

# Family-Centered Cities

## Urban Planning Response to Family Needs

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148

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The family is the most basic unit of society and is important to the growth of cities and societies. Urban planning is essential in catering to these diverse needs of families and society at large and shaping environments in cities and communities.

This paper explores how urban planning can respond to family needs amid the reality of rapid urbanization. Drawing from the Family Systems Theory, it explores the interconnected relationship between family dynamics and external urban environments emphasizing the importance of inclusive and participatory approaches in urban design.

The paper also briefly analyzes a successful case study of Curitiba's family-centered urban planning. By focusing on the challenges that envelope present urban environments, the paper hopes to show the opportunity this offers for the future of urbanization and family well-being.

The findings underscore the benefits and need for holistic urban strategies which place families at the center as it ensures equitable and thriving urban futures for all. The findings are insights that urban planners, policy makers,

The Venice Declaration emphasizes that families are key agents of development and calls for inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities. Priorities include healthcare, education, housing, safety, and leisure. [1]

These recommendations guide governments and urban planners in creating equitable urban environments where families can thrive.

Urban planning should ensure access to services, promote social participation, foster intergenerational interaction, and strengthen social cohesion. This is especially crucial as [2] projects two-thirds of the global population will live in urban areas by 2050.

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governments and individuals can use to ensure holistic and participatory approaches are central in urban development to ensure the prosperity of all people in society and future generations.

Urban planning draws from various fields such as engineering, architecture, and other technical fields to develop open lands and revitalize them in a manner that grows a town or city. Urban environments have increasingly become concrete jungles, and the well-being of people is seldom considered. Green public spaces and decent and affordable housing have alarmingly become a commodity rather than a human right.

With rapid urbanization worldwide, urban planning's focus on physical forms and economic functions are being challenged. It is observed that rapid urbanization often results in the growth of urban poverty which disproportionately affects families and children. [3] This shows the impact of urbanization on families and insights from the basic needs that families need to pay for often come at a higher cost which makes it difficult to address the urban phenomenon of child poverty and exclusion. [4]

There is a need to revive the importance of a family-centered approach in our urbanizing spaces because the challenges of unsustainable rapid urbanization are rising and family needs are neglected, leaving little room for inclusive urban design. This however provides a unique known as an urban dividend, which refers to viewing urbanization as a window of opportunity to improve people's wellbeing when planning is properly undertaken.

This consequently calls for a response to integrate inclusive urban design that is more environmentally conscious, pivoting away from primarily economic pull factors. This inequality problem can be further addressed through the Family Systems Theory as a guiding framework which will be used as a grounding concept for this paper and help in addressing socioeconomic impacts on families due to urban planning. This can ensure urban planning is more participatory which proves a pivotal opportunity for local governments to invest in children, families and sustainable urbanization today.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The Family Systems Theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of family members and their interactions with external environment, such as built environments and urban planning which foster healthy dynamics in families.[5] There are

limited specific studies linking the Family Systems Theory to urban planning but the theory's emphasis on the broader social context aligns with the understanding that external environments significantly impact the family systems. Applying this theory therefore involves recognizing how the structures and designs of built environments can influence family interactions, cohesion and general wellbeing.[6] This theory also presupposes that families are adaptive systems and their interactions with external factors can either hinder or support family functions.

With the above in mind, pairing the above theory and the concept of urban dividend can result in urban planning playing a significant role in shaping external environments to positively impact the wellbeing of family structures in society. The Family Systems Theory calls our attention to addressing family needs like green spaces, community infrastructure, and quality housing to support healthy family dynamics.

Conversely with insights from [7], poorly urban planned environments characterized by overcrowding, unsafe conditions, and lack of basic amenities disrupt family cohesion and hinder overall development. Applying the Family Systems Theory to urban planning can necessitate designing more inclusive environments to foster intergenerational interactions, support holistic wellbeing, and promote family stability.

### **Family-Centered Urban Planning**

The family perspective is important because it offers a more holistic view of the future of urban planning. Rapid urbanization calls for retrofitting existing urban spaces to accommodate growing populations. This adds strain to resources due to overcrowding and housing shortages, a consequence of rapid urban growth that leads to many families living in urban slums, or informal settlements which lack basic amenities such as access to clean water, public transportation, good hospitals, good schools, and other necessary infrastructure.[8]

This naturally creates another challenge for people to access essential services, especially in underserved areas. The common value judgment that urbanization and prosperity are synonymous contradicts current trends of urbanization. Family-centered urban planning addresses challenges like overcrowding, social disconnection, and lack of amenities as urban designs prioritize catering to holistic needs of families. Through participatory planning processes which involve families in decision-making also ensures urban de-

signs reflect family needs. [9]

Drawing from the success of Brazil's Curitiba city which is family-centered, the model shows the importance of designing spaces which foster social cohesion and intergenerational interactions and prioritizing accessibility to essential services. Most importantly, it shows the perks of engaging communities in the planning process to address their unique needs. [10] This example proves the capability of urban planning to address challenges of families under threat of rapid urbanization today.

Curitiba as a city embodies the success of a participatory approach and embodies the possibility that families everywhere can access clean drinking water, affordable housing, public transportation, education, health, culture, safety, green and public spaces, and pollution-free living environments provides supporting evidence from longitudinal and cross-sectional studies which suggests neighborhood social cohesion may protect against the adverse mental health effects of growing up in poverty, both for children and young people and adult populations. Isolation and lack of community ties in urban areas can contribute to mental health issues among family members, including children. [11] This also threatens the well-being of older generations and young people. The lack of recreational facilities and care for the elderly threatens the aspect of integration in urban communities.

This argument draws from the erosion of traditional family structures because of the lack of secure urban environments and infrastructure that encourages intergenerational interaction which can improve social cohesion between generations. The need to design cities to accommodate generations can help people feel part of a larger community.

### **Child Responsive Urban Planning**

Child poverty and exclusion are to an increasing extent becoming an urban occurrence due to urban employment alone in areas like the global South which operates in the informal economy, depicted by lack of access to legal and social protection, low pay, and instability. Worth noting, women and the poor make up a disproportionate share of the urban informal workforce. Informal settlements, informal employment, and informal provision of services exacerbate poverty and inequality in cities. [12] This brings about income disparities which affect the ability of families to afford housing and other necessities. In so far as cities offer job opportunities, they also present challenges such as job insecurity and informal

employment which impact family stability.

With megatrends explored by demographic shifts, climate change and other changes including urbanization show the need to make cities more safe, resilient, inclusive, and sustainable for families in the face of extreme estimates of over 300 million of the global population of slum dwellers being children. [13] With children making up one third of the global population, there is an urgency to incorporate child-friendly designs in urban areas especially in areas like sub-Saharan Africa which have a higher proportion of children. Worth noting, sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Asia have higher rates of urbanization and urban settings increasingly become the context in which many children grow up in. [14] This necessitates urban environments incorporating opportunities to improve the family's wellbeing and address the needs of children in a manner that can support their development to thrive and build an environment conducive to be homes for future generations. Mouratidis shows that a city can shape the levels of subjective wellbeing of people as people use several functions and areas in the city and not just in their neighborhood. [15] This translates to access to open, natural, and green spaces within urban spaces which facilitate social interaction and overall, improve safety.

The aspect of attaining higher wellbeing is connected to good health and longevity which speaks to the need to create a space in which access to health care, physical activities in nature and greener spaces is available to all. This is one way in which urban planning can intentionally create opportunities to foster a sense of community among populations.

Building on the principles of children's rights it can encourage inclusive urban design in a world where most cities are solely built to primarily respond to the needs of adults neglecting an urban childhood which can foster a better life for children in urban settings. Urban planning can improve social cohesion and intergenerational interactions within recreational areas. Aside from providing a safe and engaging environment necessary for a child's development, there is also a need to ensure all children can access quality services such as education and hospital. Most importantly, traffic safety measures implemented within structures of urban areas can protect children and adults from urban hazards.

Equity focused approaches are necessary to prioritize the needs of vulnerable children, especially around informal settlements. This can be achieved through a participatory approach which can ensure specific needs are addressed which in

turn, promotes inclusive urban development.

## Conclusion

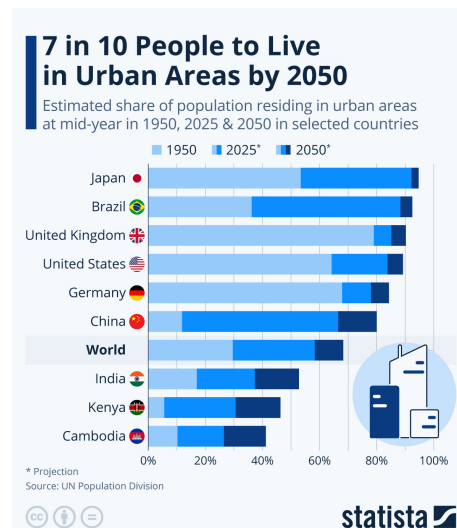
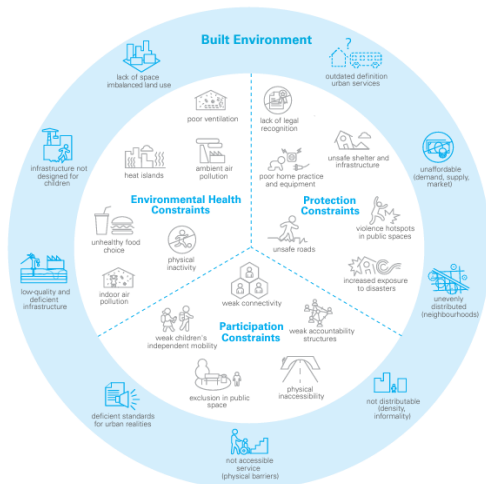
This paper may not have deeply explored the role of policy in addressing key challenges but clearly shows how urbanization significantly impacts family dynamics which often lead to challenges like access to essential services, erosion of traditional support systems and overcrowding which places pressure on existing resources. Children are often the victims of these disproportions, as well as vulnerable populations. The paper began by noting the rapid pace of urbanization as a reality and its impact on the most basic unit of society, the family. It also highlighted the benefits of a family centered approach in urban planning to prioritize family wellbeing more than ever amidst these rapid changes.

Research advocates for a child-responsive approach to urban planning which speaks to pri-

macy of family in urban planning. It emphasizes the creation of more inclusive, safe and sustainable environments which can promote the wellbeing of families. Urbanization also presents a unique opportunity, an 'urban dividend' to improve lives through participatory planning and investment in child friendly cities. By focusing on access to essential services, social cohesion, and intergenerational interaction, urban planners can support families to thrive within urban settings.

This paper calls for a shift from prioritizing economic gains to implementing holistic urban development strategies with the family at the center. It also calls for further research on the impact of family-centered approach in urban design and how it realizes the urban dividend or intergenerational interaction. This way, urban planning and development can encourage sustainable development within more cities by showing the benefits of more equitable access to resources and the long-term impact of adopting a more inclusive urban design.

Figure 9: Taxonomy of children's vulnerabilities related to the built environment



[1] citiesforfamilies.org

[2] UNDESA, 2018.

[3] Bas, D., 2022, UN-DESA, <https://www.un.org/en/un-chronicle/urbanization-and-families>

[4] UNICEF, 2021, [https://www.unicef.org/evaluation/blog/why-equity-and-inclusion-should-be-core-unicefs-urban-programming-unequal-cities#\\_ednref4](https://www.unicef.org/evaluation/blog/why-equity-and-inclusion-should-be-core-unicefs-urban-programming-unequal-cities#_ednref4)

[5] Bouchrika, I., 2024, <https://research.com/education/what-is-systems-theory?>

[6] Cohen, I. S., 2023, Psychology Today: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/your-emotional-meter/202311/understanding-bowen-family-systems-theory?>

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[8] Bas, 2022.

[9] Claire Nelischer, A. L.-S., 2022, Sage Journals,

<https://journals.sagepub.com/ezproxy.library.strathmore.edu/doi/full/10.1177/08854122221092175?>

[10] Adler, D. (2016, May 6). The Guardian . Retrieved from The Guardian : <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/may/06/story-of-cities-37-mayor-jaime-lerner-curitiba-brazil-green-capital-global-icon?>

[11] Fone, D. W., Cambridge University Press, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291713003255>

[12] UNICEF, 2021.

[13] <https://familyperspective.org/2023/02/23/civil-society-declaration-30th-anniversary-of-the-international-year-of-the-family/>

[14] Habitat, 2020, [https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/10/wcr\\_2020\\_report.pdf](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2020/10/wcr_2020_report.pdf)

[15] Mouratidis, K., 2021.