

Quebec: Sherbrooke assesses the impact of city-centre revitalization on health inequalities

Martine Shareck,

Post-doctoral researcher in community health at the Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, University of Sherbrooke, Principal researcher of the Equitable and Healthy City Centre study (Centre-ville Équitable et en Santé, CentrÉS) on the city of Sherbrooke, Canada.

Nestled in the heart of Estrie, a region in the southeast of the province of Quebec (Canada), Sherbrooke has a population of approximately 160,000. Since the 1960s there have been plans to develop the downtown area of Sherbrooke with the aim of boosting its vitality and strengthening the place of Quebec's sixth largest city as a historic, administrative, cultural and entrepreneurial centre of the region [1].

Following the massive displacement of residents and traders to the outskirts of the city in the mid-20th century, downtown Sherbrooke, which covers an area of 1.1 km² at the intersection of the Saint-François and Magog rivers, lost its vitality [1]. Data from the 2016 census highlights the relatively precarious living conditions of a large part of city-centre residents. Among the population of around 3000 people, 93.3% are renters, 57.1% live below the poverty line (compared to 17.7% across the city) and the median household income is three times lower than that for the city as a whole [2].

Consultation with residents

In 2016, the city addressed situation by adopting the Downtown Sherbrooke Sustainable Development Plan. This 25-year plan holds the aim to double the residential population of the city centre. It includes the construction of rental properties (including accessible and affordable housing), businesses and offices, the creation of a public square and the redevelopment of the Saint-François riverside area. Innovative features include a multimodal travel hub to promote active mobility and public transport, with greening initiatives and public art projects for improving the area aesthetically [3].

To keep the population informed, in line with the 2009 policy for public dialogue, there have been a number of public consultations

about the downtown revitalization projects, which draw funding from both public and private investment. The city council also set up and chaired an intersectoral committee that brought together representatives of local government, citizens' associations, community groups, industry and the cultural sphere. Under reconstitution following the municipal elections of autumn 2021, this committee aimed to promote communication between stakeholders and reduce sticking points during the works. However, a recent survey revealed mixed opinions about the practical application of the policy for public dialogue, which led the city to announce it would adopt a new public participation policy, created in partnership with citizens and based on transparency, information and listening [4].

Urban revitalization and health

Previous studies have suggested that the revitalization of socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods can improve healthcare accessibility, well-being and social conditions for residents, but can also have adverse consequences such as social exclusion and gentrification [5].

After hearing the concerns voiced by community groups and citizens' associations active in the city centre, particularly in connection with the loss of social meeting points and the marginalization of groups already living in precarious conditions, a team of interdisciplinary researchers developed the CentrÉS¹ study. This study assesses the impact of revitalization in downtown Sherbrooke on health and on social inequalities in health (i.e., health differences between social groups on the basis of gender, education or ethnicity) among young people aged 16–30. This group accounts for 34% of the downtown population, and many businesses and services catering to them (schools, shops, bars, etc.) are located in the area. The study, launched in July 2020, relies on data from longitudinal cohort surveys, qualitative interviews with downtown residents and visitors, a literature review and interviews with key informants. Data collection and analysis are ongoing.

Conclusions and outlook

The CentrÉS study will help us to improve our understanding of both the positive and negative impacts of city-centre revitalization on health and on social inequalities in health and will help develop complementary interventions to reduce the negative impacts observed. Interventions vary and could range from awareness campaigns about neighbourhood cohesion to building projects that offer subsidised housing.

Around the world, many cities are looking at city-centre revitalization to mitigate the knock-on effects of COVID-19 restrictions. It is therefore imperative to seize this opportunity to (re)develop our village and town centres in a fair and equitable manner. The scientific and practical implications of the CentrÉS study may contribute to this, but political and economic support remain essential. ■

1. <https://www.etudecentres.ca/>

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Feature
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