



Chicago

Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes is the largest public housing development in the world. The Robert Taylor Homes consist of twenty-eight 16 story apartment buildings. Most of the complex is an urban desert -- concrete and asphalt cover the spaces between the buildings -- but there are pockets of trees here and there. Frances Kuo and Bill Sullivan of the University of Illinois [Human-Environment Research Laboratory](#) studied how well the residents of Robert Taylor were doing in their daily lives based on the amount of contact they had with these trees.



Two views of the Robert Taylor Homes public housing project in Chicago.

The study found that when compared to people who live in places without trees, residents of Robert Taylor Homes who live near trees have significantly better relations with, and stronger ties to their neighbors. They have more visitors, socialize more with their neighbors, know more people in their apartment building, and have a stronger sense of community than people who live in places without trees. They also like where they are living more, feel better adjusted to living there, and feel safer than residents who have few trees around them. Sullivan and Kuo's team made 100 observations of outdoor common spaces in two public housing developments. They found people gathered in common spaces that contained trees significantly more often than they gathered in spaces that had no trees. These findings held true for adults, for children, and for adults supervising children.



Frances Kuo: Before we started our research I would have said, trees are nice, but the problems we're facing in our cities and our budgets are such that I'm not sure it's worth it. I think that through this research I have become convinced that trees are really an important part of a supportive, humane environment. Without vegetation, people are very different beings.

The study also found that residents of Robert Taylor Homes who live near trees have significantly less violence in their homes than people who live in places without trees. Of 200 residents interviewed, 14 percent of those in non-green areas said that they had hit their children in the past year, compared to only three percent of residents in areas with trees. And 22 percent of women from non-green areas said they had engaged in violence in the last year, compared to 13 percent of those in planted areas. Sullivan and Kuo believe that the urban forest provides a setting in which neighbors get to know one another. In doing so, they build stronger relationships among themselves, and build a support system that provides alternatives to violence.



Bill Sullivan: "People who live in intense poverty have to count on their neighbors for a lot of the social support that they need in their lives. We're finding trees produce settings in which neighbors get to know each other better and violence is reduced.

Therefore, trees are associated with the reduction of one of our most significant important public policy concerns of the day."

Kuo and Sullivan are nearing completion of a follow-up study that examines the benefits to children of living in close contact with urban forests. Do children who have more contact with trees do better in school? Do they play in more cooperative, collaborative ways? Is their overall development better than children who live with few trees around them?