# *Urbanization, Housing, and Families in the North American Context*

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According to recent World Bank statistics, more than half of the global population, 4.4 billion people (out of approximately 8.045 billion), live in urban areas and by 2050, nearly 7 out of 10 individuals will live in cities (2023). About 95 percent of this urban expansion is taking place in low and middle-income countries. Concurrently, the global rural population is projected to decline by 2050. The urban growth-rural decline is mirrored in the North American context. In 2022, the degree of global urbanization stood at 57 percent while North America had the highest degree of urbanization in the world, at about 82 percent (World Bank, 2023). However each North American country has had a different trajectory with respect to urbanization and thus, is characterized by divergent trends.

Many social scientists consider urbanization as the most important contemporary global mega trend as it represents a crucial shift in how humans use the environment (Galea & Vlahov, 2002; UN Habitat, 2022). It is a process that alters the natural environment and is accompanied by changes in how individuals and families live. Urbanization is driven by demographic changes (net population change as well as rural-urban migration, immigration, and changing age structures), economic opportunities and growth, and social factors such as the potential for a good quality of life and access to services. (OECD, 2015). Due to the centralization of activities, urban areas serve as hubs for economic and social innovation. Individuals and families are attracted to urban areas because of the concentration of opportunities that are *potentially* accessed there. However, urbanization is also intertwined with the grand challenges of our time including climate change, global poverty, and social inequality. To address these concerns, the latest UN Habitat report on cities suggests:

"Building economic, social and environmental resilience, including appropriate governance and institutional structures, must be at the heart of the future of cities. Economic resilience with new fiscal sustainability frameworks, societal resilience with universal social protection schemes, climate resilience with greener investments and stronger multilevel collaboration to confront future hocks must be the building blocks of a resilient urban future" (2022, p. xvii).

While it is common to consider urbanization from a population / demographic perspective, urbanization is closely related to family relationships, family decision-making, and family well-being. Most people who migrate to an urban area do so to access economic, educational, and cultural access for themselves and their families. In other words, they move to improve their lives. However, throughout North America urban areas are often characterized by vast differences in socio-economic levels leaving vulnerable and marginalized individuals and families unable to access the benefits that come with living in urban areas. Also, empirical evidence indicates that poorer and marginalized individuals and families tend to have worse health consequences and greater exposure to pollution and toxins in urban centers (UN Habitat, 2022).

We thus, need to recognize that urbanization is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that affects the well-being of individuals and families. In order to achieve the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 11 of making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable, urban planning and policies need to address not just housing stock, transportation, and other infra-structure issues. Instead, the complex social aspects of urbanization also require a focus on individual and family well-being. In each country in the North American context, this requires a multi-pronged approach that includes a focus on racial and ethnic segregation, the experiences of low-income urban inhabitants, and an acknowledgement of gender and disability issues.

## Defining Urbanization

There is currently no standard definition of urbanization. In some countries urban is defined by the number of individuals living in a specific area and by population density. In other places, urbanization is associated with the percentage of the labor force that works in non-agricultural sectors. Most commonly, urbanization is associated with both the increase in the percentage of population living in a specific geographic area and the total area occupied by urban (defined by density) settlements (UNDESA, 2019).

The absence of a definition has made it difficult if not impossible to compare indicators across cities and towns in various parts of the world, and often even in the same society.[1] In that spirit various international organizations including the European Union, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Labor Office (ILO) and several others have come together to create a global definition of degree of urbanization divided into three classes. These groups include 1) cities, 2) towns and semi-dense areas and 3) rural areas (UN Habitat, 2022).[2] Analyses using these groupings are only now beginning to be published.

## The North American Context

The urbanization patterns that we see around the world are mirrored in the North American context. However, urbanization increases have been most pronounced in the developing economies of Asia and Africa accounting for 95 percent of growth (UNDESA, 2022). In the United States, Canada, and Mexico approximately 79 − 82 percent of the total population live in urban areas, though each country has had a different trajectory with respect to urbanization due to varying historical, economic, and socio-cultural conditions (World Bank, 2023).

### *The United States*
In the United States, urban growth has been expanding since the 1830s due to the early industrialization of the nation. However, urbanization has been a highly regional phenomenon.

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[1] The 2020 US Census for example slightly altered the definition of urban areas leading to a slight decline in the number of the population that is now considered urban. https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2022/urban-rural-populations.html

[2] This categorization was endorsed by the UN Statistical Commission in March 2020 but it is so new that most reports and analysis do not yet employ it

The Northeast was first to industrialize and achieved an urban majority by the 1870s. Industrialization attracted foreign migrants, especially at the turn of the twentieth century and led to increased production capabilities and the development of transportation infrastructures (Statista, 2023). In contrast, the South for example, did not achieve an urban majority until the 1950s.

By 2022 about 80 percent of the U.S. population of 334 million were living in urban areas of the United States and 20 percent in rural areas (Census, 2023). Changes in the 2020 census to definitions of urban vs rural areas are reflected in these figures. As of 2020 urban areas in the United States are now defined by having 5000 individuals (up from 2500) and all areas with the minimum population are now defined as urban.  Distinctive to the U.S. is that in addition to the largest major cities of New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Phoenix, the urban population is scattered over more than 300 areas of 100, 000 or more individuals. Of the large cities, New York City is the most highly populated, with about 8.8 million inhabitants while California has the greatest urban population rate of any state at 94.2 percent (Census, 2022).[3] A small number of states are still characterized by a rural majority: Vermont, Maine, Mississippi, Montana, and West Virginia (Census, 2023; Statista, 2022).

Urbanization in the United States is unique due to the fact that urban growth is primarily occurring in suburban and small metropolitan areas (Pew, 2018).  In keeping with global trends, rural areas have seen a significant decrease in population over the last fifty years, however are characterized by the presence of a significant number of older persons  - about 18 percent of individuals living in rural areas are over the age of 65 compared to 15 percent in the suburbs and 13 percent in cities (Pew, 2018). Despite a wide variety of urban planning and policy initiatives, urban areas in the United States continue to be plagued by a history of racial segregation and gentrification efforts that have destroyed long-standing communities of lower-income families and frequently hollowed out city centers.

### *Canada*
The current population of Canada is estimated at about 40 million (Statistics Canada, 2023).  Of these 40 million about 83.4 percent live in an urban area. According to the Canadian census definitions, smaller urban areas are defined as having from 1,000 to 99,900 inhabitants, while larger areas are measured by having over 100,000 inhabitants. Rural areas have fewer than 1000 inhabitants and less than 400 people per square kilometer. The majority of urban dwellers, 73.7 percent, live in Canada's larger urban centers which continue to grow primarily driven by immigration. Bucking a global trend, Canada's rural population has seen a slight increase in growth over the last several years, however it remains at only 17.8 percent of its population Statistics Canada, 2022b).

Despite being neighbors and sharing the longest unguarded border in the world, urbanization looks somewhat different in Canada than in the U.S.  Canada is distinguished by the fact that over one-third of Canada's whole population live in three distinctive urban areas reflecting

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[3] New York does not make the top ten list of global mega-cities.

different economic foundations: Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal. More recently, some smaller urban areas such as Edmonton, Calgary, and Halifax have seen a significant growth of their urban areas as well (Statistics Canada, 2022a). Also distinctive is that the majority of the population of Canada, around 90%, lives within 160 km of the U.S. border and eight out of ten of Canada's largest cities are located on just 5% of its land. Large areas of Canada are characterized by below freezing weather for most of the year, making living in rural areas difficult and even hazardous for many individuals. Canada has its own form of urban segregation, relegating lower-income migrants to the outer suburbs of cities (Rowe, 2016). Also, today more than half of all Canadian indigenous populations have relocated to cities from rural areas. In general, they maintain social and cultural ties with their families and communities in their areas of origin (Hilbrecht & Keating, 2022). However, many indigenous individuals have been faced with severe poverty and discriminatory practices in their resettled urban areas.

### Mexico

In terms of population numbers, the Mexican National Statistics Office (INEGI) reports that as of 2023 Mexico had approximately 129 million inhabitants with 79% of the population considered urban. In contrast to the United States and Canada that have had a relatively long period of urbanization, Mexico has urbanized more recently and in specific phases. In the period from 1940 – 1980 urbanization grew from 20 percent to 51.8 percent with a massive migration of rural workers seeking opportunities in urban areas. However, the country was not prepared for such a massive migration resulting in informal settlements, slums, and a lack of infra-structure and employment opportunities (Esteinou, 2023). The next phase of urbanization, from 1980 – 2010 saw another rapid increase to 62.5 percent (INEGI, 2023). Again, the lack of infra-structure for such rapid urbanization has led to a wide variety of social problems including specifically for the new migrants to urban areas.

With over 22 million inhabitants, greater Mexico City is now by far the largest city in North America and is considered one of the top five mega cities of the world though medium-sized urban areas with 450,000 to 1 million inhabitants have grown the fastest over the last several decades (OECD, 2015). Rapid urbanization has occurred primarily along city margins leading to major urban sprawl (Aguilar, Flores & Lara, 2022). Due to poor land-use planning as well as inadequate land available for low-income residents, Mexico has seen the emergence of irregular settlements in risk prone areas that are devastated during earthquakes, floods, and tropical storms. It is estimated that up to one-fourth of urban households live in informal settlements (Monkkonen, 2019). In response to these challenges, Mexico established a single ministry in 2013, the Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban development which focuses on urban policy and housing issues. The aim was to create a more coordinated response to the complex urban problems that have come with rapid urbanization.

### Urbanization and Housing

Urbanization is very closely linked with the creation and access to affordable housing. A fundamental human right is to have a safe and comfortable home where one can live. This is both a physical necessity and a psychological requirement (Bashir, 2002). However, current

housing trends, especially in urban areas in North America, do not bode well for a large proportion of individuals and families. A range of issues from unplanned urbanization, the stagnation of household incomes, the dominance of Airbnb and other types of short-term rental options, and the control of housing markets by large commercial entities, are influencing housing patterns and housing availability. Issues around access to affordable housing abound in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.[4]

Housing is foundational to sustaining and promoting family life. Every aspect of life is affected when individuals and families do not have a safe place that they consider their "home." As the U.S. National Housing Task Force already suggested in 1988,

"... a decent place for a family to live becomes a platform for dignity and self-respect and a base for hope and improvement. A decent home allows people to take advantage of opportunities in education, health and employment – the means to get ahead in our society. A decent home is the important beginning point for growth in the mainstream of American life" (In Bratt. 2002 p. 15).

While the National Housing Task Force was speaking specifically about the United States, having decent shelter is a basic requirement for all human beings. Moreover, as Bratt (2002) illustrated in a widely cited model, housing has three crucial components that contribute to family well-being: physical attributes, the relationship of housing to the individual living in that home, and community conditions.
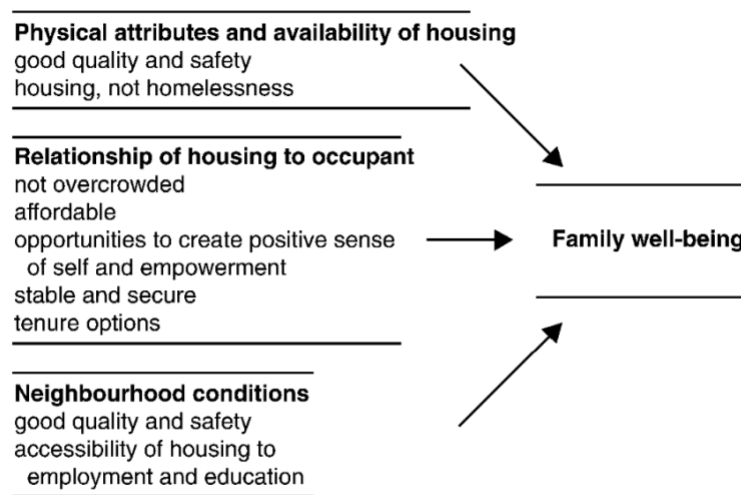


**Physical attributes and availability of housing**
good quality and safety
housing, not homelessness

**Relationship of housing to occupant**
not overcrowded
affordable
opportunities to create positive sense
  of self and empowerment
stable and secure
tenure options

**Neighbourhood conditions**
good quality and safety
accessibility of housing to
  employment and education

**Family well-being**

**Figure 1.** Connections between housing and family well-being.

Empirical research highlights that stable housing is critical for positive child development. When families suffer from housing instability or homelessness, children's educational, behavioral, and

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[4] Access to affordable housing for the reasons mentioned have become a global problem including in high and low-income countries.

cognitive development suffers (Harkness & Newman, 2001). A wide literature indicates that children also have a more difficult time exploring the outer world without the experience of an early safe home base (Bratt, 2002; CIEH, 2018; Mueller & Tighe, J. 2007). Home stability and instability directly impacts immediate family life as well as the potential families that will be formed in the future. In addition, if a family's housing needs are not met, they will have difficulty accessing educational, economic, and social opportunities.

Despite our knowledge about the importance having a stable home in people's lives, we are faced by what is at times called a "silent crisis" (Anacker, 2019).  The lack of affordable housing stock and sky-rocketing home prices are affecting an increasing number of families – especially low and moderate-income renters and some homeowners in the United States, Canada, and Mexico. Housing affordability affects every other part of a family's budget including having enough money for food, transportation, health needs, retirement savings, and childcare.

The United States faces an enormous housing crisis: there is both a lack of affordable housing stock and rents have increased exponentially.  According to the most recent statistics, 31.5 percent of households in the United States pay more than 30 percent of their incomes in housing (Wang & Balcharan, 2023). Under current guidelines, households that spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing, are considered cost burdened (Urban Institute, 2023). Housing costs and their accompanying housing insecurity issues are primarily experienced by low-income populations, individuals with disabilities, and families of color. Currently, the U.S. has a shortage of 7.3 million affordable rental homes available to those with extremely low incomes – which is defined as an income at or below either the federal poverty guideline or 30% of their area median income, whichever is greater. Approximately 33 affordable rental homes are available for every 100 extremely low-income renter households. This situation exists in every state and major metropolitan area (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2023).

The combination of income insufficiency and the lack of affordable housing have exacerbated homelessness in the United States (National Law Center, 2015).  Based on 2022 data from HUD, 582,462 individuals were listed as being homeless. This equals about 18 out of every 10,000 people and includes individuals of all genders, every racial and ethnic group, and from every region of the country (HUD, 2023). Homelessness has increased most dramatically amongst individuals who identify as transgender and those who are Asian, Hispanic, or American Indian. These increases have occurred primarily in Western states that are ethnically and racially diverse and are facing severe affordable housing challenges, however every state is dealing with rising homelessness (End Homelessness, 2023). In the United States, homelessness is driven by the interconnection of lack of affordable housing, unemployment, low wages, rising rents and gentrification.[5]

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[5] Gentrification refers to the process of displacing lower-income residents of a community, redeveloping the area, and creating more expensive housing and retail options (Chattoo et al., 2021).

Canada is also facing an affordable housing crisis with amongst the highest home prices in the G7 and the top OECD countries.[6] Census data indicates that between 2011 and 2021, households that rented grew by 21.5 percent while homeownership went up by 8.4 percent. Moreover, renters were more than twice as likely to be in homes that overstretched their budgets in comparison to homeowners (Statistics Canada, 2023). According to the Canadian Rental Housing Index, over 33 percent of Canadian households spent over 30 percent of their incomes on housing while 13 percent spent over 50 percent in 2021 (CRH, 2023). Especially recent renters faced more rental cost pressure than more long-term renters and specifically in popular downtown areas. Young people are the ones who are most often faced by housing affordability issues as they move to metropolitan areas to study or work (Statistics Canada, 2023). Rental demand in Canada is driven in great part by recent international migrants and the high influx of foreign students coming in to attend institutions of higher learning (CRH, 2023).

Affordable housing issues are also rampant in Mexico. In contrast to the United States where housing is primarily financed through private entities, in Mexico, a government agency, INFONAVIT, finances most mortgages (Monkkonen, 2019). Its mission is to guarantee decent housing for all workers – a right that is enshrined in the Mexican constitution. Members (formal, salaried employees – or approximately 40 percent of the workforce) are obligated to contribute 5% of their salaries to this fund for their housing needs. The fund is also subsidized by the government and businesses. Restrictions on how the money that is available through INFONAVIT in conjunction with building policies have led to a substantial increase in the building of single-family homes (Monkkonen, 2019). This Mexican housing policy framework has contributed to an exponential housing expansion in urban margins as it encourages individual homes to be built where land is cheaper. However, there have been major repercussions with this strategy. On a household level, homeowners have become disconnected from places of employment which are most frequently found in city centers (OECD, 2015). And increasingly, a number of studies have shown an association between government backed loans and an increase in vacant houses, especially on the periphery of urban areas (Monkkonen, 2019). The emphasis on home ownership has also led to a shallow rental market with other unintended consequences: home ownership has tended to make people less mobile and thus, unable to access potential new economic opportunities. In addition, rapid, inefficient urbanization, has also led to multiple infra-structure challenges including high levels of pollution, poor water quality and inadequate waste-water treatment. Mexico currently ranks among the bottom five countries on the OECD's Better Life index due to these issues (2023).

Currently, all three North American countries face severe affordable housing crises. Yet, despite the dire situation, this phenomenon has received relatively little public and policy attention. This is a critical social omission. Housing is not just important on an individual and familial level: housing can also play a key role in social integration for individuals across socio-economic classes and from varying backgrounds. When people have access to safe homes, public spaces,

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[6] The average cost of a house in Canada was $811,700 in 2021 a 97% increase from 2015 (Office of the Parliamentary Budget Office, 2022).

civic buildings, and green spaces, they are more likely to interact with each other in a peaceful manner leading to social cohesion and greater potential for cultural and social understanding.

## Urbanization and Gender / Urbanization and Disability

Life in urban areas affects different groups of individuals in a variety of ways. Often ignored but of critical importance is addressing gender issues and disability challenges in urban contexts. Women bear the brunt of inequality in urban contexts if they face harassment or violence, cannot access basic services such as health care, or get to their places of employment safely. Unfortunately, sexual violence and sexual harassment in public spaces is an extremely common experience for girls and women specifically in urban areas (UN Women, 2019).  Throughout North America, women and individuals with disabilities associate public parks for instance, as areas where they are more likely to be in danger. Also, many women structure their work hours and other activities, in order to avoid being out late at night due to the fear of harm coming to them (Kern, 2020). While intimate partner and domestic violence are now recognized as human rights violations, violence and harassment of women and individuals with disabilities in public spaces remains an issue that has received little if any attention.

UN Women has launched a global program in 20 cities that partners with community-based women's organizations to specifically highlight the needs of women in urban centers (UN Women, 2017).  Vienna, Austria has also initiated an involved process to make urban areas and transportation safer for women. For instance, they have added street lights and widened side walks in large urban areas. These small improvements have assisted in making women feel safer as there are fewer hidden areas where a perpetrator could hide (Kern, 2020). North American urban planning initiatives can learn from these initiatives: in order for urban areas to be safe, equitable, healthy places to live, they need to involve girls and women in their planning and development. Gender equality is not just a theoretical concept that applies to a limited sphere of locations such as schools and workplaces. Instead, gender issues need to be recognized and embedded in every aspect of social life including in the planning of safe transportation and public spaces. This requires that women participate in every aspect of urban governance, planning and financing, and that gender equality measures be embedded throughout these processes (UN Women, 2019).

In a similar vein, the specific challenges and opportunities for individuals with disabilities need to be part of urban planning and housing initiatives as well. Research in this area indicates that there are a wide variety of measures that can improve the lives of individuals with disabilities specifically in urban centers.  For instance, in order to promote the general goal of well-being, a focus on safe public spaces and green areas acknowledges that it is necessary for all individuals to be able to move about, access services and employment, and also to have physical and psychological space for relaxation and recovery (Global Disability Summit, 2022).

Urban planning efforts that include measures to assist individuals with disabilities, benefit everyone. For instance, access to appropriate physical accommodations that include areas to relax has been proven to increase well-being for urban dwellers. Minor modifications such as

ramps on street corners, assist individuals in wheelchairs *and* individuals who are pushing baby strollers (Global Disability Summit, 2022). However, it is not enough to modify physical environments. Public education on disabilities in order to create a greater sense of equity and equality is critical as well.

## Urbanization and Green Spaces

Unplanned, rapid urbanization leads to settlement patterns that include little public space and result in less land for basic infrastructures such as sewers, water access, and fewer green areas. As urban areas are expanding, the allocations for public space, particularly streets have been reduced. In the U.S. these days it is common to allocate about 15 percent of land to streets in newly planned areas, which is considerably less than it was in the past. In unplanned regions, the average is about 2 percent of land. The generally accepted minimum standard for public space in high density areas (150 people per hectar) is approximately 45 percent (30 percent for streets and sidewalks and 15 percent for open public spaces) (Global Goals, 2017). Allocating adequate public space is crucial to increase accessibility of services and employment, as well as greater connectivity especially for women, older persons, and individuals with disabilities.

In certain parts of the United States efforts are underway to create new types of public and green spaces. For instance, in Cleveland, Ohio, LAND studio which was formed in 2011, has brought together individuals from disadvantaged neighborhoods, artists, landscapers and developers to create inner city public spaces that are accessible to their residents. In these communities they are creating green sustainable neighborhoods. LAND partners with city officials, art foundations, the Trust for Public Land and conservancies to create their multi-purpose projects. LAND exemplifies a public-private partnership that includes resident participation and support (LAND, 2018).

Having green spaces and access to nature is also a growing focus of early childhood specialists who advocate that nature-based play facilitates early development and leads to positive youth outcomes (Mainella, Agate, & Clark, 2011). In a 2014 study, Zelenski and Nisbet found that there is a link between well-being and nature, and that this relationship facilitated connectedness to family, friends, and home. They referred to this idea as nature relatedness and they pointed out that when this notion is fostered, it also creates more positive feelings and an interest in sustainability. Van den Bosch & Sang (2017) also suggested that spending more time in natural surrounding contributes to positive mental health - which leads to healthier close relationships.

In another example from the United States, Temple University in Philadelphia Pennsylvania and the Brookings Institution are partnering to integrate urban design and placemaking with the science of learning. The initiative entitled Playful Learning Landscapes Action Network (PLLAN) is creating learning opportunities in everyday places such as bus stops, parks and supermarkets. The emphasis is on playful learning and on enriching social spaces for children, families, and communities (Hadani et al., 2021). This is one path forward as it emphasizes building children's competencies and reducing social inequities amongst different groups.

While not in North America, however providing a pertinent example, Curitiba, Brazil is a different case example of urban planning that has carefully incorporated green spaces into the design of the city. Despite the city having grown exponentially over the last 50 years, air pollution is close to WHO guideline levels and is much lower than in many other rapidly growing urban areas. The success of urban planning in Curitiba is associated with a conscious planning process that expanded the amount of green space per resident. As part of the process, 1.5 million trees were planted and a complex network of pedestrian walkways were incorporated into the city design. Life expectancy in Curitiba is now two years longer for residents than in the rest of Brazil (it stands at 76.3 years) and infant mortality also remains relatively low (Suzuki, Dastur, Moffatt, Yabuki & Maruyama, 2010).

## Conclusion

As the discussion above has illustrated each country in North America has a unique trajectory with respect to urbanization. However, in each country, economic development intersects with access to affordable housing, environmental sustainability, and social cohesion. Thus, it is critical to bring together the various constituencies and stakeholders in urban areas in order to create a more equal playing field were marginalized individuals, women, and low-income residents also have a voice. Moreover, urban areas need to be viewed as places where families – not just individuals – can thrive. This means that educational and social services with a focus on family needs need to be a key part of urban agendas. A holistic perspective will allow for the realization of the 2030 Agenda and particularly Goal 11 of making human settlements and specifically cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.  Well-planned urban areas can decrease social inequalities and promote family life. By providing affordable, safe housing, accessible transportation options, and safe and green spaces for marginalized groups, cities can be the conduit for more peaceful equitable societies. As the United Nations World Cities Report (2020) proposed,

> When cities are well-planned and managed, they can lift families out of poverty, liberate women from gender-based discrimination, point to bright futures for children and youth, offer comforts and supports to older persons in their golden years and welcome migrants looking for a better life. This wide-ranging value of urbanization is one of its most potent features. Cities are the crucible in which social outcomes will be improved for all types of marginalized and vulnerable groups (p. xxvi).

In addition, we need to recognize and celebrate the fact that cultural diversity is a hallmark of urban life. The diversity of urban areas is exactly one of the key features that makes them vibrant, inclusive, and attractive to individuals and families. When people are exposed to new ideas and practices they are stimulated and become innovative. There is much empirical evidence now that well-planned and managed urban areas that employ inclusive participatory processes are the key to the sustainability of contemporary social life (UNDESA, 2019).

Urban planning across North America cannot conform to one shared paradigm. Instead, a better alternative is to incorporate recommendations from the new Urban Agenda that was adopted

by most countries in 2016. The new Urban Agenda emphasizes collaboration and supportive partnerships between smaller and larger urban areas in regional areas (UNDESA, 2019). These types of partnerships support equitable development and incorporate cultural and regional differences to ensure that rural areas and marginalized populations are not left behind. The new Urban Agenda also emphasizes sustainable urbanization. This is a new paradigm that incorporates economic development with ecological protections and emphasizes social equity and social needs. As Aguilar, Flores, and Lara stated, "The social dimension is crucial because an unequal society cannot be regarded as sustainable in the long term (2022, p. 3).

When urbanization is deliberate with the appropriate stakeholders on local, national, and transnational levels involved in the process, it can be the most efficient and successful mechanism for improving the lives of individuals and families. This necessitates a focus on understanding the complexity of family life in urban contexts: family needs and family supports for newcomers as well as longtime residents. Families, in all their diversity of shapes and sizes, need to be supported through affordable housing, economic opportunities, reliable, safe transportation, and access to education, social services, and green spaces.

## Recommendations

*Standardize definitions.* There is currently no shared definition across the countries of North America of what is urban or a city – and what is considered urban can even differ over time in the same country. This creates challenges when making comparisons between places and regions and for planning and executing sustainable urbanization. Efforts such as those encouraged by the OECD (2020) which define urban areas through people-based definitions that measure the concentration of individuals instead of purely land use are a first step in creating a working definition that can be used by policy makers when formulating plans for sustainable urbanization.

*Increase capacity for data collection.* A key finding from research that focuses on cities and urbanization is that we are missing good quality, relevant, accessible, and timely data. This problem is influencing not just the monitoring and reporting of policies but is affecting the policies that are needed to effectively respond to rapid urbanization and / or urban spread. Accurate data would assist policy makers in tracking changes and documenting which policies make the most impact in cities. Reliable, accurate data would also allow for private and public investment in infrastructure, housing, and economic opportunities.

*Expand the training and incorporation of urban planners.* Urban planning needs to take into account differing local contexts and trajectories. This includes integrating a family lens, gender awareness, and disability knowledge. Also, local planners need to be part of regional and national initiatives.

*Integrate transnational and national capacities.* Creating partnership between policy makers, transnational NGOs, and local planners that address the linkages between urban planning and

social issues will lead to more sustainable urban planning. The New Urban Agenda emphasizes these linkages and complements SDG 11 by outlining strategic initiatives in order to support and facilitate the implementation of the UN 2030 Agenda.

*Create incentives for economic opportunities, mixed income and use development, and create linkages with transportation planning.* Economic diversification leads to more opportunities for individuals with varying skill sets. This necessitates prioritizing long-term private-public partnerships. The private sector needs to invest in affordable housing, infrastructure, and clean technologies (UN World Cities Report, 2020). This also requires planning and investing in efficient transport systems in order to increase access to employment, health, community services and educational facilities. Transport needs to include walking, cycling and public transport. Centralized planning that is coordinated between the various stakeholders is a key element in this area.

*Promote more intensive land use.* Sometimes referred to as infill development, instead of allowing cities to spill over into wider and wider areas, create borders and incentives to use vacant housing stock in cities. Specially, affordable housing is one of the key components of promoting healthy family life in urban areas and incorporating green spaces improves life conditions for vulnerable populations such as older persons and individuals with disabilities.

*Incentivize stronger rental markets for urban dwellers*. Currently home ownership is prioritized in housing policies across North America. Moreover, short-term rentals such as through Airbnb are pricing middle and lower-income residents out of urban housing markets. Stronger policies to thwart these initiatives have been proven to encourage urban populations to live closer to their jobs which is also more beneficial for family life.

*Design and retro-fit urban areas to be flexible use spaces.* Currently most urban spaces are designed for single use purposes (such as housing or commercial interests). The UN World Cities report (2022) points out that the pandemic has highlighted the need for flexible use policies for both indoor and outdoor spaces, especially in times of crises.

*Acknowledge and support the link between urbanization, physical and mental health, and access to nature / green spaces*. The way cities and neighborhoods are designed affects whether or not it is easy for people to walk, cycle, participate in active recreation, use public transport, and interact with neighbors and their community. It is increasingly understood that urban planning decisions have a key role to play in combatting growing levels of obesity and helping prevent lifestyle-related diseases through facilitating physical activity and positive mental health (Van den Bosch & Ode Sang, 2017).

*Provide safe and easily accessible public spaces that are accessible to all residents of urban areas including vulnerable populations*. Public space is understood as land that is publicly owned and can be used by all. Public spaces include streets, sidewalks, gardens, parks, and conservation areas. Using data from child development and positive youth development can assist in supporting efforts to divert public and private money towards the creation of outdoor

nature spaces that support well-being of all vulnerable populations including older persons and individuals with disabilities.

*Prioritize family, gender, and disability issues, rights, and concerns through formal and informal efforts in urban planning.* Integrating a family, gender, and disability lens into urban planning leads to greater social cohesion and safer environments for all urban dwellers. Women and individuals with disabilities need to be included in urban planning efforts in order to provide multiple lenses on what is needed for various groups to function optimally in urban environments.

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