

PRIORITISING HEALTH IN MOBILITY PLANNING

ASSESSING HEALTH AND CO-BENEFITS IN EUROPEAN SUSTAINABLE URBAN MOBILITY PLANS



BACKGROUND

Urban mobility can have detrimental impacts on city dwellers' health and quality of life, for example through its effects on air pollution, noise and traffic injuries. Travel can also be an opportunity for health promotion, for example when active travel such as walking and cycling replaces car use. Health promotion could be an attractive benefit and key motivator of transformative urban sustainability policies. Transport policies fostering health can significantly co-benefit a host of European strategies and policies that target public health, such as the EU Global Health Strategy. European towns and cities are strongly encouraged by the European Commission to develop Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs) to improve residents' quality of life by addressing major challenges such as congestion, pollution, and climate change.

While health impacts of the transport sector and of urban mobility policies are well known, the extent to which health is considered in mobility plans is less obvious. Understanding how prominently and in what aspects health is featured in these plans can help guide future policy and engagement strategies to make the most of transport as an opportunity for health promotion.

AIM AND METHOD

The Study investigates the intersection of health and transport in Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans (SUMPs), focusing on the extent to which health is highlighted, transport pathways to health are made explicit, and health is operationalised into targets and key performance indicators (KPIs). It adopts a comprehensive three-step methodology, combining a health dictionary and policy analysis checklist, quantitative text analysis on a dataset of 230 SUMPs across Europe from 2006 to 2023, and an in-depth qualitative analysis of a purposive sample of 13 SUMPs.

FINDINGS

The findings show that while health is often touched upon, and its prominence seems to be increasing, SUMPs miss out on the opportunity to embrace mobility as a driver of health promotion. While some documents mention health explicitly in mobility planning, 34 out of 230 cities show no mention of health or its variants. Cycling and accessibility are the most frequently mentioned health-related concepts. Notably, security and safety are more emphasised than the explicit mention of “health” itself. The development of SUMPs seems to be strongly influenced by national/regional government requirements, as seen by peaks in SUMP publications following supportive measure taken.

The findings indicate that the link between transport and equity, and social and mental wellbeing is not frequently discussed. Detailed targets and (KPIs) for several health pathways are scarce or missing, as are the health rationale and health outcomes for proposed measures. Long-term health goals are present, but few plans outline intermediate targets and mention health impact assessment methods and monitoring mechanisms.

Overwhelmingly SUMP's health aspirations are concerned with minimising detrimental impacts of transport on health, primarily from traffic injuries and to a lesser extent from air pollution and noise. The health implications of climate change, linked to GHG emissions, stress, and urban heat islands are rarely discussed. Health related concepts such as accessibility and active travel feature prominently but are not explicitly identified as an opportunity to enhance health. In short, urban mobility planning across European cities seems to miss an opportunity to embrace health as a means to engage across sectors and society to help promote transformative green transitions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings emphasise the need for SUMPs to highlight the role of transport policy not only in reducing adverse health effects, but also as an opportunity for health enhancement. SUMPs are advised to explicitly outline transport pathways to health and include health promotion as an objective. Recommendations include incorporating health as a standard in mobility frameworks, quantifying the health(care) costs and benefits of transport across as many pathways as possible, employing appropriate indicators and monitoring mechanisms, and enhancing the link between transport and health in higher-level strategies. The study contributes valuable insights for policymakers, planners, and academics working towards more health-oriented and sustainable urban mobility planning.