

Urban density in pandemic times

"We need more green public space in our cities!"
A question of justice.



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How has the pandemic affected the debate on the right level of urban density? The story highlights the importance of green spaces in times of pandemic.

Since the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, there has been intensive discussion about the impact of the pandemic on urban development. In the current discussion, the question of the extent to which urban density favours or even explains the spread of the virus appears again and again (Siedentop and Zimmer-Hegmann, 2020: 2). Large cities are more affected by the pandemic than rural areas - according to many authors (Reicher, 2020; Tietz, 2020). The journalist Laura Weißmüller confirms this: The coronavirus is hitting the cities harder than the countryside. She speaks of the "flip side of urbanisation" (Weißmüller, 2020) and describes how the pandemic is turning everything that makes our metropolises liveable and successful almost into a horror scenario.

But is physical density really the problem? At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, the highest population-weighted case numbers did not occur in large cities, but in hotspots of small towns and rural communities. Between February and mid-August 2020, the average COVID-19 case numbers per 100,000 inhabitants were only slightly higher in urban areas than in rural areas (Dosch and Hauray, 2020: 71). This is because by mid-May, large cities no longer had corresponding large city functions: less public transport, a reduced volume of traffic, closed universities and no major events.

With the holiday season, travel activity also increased again. In summer 2020, the number of cases in urban areas was twice as high as in rural areas (ibid.: 71). From September to the beginning of October, the case numbers in large cities were even three times higher than in sparsely populated rural districts, which was partly also due to higher infection numbers among younger people (ibid.: 71).

In October and November 2020, the differences between urban and rural areas narrowed again (ibid.: 71). Overall, no meaningful evidence can be found for significant differences in the affectedness of urban and rural areas.

Urban density is thus not the sole factor for above-average infection rates; rather, other factors seem to be important - such as the age structure of the population and the proportion of socio-structurally disadvantaged population groups (Blätgen and Milbert, 2020: 43). The consequences of the corona crisis will be more pronounced the weaker the affected cities and social groups were already positioned in the run-up to the crisis. "In this respect, the corona pandemic highlights the strengths and weaknesses of social structures with a magnifier" (Jakubowski, 2020: 25).

The corona pandemic increases social inequalities. This affects not only income, but also opportunities for local recreation and housing conditions (Adam and Klemme, 2020: 11). Low-income groups have suffered and continue to suffer significantly more than others. This is partly because income levels and housing situations are often closely correlated (Jakubowski, 2020: 25). The case of Göttingen shows that cramped housing conditions can lead to a local accumulation of corona infections. Here, about 120 people in a high-rise building had become infected with the coronavirus (Zeit Online, 2020).

"The corona pandemic has highlighted a social dichotomy in our society: into a group of the population that has private green space and a group that is more dependent than ever on public open spaces" (Reicher, 2020: 52). The demand for environmental justice, i.e. equal access to spaces, is becoming louder: "those who have access to private open space are safer from infection in the time of the pandemic, and those who do not must expose themselves to an increased risk of infection" (Hennecke, 2020).

Basically, this demand was already very relevant before the corona pandemic, but it has gained increased importance as a result of the pandemic. A representative survey shows that green spaces in the city have become more important, especially among younger people under 30 and parents of children under ten (BGL, 2020).

Almost half of the respondents consider urban green spaces to be more important since the corona crisis, and more than one in four visits them more frequently since then (ibid.).

These developments bring existing problems more to the fore. Green spaces must be available, but these are usually highly variable in urban areas. This is confirmed by satellite data and the green provision of individual cities derived from them (BBSR, 2018). In Berlin's urban districts, for example, the amount of green space in the city center is comparatively low.

Once again, society must ask itself how much density our cities can tolerate. "Interior development must always be thought of in two ways - in terms of constructional development and green development at the same time" (Difu, 2017). Approaches like those of double inner development are more important than ever, as they create and preserve open spaces.

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