found that for the majority of these individuals, participation in basic daily activities is "extremely difficult or even impossible due to a range" of barriers.[11] These barriers are physical, such as the lack of ramps and elevators, as well as psychological, including discrimination from employers, transport operators and shopkeepers.

Though Russia has laws guaranteeing access for people with disabilities to infrastructure, healthcare and education, Human Rights Watch found that these laws are not consistently enforced.[12] In fact, interviewees reported "difficulty leaving their homes or accessing … buildings due to narrow doorways, no elevators, and steep wheelchair ramps that lack accessible handrails."[13] Furthermore, they are unable to access transportation due to difficulties "entering train stations or bus stops, boarding transport, or communicating with transport operators."[14] This lack of accessibility isolates people with disabilities, preventing them from participating fully in society. Indeed, "many people with disabilities may rarely leave home, have incomplete or substandard educations, and may never start a family or have meaningful employment."[15]

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[10] Human Rights Watch, "Barriers Everywhere: Lack of Accessibility for People with Disabilities in Russia," *Human Rights Watch*, September 11, 2013.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.

However, this trend is certainly not exclusive to Russia. People with disabilities face isolation in cities across the world. The World Bank reports that one billion people – 15% of the world's population – experience some form of disability.[16] Accessibility is a vital component for an inclusive city; yet, globally, people with disabilities are forgotten in the shadows. There exists a pervasiveness of the "'disabling city' – the urban setting that restricts, ignores and excludes people with disabilities from regular participation in everyday social, cultural, economic and recreational activities."[17]

2. Impact of Social Isolation among the Elderly

Population ageing and urbanization are intertwined global trends shaping the 21st century. The World Health Organization reports that "at the same time as cities are growing, their share of residents aged 60 years and more is increasing."[18] City planners must recognize the increasing trends of population ageing and urbanization, and respond accordingly to the needs of older people, particularly the most vulnerable cohort: persons of 85 years and older.[19]

The urban environment poses serious challenges for older people. A city's built environment can "limit the mobility among older people, discourage social interaction, and increase the probability of isolation."[20] Indeed, older people who live in neighbourhoods with little green space, and fewer social and recreational

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[16] World Bank, "Disability Overview," *World Bank*, September 21, 2016.
[17] Michael J. Prince, "Inclusive City Life: Persons with Disabilities and the Politics of Difference," *Disability Studies Quarterly* 28, no. 1 (2008).
[18] World Health Organization, "Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide," *World Health Organization*, 2007.
[19] Michael K. Gusmano, and Victor G. Rodwin, "Urban Aging, Social Isolation, and Emergency Preparedness," *Global Ageing: Issues & Action* 6, no. 2 (2010): 40-41.
[20] Ibid., 41.

opportunities, tend to have fewer social networks and a less positive outlook on life.[21]

In urban areas, individuals are more likely to live alone, and older persons "living alone is the fastest-growing segment of these populations."[22] Living alone brings with it the challenges of "inadequate housing, [such as] living in walk-up apartments without elevators,"[23] as well as social isolation. Socially isolated older persons are extremely vulnerable, as they are often preyed upon by criminals. Moreover, social isolation poses serious health risks. For instance, evidence suggests loneliness and social isolation "contribute to the large number of annual winter deaths due to hypothermia"[24] among older people in the UK.

3. Policy Recommendations

Though some still argue that urbanization does not cause social isolation,[25] evidence indicates that the two are certainly correlated. Henceforth, we must design our cities in ways that encourage "natural prospects for connection."[26] Examples include pedestrian zones, parks, and markets.[27] Governments should make green spaces a priority in all city development projects, as studies have shown that accessible urban green spaces are "associated with decreased anxiety [and] mood disorder treatment counts."[28] In addition to promoting mental health,

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[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., 43.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., 41.
[26] Kim Samuel, "Building for Belonging," *Resurgence,* 2015.
[27] Ibid.
[28] D. Nutsford, A.L. Pearson, and S. Kingham, "An Ecological Study Investigating the Association between Access to Urban Green Space and Mental Health," *Public Health* 127, no. 11 (2013): 1011.

green spaces encourage people to congregate and thus diminish the potential for social isolation.

As demonstrated above, urban environments habitually exclude vulnerable populations, particularly in regards to poor accessibility. However, certain initiatives are attempting to change this. Using the following programs and policies as models, cities can reverse this trend. The result would be cities where everyone has "access, on an equal basis with others, to the physical environment, transportation, information and communications technologies and systems, and other facilities and services."[29]

People with Disabilities

Established in 1993, the European Institute for Design and Disability (EIDD) is an international platform for organizations with a common goal: to enable equal participation in society for everyone. They believe the built environment and services must be accessible and convenient for all. In 2014, the EIDD issued the Stockholm Declaration, which outlines the Design for All policy. The Declaration asserts that "good design enables, bad design disables."[30] Design for All has roots in Scandinavian welfare policies, which "in the late 1960s gave birth to the concept of 'A society for all' referring primarily to accessibility."[31] Design for All is "design for human diversity, social inclusion and equality."[32]

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[29] European Commission, "2013 Access City Award for Disabled-Friendly Cities goes to Berlin," *European Commission Press Release Database*, December 3, 2012.
[30] European Institute for Design and Disability, *The EIDD Stockholm Declaration*, May 9, 2014.
[31] Ibid.
[32] European Commission, "2013 Access City Award for Disabled-Friendly Cities goes to Berlin," *European Commission Press Release Database*, December 3, 2012.

The City of Stockholm has been praised for its longstanding, inclusive approach following Design for All. In 2007, they released Vision Stockholm 2030, a project designed to make the city accessible. The project includes the remodeling of "pedestrian crossings, public toilets and playgrounds to ensure that they are accessible to children and parents with disabilities."[33]

Berlin also serves as an example of a city that has given substantial consideration to people with disabilities. In fact, it was awarded the 2013 Access City award for its comprehensive and strategic approach to creating a disabled-friendly city.[34] Its inclusive policy "invested heavily in turning the formerly divided city into an accessible, barrier-free environment."[35] The most notable approach to accessibility was the city's overhaul of the transportation system. Berlin's buses are now all wheelchair-accessible, and wheelchair-accessible stations are marked on all transit and city maps. Furthermore, they have a free service which helps people with limited mobility buy tickets and change trains, as well as offering free-of-charge transport to and from stations.

The Elderly

In 2007, the World Health Organization introduced the Global Age-Friendly Cities Project. The Project aims to assist governments in creating age-friendly cities that encourage "active aging by optimizing opportunities for health, participation and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age."[36] WHO worked with focus groups of older people in 33 cities to identify the main barriers

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[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] World Health Organization, "Global Age-Friendly Cities: A Guide," *World Health Organization*, 2007.

they experience. The final product was a checklist for cities to use to adapt their "structures and services to be accessible and inclusive of older people with varying needs and capacities."[37]

However, despite WHO's effort, cities around the world are not doing enough. Michael Gusmano and Victor Rodwin argue that the primary barrier to change is the fact that "too little is known about the spatial distribution of older vulnerable persons, including isolated persons across city neighbourhoods."[38] Thus, before cities may tackle the Global Age-Friendly Cities Project, they must focus on collecting data. To start, policy makers should utilize existing, publically available information to focus on areas of concern. They should then "employ more limited surveys to evaluate the health and quality of life of older people in neighbourhoods"[39] where clear gaps exist between needs and service use.

Vancouver has successfully demonstrated the capacity for a city to collect data, combine it with WHO principles, and create a specialized, detailed plan. Their Age-Friendly Action Plan contains over 60 actions that seek to "improve facilities and services for seniors from fully independent older adults and seniors to those who are more vulnerable and need additional support."[40] To ensure inclusivity, the city consulted over 400 Vancouver seniors, caregivers, and seniors' organizations through the Seniors Dialogues Project.[41] The Plan aims to improve health and well-being for all and to address inequalities. By employing WHO principles, the Plan strives to ensure older people are "supported to age actively, enjoy good health, remain independent, and stay involved in communities."[42]

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[37] Ibid.
[38] Michael K. Gusmano, and Victor G. Rodwin, "Urban Aging, Social Isolation, and Emergency Preparedness," *Global Ageing: Issues & Action* 6, no. 2 (2010): 39.
[39] Ibid., 47.
[40] City of Vancouver, "The Age-Friendly Action Plan," *City of Vancouver*, 2013.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid.

Vancouver also recognizes the importance of the built environment. The Plan emphasizes the importance of safe and barrier-free buildings and streets, "with better access to local businesses and facilities."[43]

Conclusion

Cities present a vast number of opportunities that were once unimaginable. They encourage innovation and are bursting with a variety of cultures and knowledge. However, cities are also conducive to social isolation. Indeed, the rapid rise in urbanization is causing billions of people to feel the terrorizing effects of loneliness and isolation. Unfortunately, these feelings are exacerbated by poor urban planning, which favours highways and high-rises rather than pedestrian zones and green spaces.

Vulnerable populations in cities are particularly at risk of social isolation. People with disabilities and the elderly are often left out entirely in urban planning. Indeed, they comprise an "invisible population that does not receive attention from policy makers, the media or the general public."[44] Built environments in cities globally pose challenges to people with disabilities and the elderly, primarily due to a lack of ramps and elevators. Combined with barriers to transportation, this often leads to cities' imprisonment of these populations. Many cannot leave their homes, and thus suffer from social isolation.

As we acknowledge how cities are excluding large cohorts of the population, we can seek to model our plans of action after existing programs and policies that

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[43] Ibid.
[44] Michael K. Gusmano, and Victor G. Rodwin, "Urban Aging, Social Isolation, and Emergency Preparedness," *Global Ageing: Issues & Action* 6, no. 2 (2010): 47.

have proven successful. To build accessible cities for persons with disabilities, Europe's Design for All policy provides a strong philosophy, and Stockholm's implementation of the policy offers a case to replicate. Moreover, Berlin's comprehensive approach to creating an accessible city demonstrates that an inclusive environment is entirely possible. To combat social isolation among the elderly, all cities should employ the principles of WHO's Global Age-Friendly Cities Project. However, this cannot be done unless cities first conduct extensive spatial distribution studies to identify where older vulnerable persons are living. Vancouver's Age-Friendly Action Plan provides a model for other cities, as it combines data with WHO principles to improve the well-being of older persons.

Inclusive cities mean accessibility for all. Moving forward, the recognition of vulnerable populations and their inclusion in urban planning may mitigate the profound impacts of social isolation around the world.

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