



# Changing the urban design of cities for health: The superblock model

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Car-dependent city planning has resulted in high levels of environmental pollution, sedentary lifestyles and increased vulnerability to the effects of climate change. The Barcelona Superblock model is an innovative urban and transport planning strategy that aims to reclaim public space for people, reduce motorized transport, promote sustainable mobility and active lifestyles, provide urban greening and mitigate effects of climate change. We estimated the health impacts of implementing this urban model across Barcelona.

**Methods:** We carried out a quantitative health impact assessment (HIA) study for Barcelona residents  $\geq 20$  years ( $N = 1,301,827$ ) on the projected Superblock area level ( $N = 503$ ), following the comparative risk assessment methodology. We 1) estimated expected changes in (a) transport-related physical activity (PA), (b) air pollution ( $\text{NO}_2$ ), (c) road traffic noise, (d) green space, and (e) reduction of the urban heat island (UHI) effect through heat reductions; 2) scaled available risk estimates; and 3) calculated attributable health impact fractions. Estimated endpoints were preventable premature mortality, changes in life expectancy and economic impacts.

**Results:** We estimated that 667 premature deaths (95% CI: 235–1,098) could be prevented annually through implementing the 503 Superblocks. The greatest number of preventable deaths could be attributed to reductions in  $\text{NO}_2$  (291, 95% PI: 0–838), followed by noise (163, 95% CI: 83–246), heat (117, 95% CI: 101–137), and green space development (60, 95% CI: 0–119). Increased PA for an estimated 65,000 persons shifting car/motorcycle trips to public and active transport resulted in 36 preventable deaths (95% CI: 26–50). The Superblocks were estimated to result in an average increase in life expectancy for the Barcelona adult population of almost 200 days (95% CI: 99–297), and result in an annual economic impact of 1.7 billion EUR (95% CI: 0.6–2.8).

**Discussion:** The Barcelona Superblocks were estimated to help reduce harmful environmental exposures (i.e. air pollution, noise, and heat) while simultaneously increase PA levels and access to green space, and thereby provide substantial health benefits. For an equitable distribution of health benefits, the Superblocks should be

**Abbreviations:** BCNEcologia, Barcelona Urban Ecology Agency; CadnA, Computer Aided Noise Abatement Software; CI, Confidence interval; ERF, Exposure response function; HIA, Health impact assessment; IPAQ, International Physical Activity Questionnaire;  $L_{den}$ , EU day-evening-night noise indicator with 5 dB and 10 dB weights for the evening and night time, respectively; LE, Life expectancy; METs, Metabolic equivalents of task;  $\text{NO}_2$ , Nitrogen dioxide; NDVI, Normalized Difference Vegetation Index; PA, Physical activity; PAF, Population attributable fraction; PI, Prediction interval;  $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ , Particulate matter with diameter  $\leq 2.5 \mu\text{m}$ ; RR, Relative risk; SDGs, Sustainable Development Goals; TRAP, Traffic-related air pollutants; UHI, Urban heat island; VSL, Value of a statistical life; WHO, World Health Organization; %GS, Percentage green space

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implemented consistently across the entire city. Similar health benefits are expected for other cities that face similar challenges of environmental pollution, climate change vulnerability and low PA levels, by adopting the Barcelona Superblock model.

## 1. Introduction

Worldwide, car-dependent city planning has resulted in low levels of physical activity (PA) and high levels of environmental pollution (i.e. air pollution, noise, and anthropogenic heat) (Nieuwenhuijsen and Khreis, 2016). Contemporary cities devote up to 70% of public space to accommodate motor vehicles (Crawford, 2002; Manville and Shoup, 2005), whereas no more than 25% is suggested for a sustainable design (Barcelona Urban Ecology Agency, 2018; Dávalos et al., 2016). Comparatively little space in cities is assigned to public open and green space. Reclaiming these spaces, however, for recreational (e.g. PA performance) and community activities, would add aesthetical appeal, and could provide urban resilience and climate change adaptation through the provision of eco-system services (i.e. passive air and noise pollution control, cooling through shading and evapo-transpiration of water) (Nieuwenhuijsen et al., 2017; Wolf and Robbins, 2015).

The original plan for the 'extension' of the city of Barcelona (i.e. Eixample), by 19th century progressive Catalan urban planner Ildefons Cerdà, considered the human needs for natural lighting, ventilation, open space and greenery, and a transport network fairly

accommodating pedestrians, horse-drawn carriages and public tram lines. Nevertheless, Barcelona's streets became filled with concrete structures, cars and traffic (Barcelona City Council, 2018). Consequently, air and noise pollution levels are high, persistently exceeding WHO limits, and are estimated to cause a large health burden (Mueller et al., 2017a, 2017b). The city's densely-constructed urban design, accommodating > 1.6 million people on 100 km<sup>2</sup>, leaves little available space for green and public open space, and amplifies the generation of anthropogenic heat. Temperature in the city center can be up to 8 °C higher in comparison with less urbanized surrounding areas because of the urban heat island (UHI) effect (Moreno-Garcia, 1994).

To recuperate Cerdà's progressive design and remedy the negative effects of the current situation, the Barcelona Superblock model has been proposed: an innovative land use intervention that aims to reclaim space for people, reduce motorized transport, promote sustainable mobility and active lifestyles, provide urban greening and mitigate the effects of climate change (Rueda, 2018). A total of 503 Superblocks, stretching over the city of Barcelona, have been developed by the Urban Ecology Agency (BCNEcologia), a public consortium integrated into the Barcelona City Council. Superblocks are constructed cells transforming

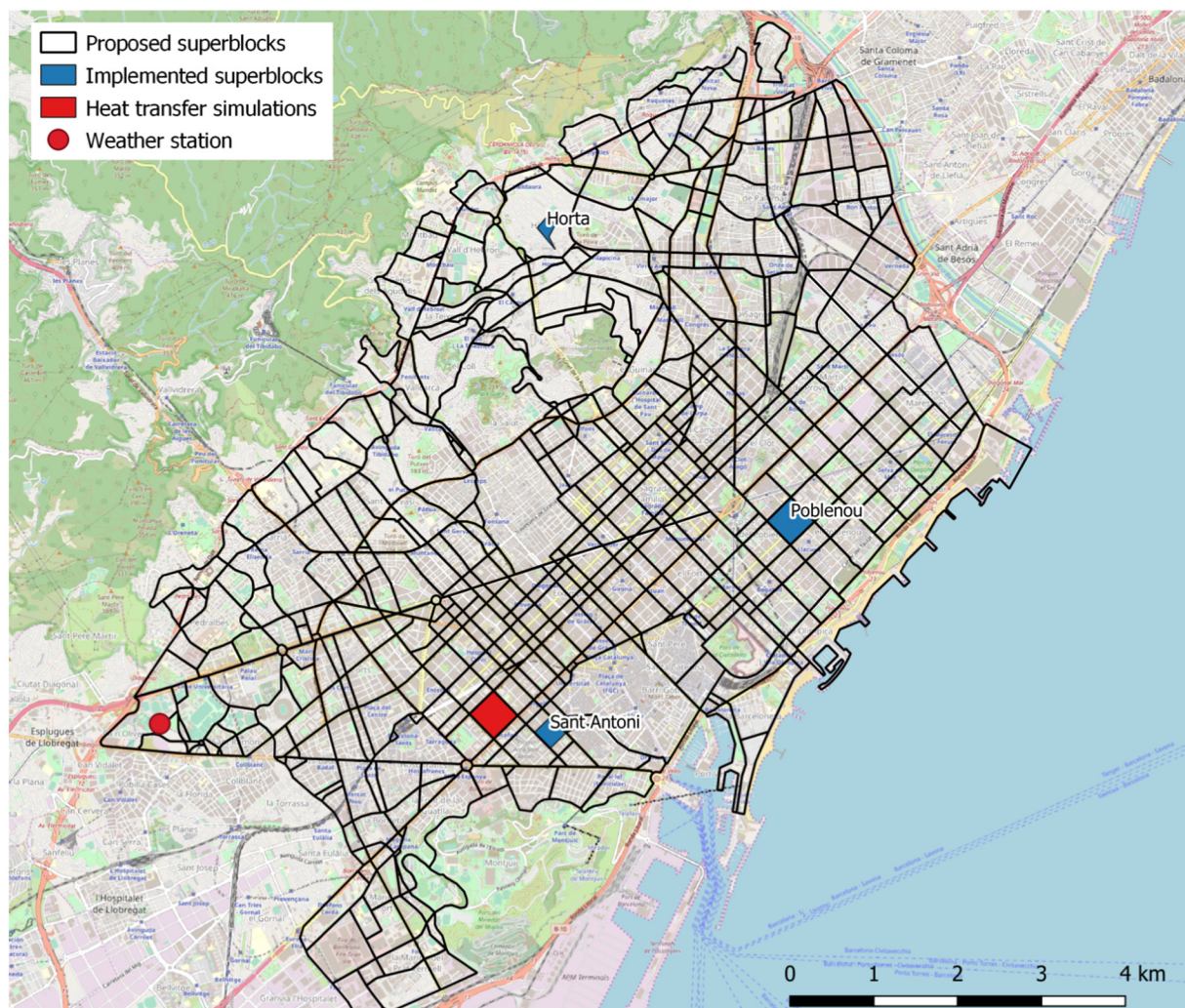


Fig. 1. Barcelona's 503 proposed Superblocks.



the city into sustainable (and healthy), compact and connected neighborhoods with a mixed land use, and high potential for social capital. The Superblock model also works towards achieving the ambitious targets set by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that define sustainable city and community development in SDG 11 as a pressing issue and leverage point to overcome global challenges related to poverty, inequality, climate, environmental degradation, prosperity, peace, and justice (United Nations, 2015).

While by mid 2019 the Barcelona City Council has implemented three Superblocks (Poblenou, Sant Antoni, Horta neighborhoods) (Fig. 1), and is committed to six more (<http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/superilles/es/>), the present study aimed at estimating the health impacts related to the potential implementation of all 503 proposed Superblocks. We estimated the impact on preventable premature mortality, changes in life expectancy (LE) and economic impacts based on expected changes in urban and transport planning related exposures of (a) transport-related PA, (b) air pollution, (c) road traffic noise, (d) urban green space, and (e) mitigation of the urban heat island (UHI) effect through heat reductions.

## 2. Materials and methods

### 2.1. The Barcelona Superblock model

In the Eixample neighborhood, which covers most of the city center and is laid out in an orthogonal grid pattern, a Superblock will cover approximately 400 m × 400 m. In other parts of the city, the Superblock design can deviate (Fig. 1). Within the Superblocks, pacified interior roads will provide a local road network that is accessible primarily to active transport (i.e. walking and cycling) and secondarily to residential traffic with a maximum speed of 20 km/h (Fig. 2) (Rueda, 2018). The Superblocks will be framed by the basic road network that connects the city and accommodates through traffic at a maximum speed of 50 km/h (Rueda, 2018). Besides accommodating cars/motorcycles, the basic road network will contain segregated cycling and pedestrian infrastructures and segregated bus lanes for rapid transit. For optimal access, bus stops will be placed every 400 m at the main intersections of the Superblocks (in the non-grid-like neighborhoods this distance can vary) and buses will circulate at a high frequency, making public transport an attractive alternative. With the implementation of the 503 Superblocks, private motorized traffic is expected to decrease considerably, and traffic flow on the basic road network is expected be

less congested, because of avoided turns into the Superblocks (Barcelona City Council, 2014; Rueda, 2018). In addition to re-configuration of transport, liberation and re-allocation of public space are planned: the Superblock model foresees the development of public open and green space throughout the city, consisting of plazas, parks, green corridors, green patches and general greening in and outside the Superblocks (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).

### 2.2. Health impact assessment

A quantitative health impact assessment (HIA) was carried out for the Barcelona population ≥ 20 years ( $N = 1,301,827$ ; 2017) (Table 1) (Barcelona City Council, 2017a), at the projected Superblock area level ( $N = 503$ ) (Fig. 1). Anticipated changes in the urban form and transport system are expected to result in changes of (a) transport-related PA, (b) air pollution, (c) road traffic noise, (d) green space, and (e) mitigation of the UHI effect through heat reductions.

Preventable premature mortality, changes in LE and economic impacts related to the Superblock model were estimated. We used a comparative risk assessment framework (Murray et al., 2004), and followed standard HIA methodologies (Mueller et al., 2017a, 2017b), comparing the baseline situation with the counterfactual scenario (i.e. Superblocks). We obtained exposure-response functions (ERFs) from the literature to quantify the strength of association between the exposures and mortality (Table 2). We obtained the annual natural-cause mortality rate for Barcelona (1,144 deaths/100,000 persons; 2015) (Table 1) (Barcelona Public Health Agency, 2017). We combined the exposure data with the ERFs, population data and mortality statistic to calculate population attributable fractions (PAFs) to quantify the Superblock scenario attributable preventable mortality burden:

$$PAF = \frac{\sum_{i=1}^n p_i RR_i - 1}{\sum_{i=1}^n p_i RR_i}$$

where  $p_i$  is the proportion of population at exposure level  $i$ ,  $RR_i$  is the relative risk that quantifies the strength of association between the level of exposure  $i$  and mortality,  $i$  is the level of exposure (i.e. the difference in exposure between baseline situation and Superblock scenario), and  $n$  the number of exposure categories (i.e. 503 Superblocks) (Zapata-Diomedes et al., 2018).

We assumed immediate build-up of health benefits and the population size, age structure and mortality rate to stay constant. Children

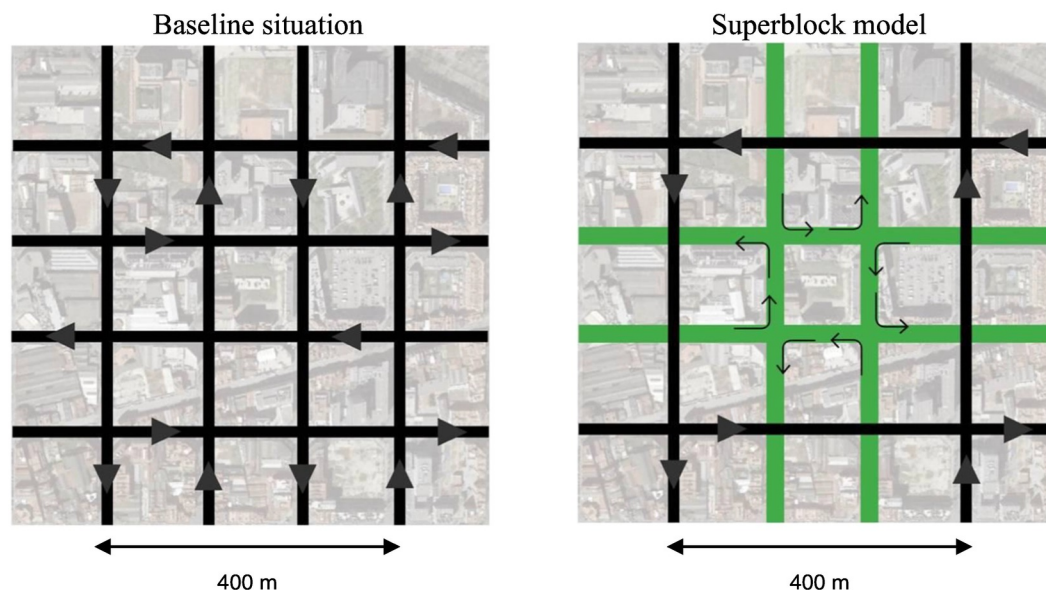


Fig. 2. Road hierarchy and traffic circulation aimed at with the Superblock model.

**A****B**

A=Baseline green space  
B=Superblocks green space

**Fig. 3.** Green space development for the Eixample neighborhood.

and adolescents were excluded from the analyses as their exposure-health relationships; their transport behaviors and the natural-cause mortality rate are different from the adult population. Analyses were conducted in R (v 3.5.2), Microsoft Excel (v 12.0) and QGIS (v 3.4.2).

### 2.3. Exposure data

#### 2.3.1. Transport-related physical activity

With the implementation of the 503 Superblocks, the private motorized transport share is estimated to be reduced by 19.2% (Table 3). This scenario is based on transport projections made for the Barcelona





Fig. 4. Sant Antoni Superblock (2019).

**Table 1**  
Barcelona population characteristics.

Population $\geq 20$ years (2017)	Natural-cause mortality rate (2015)	Expected natural-cause mortality
1,301,827	1,144/100,000 persons	14,893

Urban Mobility Plan 2013–2018, that included infrastructure, quality and safety measures to promote public and active transport and reduce private motor vehicle use (Barcelona City Council, 2014). Hence, of the current almost 1,190,000 car/motorcycle trips/weekday (Barcelona City Council, 2017b), almost 228,000 trips would be shifted to public and active transport. We estimated health impacts associated with expected changes in transport-related PA levels resulting of shifting car/motorcycle trips to public transport, cycling or walking for 5 days/week. Supported by transport data, we assumed that Barcelona residents carry out on average 3.5 trips/weekday (Metropolitan Area of Barcelona, 2013) (Table 3). Metabolic equivalents of task (METs) were used as a measure of energy expenditure during PA. We calculated the gain in marginal METs for persons substituting car/motorcycle trips (i.e. 65,092 persons/weekday) with public transport, cycling or walking, considering baseline PA levels. Baseline PA levels were derived from the Barcelona Health Survey 2016/2017. The Barcelona Health Survey draws on a population-based random sample of 4,000 residents studying their health status, life-styles and use of health services (Bartoll et al., 2018). PA levels were assessed in the Health Survey with the International Physical Activity Questionnaire (IPAQ) short form (IPAQ, 2005). We included Health Survey participants  $\geq 20$  years with complete PA data (i.e. 3,217 adults) to determine baseline PA levels as a combination of walking, moderate and vigorous-intensity PA (Table A.1). Accounting for shorter trips and peoples' willingness to cycle or walk for transport, we assumed that a new bicycle trip would

have the distance of an average baseline bicycle trip (i.e. 3.84 km), and a new walking trip would have the distance of an average baseline walking trip (i.e. 1.2 km) (Table 3). Accounting for longer trips, we assumed a new public transport trip would replace an average baseline car/motorcycle trip (i.e. 8.45 km) and would include a total 10 min walk to/from public transport to final destinations (Rojas-Rueda et al., 2012). We assigned the new bicycle trip 6.8 METs (Ainsworth et al., 2011), and the new walking trip and 10 min walk to/from public transport 3.5 METs (Ainsworth et al., 2011). The association between PA and mortality was quantified using a curvilinear ERF, applying a 0.25 power transformation (Table 2) (Woodcock et al., 2011). We calculated the relative risk (RR) and the population attributable fraction (PAF) for both baseline PA and gained PA. The estimated number of preventable deaths for baseline PA was subtracted from the estimated number of preventable deaths for the gained PA.

### 2.3.2. Air pollution

Baseline nitrogen dioxide ( $\text{NO}_2$ ) concentrations (2012) were calculated and averaged at the Superblock area level using the Street 5.2 air quality model (KTT Umweltberatung und Software Dr. Kunz GmbH, 2005). Changes in  $\text{NO}_2$  concentrations were modeled and reflect the expected 19.2% car/motorcycle share reduction, including changes in vehicle fleet and increased average speeds due to avoidance of congestion (Barcelona City Council, 2014) (Fig. 5). The association between  $\text{NO}_2$  and mortality was quantified using a linear ERF (Table 2) (Atkinson et al., 2018). The RR and PAF corresponding to the exposure level difference between baseline and the Superblock scenario were calculated at the Superblock area level. The expected changes of other traffic-related air pollutants (TRAPs), such as particulate matter (e.g.  $\text{PM}_{2.5}$ ), were not modeled for the Superblock scenario, and therefore, health impacts could not be estimated.

**Table 2**  
Risk estimates for mortality by exposure domain.

Exposure	Risk estimate	Exposure	Health effect	Study design	Reference
Physical activity	RR = 0.81 (95% CI 0.76–0.85)	11 versus 0 MET-h/week	All-cause mortality	Meta-analysis	Woodcock et al., 2011
$\text{NO}_2$	RR = 1.02 (PI 0.99–1.06)	per 10 $\mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$	All-cause mortality	Meta-analysis	Atkinson et al., 2018
Noise	HR = 1.04 (95% CI 1.02–1.06)	per 10 dB $L_{\text{den}}$ (Road)	CVD mortality	Cohort study	Héritier et al., 2017
Green space	RR = 0.99 (95% CI 0.98–1.01)	per 10% increase in greenness	All-cause mortality	Meta-analysis	Gascon et al. 2015
Heat	RR = 1.19 (95% CI 1.16–1.23)	99th versus 74th temperature percentile	All-cause mortality	Time-series study	Guo et al., 2014

CVD = cardiovascular disease; HR = hazard rate;  $L_{\text{den}}$  = EU day-evening-night noise indicator with 5 dB and 10 dB weights for the evening and night time, respectively; MET = metabolic equivalent of task (1 MET = 1 kcal/kg/h); PI = prediction interval; RR = relative risk; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval.

**Table 3**  
Barcelona transport data.

Mode	Baseline			Superblocks			Difference		Transport data		
	Mode share (%) <sup>a</sup>	Trips/weekday	Persons/weekday <sup>b</sup>	Mode share (%) <sup>c</sup>	Trips/weekday	Persons/weekday <sup>b</sup>	Persons/weekday		Mean distance (km)	Mean duration (h)	Mean speed (km/h)
Car/motorcycle	26.10	1,189,219	339,777	21.10	961,399	274,685	–	65,092	8.45 <sup>d</sup>	0.41 <sup>f</sup>	20.60 <sup>g</sup>
Public transport	39.50	1,799,776	514,222	41.30	1,881,791	537,655	+	23,433	6.22 <sup>d</sup>	0.51 <sup>f</sup>	12.20 <sup>g</sup>
Bicycle	2.10	95,684	27,338	2.50	113,910	32,546	+	5,208	3.84 <sup>e</sup>	0.28 <sup>f</sup>	13.71 <sup>h</sup>
Walking	32.30	1,471,716	420,490	35.10	1,599,295	456,941	+	36,451	1.20 <sup>e</sup>	0.25 <sup>f</sup>	4.80 <sup>h</sup>
Total	100.00	4556395 <sup>b</sup>	1,301,827	100.00	4556395 <sup>b</sup>	1,301,827					

<sup>a</sup> Barcelona City Council, 2017b.

<sup>b</sup> Calculated based on 3.5 trips/person/day (2003–2012) (Metropolitan Area of Barcelona, 2013).

<sup>c</sup> Barcelona City Council, 2014.

<sup>d</sup> Calculated as duration (h) \* speed (km/h).

<sup>e</sup> Raser et al., 2018.

<sup>f</sup> Encuesta de Movilidad en Día Laborable (EMEF) 2015 (Metropolitan Transport Authority, 2015).

<sup>g</sup> Barcelona City Council, 2016.

<sup>h</sup> Calculated as distance (km)/duration (h).

### 2.3.3. Road traffic noise

Baseline annual mean 24-h noise indicator  $L_{den}$  (in dB) for road traffic (2016) was calculated in 5 dB intervals by using the Computer Aided Noise Abatement (CadnaA) software (v 3.7) (DataKustik GmbH, 2007) and was averaged at the Superblock area level. Changes in  $L_{den}$  levels were modeled reflecting the 19.2% car/motorcycle share reduction (Fig. 5). Missing noise values were imputed by using the mean. Currently, only evidence for  $L_{den}$  and cardiovascular mortality exists (van Kempen et al., 2018). It is believed though that the greatest contribution of noise to mortality is through cardiovascular effects (van Kempen et al., 2018), which was recently reinforced by a mega cohort study (Héritier et al., 2017). The association between  $L_{den}$  and cardiovascular mortality was quantified using a linear ERF (Table 2) (Héritier et al., 2017). The hazard ratio and PAF corresponding to the exposure level difference between baseline and the Superblock scenario were calculated at the Superblock area level.

### 2.3.4. Green space

Baseline and Superblock green space was estimated and developed by BCNecologia exclusively for the Eixample neighborhood (Fig. 5), using cartographic data (2010) (resolution 1:1,000) from the Barcelona City Council (Barcelona City Council, 2019). Using PostgreSQL/PostGIS (v 2.3), the current percentage green space (%GS) and projected increase in %GS under the Superblock scenario was calculated for the 202 Superblock areas comprising the Eixample neighborhood (population  $\geq 20$  years  $N = 464,216$ ) (Fig. 3). The exposure difference between the current %GS and the Superblock %GS was calculated. A linear ERF was used to quantify the association between green space and mortality (Gascon et al., 2016b). The RR and the corresponding PAF were calculated for each of the 202 Eixample Superblocks. The remaining 301 Superblock areas framing the Eixample neighborhood (i.e. population  $\geq 20$  years  $N = 837,611$ ) and either representing the historic city center (i.e. Ciutat Vella) or neighborhoods located at Barcelona's periphery in the north, west and south, were excluded from the analyses as no quantifiable green space vision exists yet for these neighborhoods.

### 2.3.5. Heat

Daily mean temperatures (2012–2017) were available through a weather station located in the south-west of the city (Fig. 1) (Klein Tank et al., 2002), and were averaged to obtain typical temperatures for one calendar year. Following an empirical model (Guo et al., 2014), the 74th daily mean temperature percentile, which defines the minimum mortality temperature (MMT) for Spain, was determined to be 21.5 °C for Barcelona (2012–2017). Between the 74th and 99th temperature percentiles, a linear mortality ERF was assumed (Guo et al., 2014)

(Table 2). Daily mean ambient air temperatures (2016) were simulated with the UrbClim Model (v 1.1) (resolution 1:100) provided by the Flemish Institute for Technological Research (VITO) within the European climate-fit.city project (Ridder et al., 2015), and were averaged at the Superblock area level (Fig. 5). On 132 days during 2016, at least one Superblock exceeded the MMT of 21.5 °C (Table 4). The exposure level difference between the MMT and the simulated daily mean temperature was calculated at the Superblock area level. To account for seasonal variability in mortality, we based the daily mortality rate on averaged daily mortality count data for Barcelona for the meteorological summer season (June through August) provided by the Spanish Institute for National Statistics (i.e. 3 deaths/100,000 persons/day). The corresponding RR and PAF were calculated.

Thermal simulations of heat transfer from finite elements (i.e. surface) to ambient air temperatures for one centric Superblock in the densely-constructed city center (Fig. 1 and Fig. B.1), were conducted using RadTherm Heat Transfer Software (v 9.0.1) (Thermo Analytics Inc., 2016). Considering statistical summer day weather conditions, the use of semi-permeable materials and additional green space, heat transfer simulations simulated in a daily average 2 °C heat transfer reduction (Fig. B.2 and Fig. B.3). To be more conservative and to allow for varying land uses, densities, traffic volumes, surface elements and the presence of green and blue spaces across the city, we assumed a 1 °C ambient air temperature reduction as a more realistic scenario for the implementation of all 503 Superblocks. Supporting this assumption, compared to rural background, the city-wide UHI effect for summer 2016 was estimated to be around 2 °C (Fig. 5). Given that rural background conditions are unlikely to be achieved in the city, reducing the UHI effect by half (i.e. 1 °C) seemed a more plausible scenario for the Superblocks. Nevertheless, we also present results of the 2 °C Superblock heat reduction scenario as a sensitivity analysis in the appendix (Table B.1).

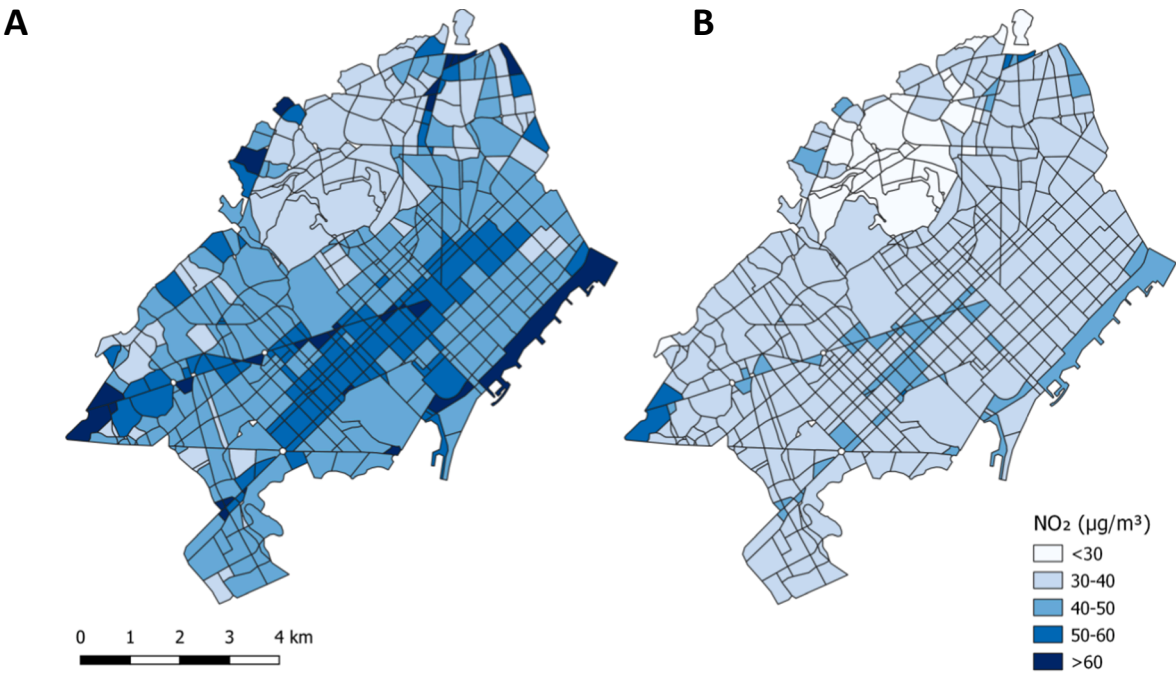
Under the Superblock scenario, we reduced 2016 daily mean air temperatures by 1 °C at the Superblock area level. The exposure difference was calculated for each Superblock for each day still exceeding 21.5 °C (i.e. 116 days) (Table 4). The corresponding RR and PAF were calculated. The number of deaths attributable to ambient air temperatures theoretically reduced by 1 °C was subtracted from the number of deaths attributable to the simulated ambient air temperatures for 2016.

## 2.4. Life table analysis and economic impact

We estimated average changes in LE anticipated with the Superblock model, using life tables for Barcelona (2016) (Table C.1) (IDESCAT, 2018), applying life table methods, as first described by



**NO<sub>2</sub> (µg/ m<sup>3</sup>)**



**Road noise (L<sub>den</sub> dB)**

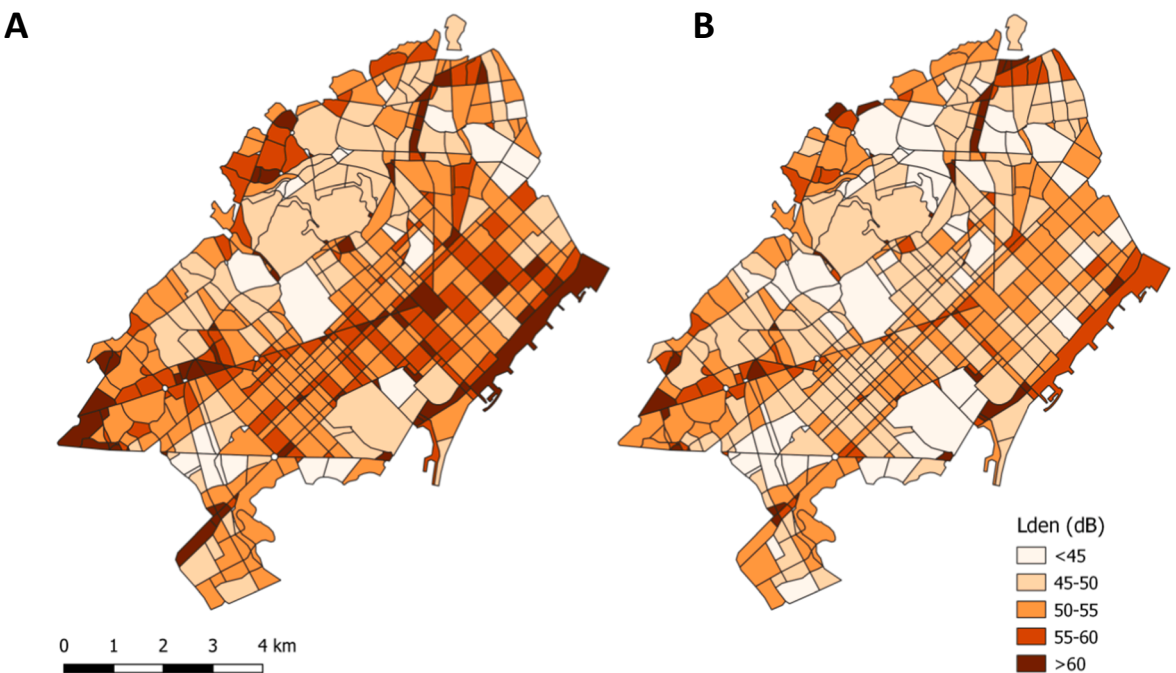
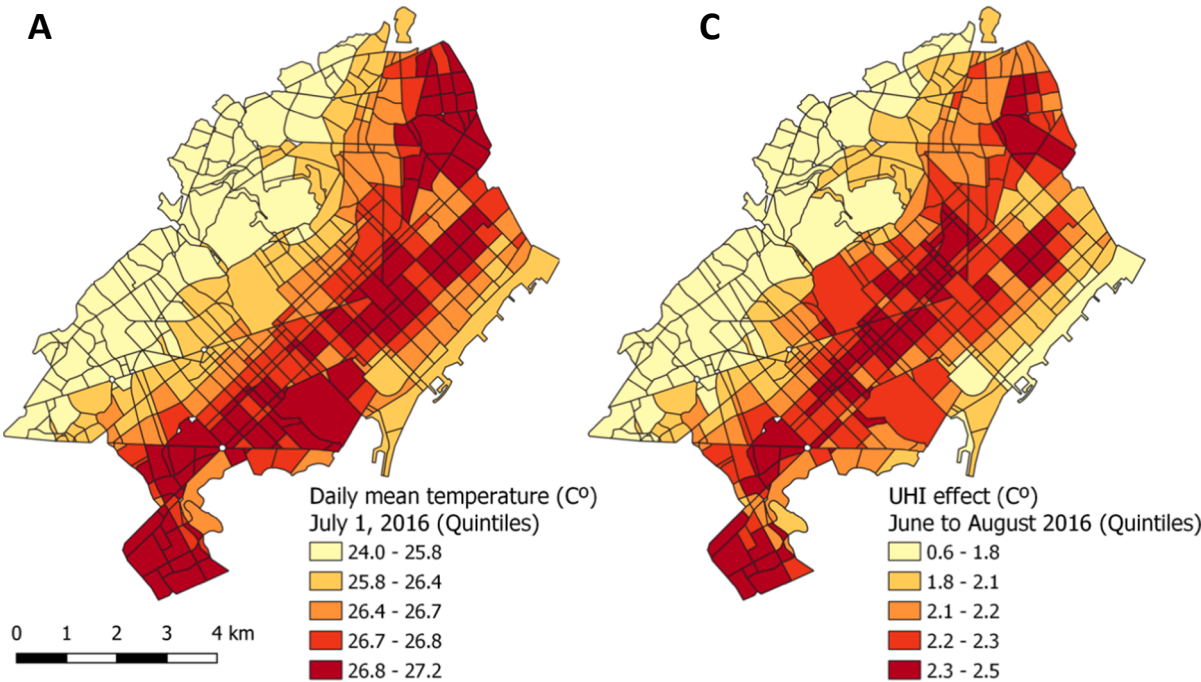


Fig. 5. Baseline and Superblocks environmental exposure levels.

Green space (%)



Temperature (°C)



A=Baseline exposure level  
B=Superblock exposure level  
C=UHI effect summer 2016

Fig. 5. (continued)  
8



**Table 4**  
Baseline and Superblocks exposure levels and annual preventable premature deaths.

Exposure (year)	Baseline	Superblocks	Preventable deaths (95% CI)
Transport physical activity (2017)	Mean 29.39 MET-h/week (SD 35.93 MET-h/week)	Public transport + 16.78 MET-h/week Bicycle + 23.99 MET-h/week Walking + 5.99 MET-h/week	36 (26–50)
NO <sub>2</sub> (2012)	47.18 µg/m <sup>3</sup> (Range 31.64–90.47 µg/m <sup>3</sup> )	35.72 µg/m <sup>3</sup> (Range 27.31–56.83 µg/m <sup>3</sup> )	291 (0–838)
Noise (2016)	54.18 dB L <sub>den</sub> (Range 39.15–74.60 dB L <sub>den</sub> )	51.26 dB L <sub>den</sub> (Range 37.52–71.01 dB L <sub>den</sub> )	163 (83–246)
Green space (Eixample) (2010)	6.54%GS (Range 0.00–66.78%GS)	19.57%GS (Range 0.20–97.95%GS)	60 (0–119)
Heat (2016)	132 days at least one Superblock > 21.50 °C Mean exceedance 3.55 °C (SD 2.11 °C)	116 days at least one Superblock > 21.50 °C Mean exceedance 3.15 °C (SD 1.77 °C)	117 (101–137)
Total			667 (235–1,098)

dB = decibel; L<sub>den</sub> = EU day-evening-night noise indicator with 5 dB and 10 dB weights for the evening and night time, respectively.

MET = metabolic equivalent of task (1 MET = 1 kcal/kg/h); SD = standard deviation; %GS = percentage green space; 95% CI = 95% confidence interval.

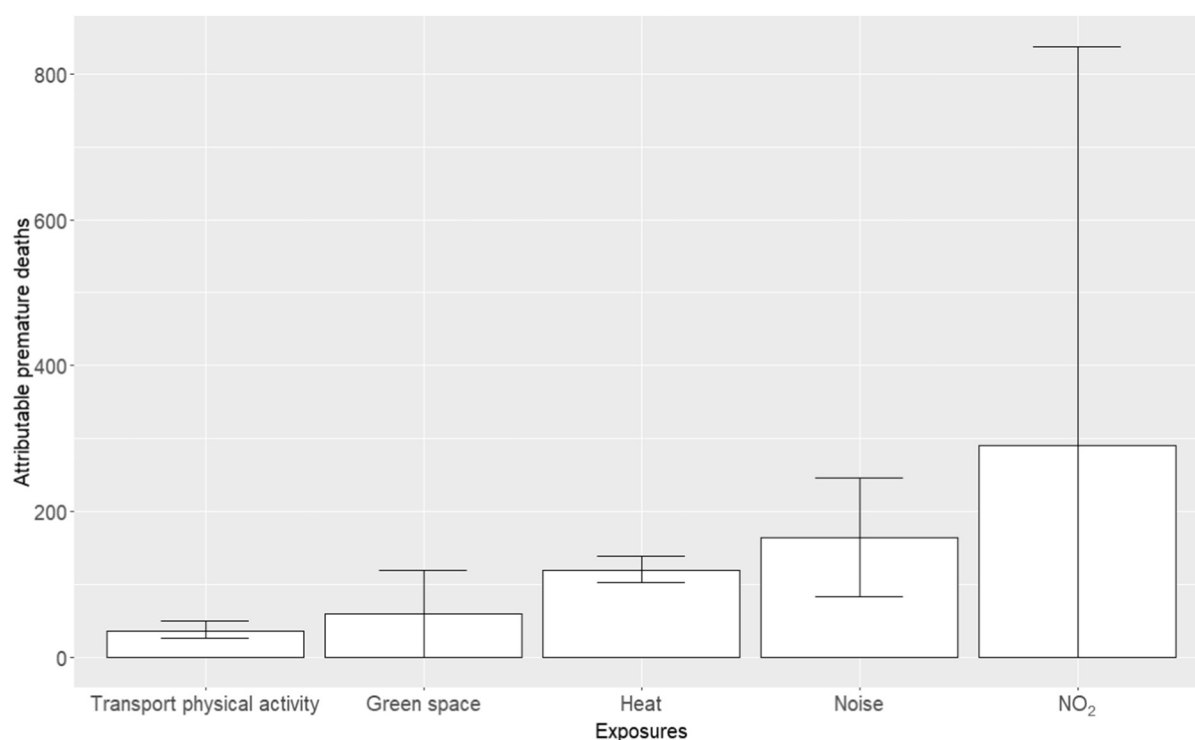
Brunekreef (1997) for air pollution. We estimated average gains in LE for the Barcelona population  $\geq 20$  years by changing the probabilities of dying because of estimated city-wide mean improvements in environmental exposure levels (i.e. NO<sub>2</sub>, noise, heat and green space) and increases in transport-related PA for persons expected to habitually replace car/motorcycle trips with public and active transport. We also estimated economic impacts of the changed premature mortality risk based on the value of a statistical life (VSL) (2,510,000 EUR for Spain, 2015) (WHO, 2017).

### 3. Results

With the implementation of the 503 Superblocks, the car mode share was projected to be reduced by 19.2% (Barcelona City Council, 2014), that translated into almost 230,000 car/motorcycle trips/weekday being shifted to public transport, cycling or walking (Table 3). Accordingly, baseline city-wide annual mean NO<sub>2</sub> levels of 47.2 µg/m<sup>3</sup>

were estimated to be reduced to 35.7 µg/m<sup>3</sup> (−24.3%), and baseline city-wide annual mean road traffic noise levels of 54.2 dB L<sub>den</sub> were estimated to be reduced to 51.3 dB L<sub>den</sub> (−5.4%) (Table 4). In the Eixample neighborhood, baseline mean percentage green space of 6.5% was estimated to be increased to 19.6%. In 2016, on 132 days at least one Superblock exceeded the MMT of 21.5 °C daily mean temperature, whereas with an assumed reduction of ambient air temperatures by 1 °C, on 116 days at least one Superblock would have exceeded 21.5 °C.

With the implementation of the 503 Barcelona Superblocks, we estimated that 667 premature deaths (95% CI: 235–1,098) could be prevented annually (Fig. 6). The greatest proportion of preventable premature deaths could be attributed to reductions in NO<sub>2</sub> levels (291, 95% PI: 0–838), followed by road traffic noise (163, 95% CI: 83–246), heat (117, 95% CI: 101–137), and green space development in the Eixample neighborhood (60, 95% CI: 0–119). The estimated increased PA from the habitual shift from cars/motorcycles to public and active transport for approximately 65,000 persons (Table 3) resulted in 36



**Fig. 6.** Annual preventable premature deaths estimated for the Barcelona Superblock model.

preventable premature deaths annually (95% CI: 26–50) among this population.

In terms of changes in LE, we estimated that Barcelona residents  $\geq 20$  years would gain on average 198 days (95% CI: 99–297) because of reductions in NO<sub>2</sub>, noise and heat. Additionally, Eixample neighborhood residents  $\geq 20$  years were estimated to gain on average 37 days (95% CI: 0–76) because of green space development. Adults habitually replacing car/motorcycle trips with public transport, cycling or walking were estimated to gain on average 97 days (95% CI: 79–159), 125 days (95% CI: 102–192), and 44 days (95% CI: 36–95), respectively, because of increases in PA (Table C.1).

The reduction in 667 premature deaths resulted in economic impacts of 1.7 billion EUR annually (95% CI: 0.6–2.8).

#### 4. Discussion

The Superblocks are a new innovative model in urban and transport planning that reframes the current mobility paradigm and places people and well-being at the center. We estimated that with the implementation of the 503 planned Superblocks, 667 premature deaths could be prevented annually in Barcelona (Fig. 6), translating into a substantial economic impact of 1.7 billion EUR and considerable average gains in LE of almost 200 days due to reductions in harmful environmental exposures. Further gains in LE are expected with green space development and uptake of public and active transport.

The present study is the first study to comprehensively estimate the health impacts of this proposed real-life innovative intervention, holistically considering the expected changes in the multiple urban and transport planning related exposures. Previous HIA studies for the city of Barcelona estimated that 20% of premature mortality and 13% of the total burden of disease could be prevented under the assumption that international exposure guidelines for PA, exposure to air pollution, noise, heat and access to green space were complied with (Mueller et al., 2017a, 2017b). However, these scenarios were not associated with an actual urban and transport planning intervention.

In contrast to other HIA studies of transport scenarios, that considered the impacts of PA, besides other risk factors, and commonly estimated PA to be the most important health determinant (de Hartog et al., 2010; Mueller et al., 2015; Rojas-Rueda et al., 2011; Woodcock et al., 2009), our estimated transport-related PA benefits were smaller compared to those attributable to air pollution, noise and heat reductions. This result can be explained by the different baseline populations for which health impacts were estimated for. While motorized transport emission reductions (i.e. NO<sub>2</sub> and noise) and mitigation of the UHI effect would benefit the general Barcelona adult population ( $N = 1,301,827$ ), green space benefits were estimated for Eixample neighborhood residents only ( $N = 464,216$ ) and benefits linked to increases in transport-related PA relate exclusively to the population that is expected to habitually switch from cars/motorcycles to public and active transport ( $N = 65,029$ ).

By far the strongest mortality impacts for the Superblocks resulted from air pollution reductions (291 deaths) - under the assumption that the association between NO<sub>2</sub> and mortality is causal. This finding is linked to the assumption of reduction of traffic volume and decline in congestion, that reduces NO<sub>2</sub> concentrations substantially (Zhang and Batterman, 2014) (Table 4). Estimated road traffic noise and heat mitigation effects were of considerable magnitude (163 and 117 deaths, respectively), emphasizing the importance of these understudied environmental exposures in urban environments. Further, green space development in the Eixample neighborhood alone resulted in a considerable number of preventable deaths (60 deaths), underlining the epidemiological significance of vegetation in cities in times of increasing population densities, general space scarcity and climate change.

In addition to the health benefits presented in this study, other potential co-benefits that we were not able to quantify should be

highlighted: quality spaces with less disturbing factors (e.g. cars and motorcycles) help create place attachment and provide security that positively affects the formation of identity, sense of community and emotional and social well-being (Rollero, 2013). Public space helps facilitate social interaction and therefore contribute to social cohesion (Holland et al., 2007). In addition, Superblocks can help facilitate safe and independent child play. Research on Play Streets (i.e. street closure from traffic to foster child play) showed that children's PA levels significantly increased, enhanced their sociability and reduced parental safety concerns (Cortinez-O'Ryan et al., 2017; D'Haese et al., 2015). Also, leisure time PA levels, although not considered in the present analysis, are expected to increase with compact neighborhoods, mixed land-use and quality spaces, and result in even greater health benefits.

##### 4.1. Limitations and strengths

As with all HIA studies, causal inferences may be an issue and results have to be understood as estimations based on best available epidemiological evidence. All changes in environmental exposures were modeled and depend on assumptions made in the models and data availability. Further work is needed to validate these models with actual post-intervention measurements. Despite the longstanding epidemiological study of air pollution, the evidence base for a causal relationship between long-term NO<sub>2</sub> exposure and mortality remains uncertain partly due to concerns relating to potential confounding effects by co-pollutants, especially fine particulate matter (i.e. PM<sub>2.5</sub>), and the heterogeneity of individual study results (Atkinson et al., 2018). The evidence base for PM<sub>2.5</sub> for inference of a causal effect on mortality is stronger (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2009), but exposure level changes of PM<sub>2.5</sub> under the Superblock scenario were not modeled, and PM<sub>2.5</sub> can have many other sources than road traffic (i.e. industry, the port and ships, construction, domestic, natural, etc.). Particularly in the city of Barcelona, which has the highest-traffic density in Europe (Barcelona City Council, 2018) and a large share of diesel-powered vehicles, NO<sub>2</sub> is believed to be a good marker for road traffic related air pollution. A 2014 meta-analysis found a statistically significant pooled effect of 1.04 (95% CI: 1.02–1.06) for NO<sub>2</sub> on mortality (Faustini et al., 2014). If the true effect of NO<sub>2</sub> on mortality was indeed that reported by Faustini and colleagues, then Superblock-related NO<sub>2</sub> reductions would result in more certain and stronger health benefits of 570 preventable premature deaths (95% CI: 291–838).

While the largest contribution of noise to mortality is believed to be through cardiovascular effects (van Kempen et al., 2018), underestimation of the effect of noise on multiple causes of mortality cannot be ruled out: a recent and growing body of evidence has associated noise exposure with a wide range of physiological and psychological health reactions (e.g. metabolic effects, respiratory symptoms, effects on cognition, annoyance and sleep disturbance) (WHO, 2018). Despite the Swiss population, from which the noise risk estimate was obtained (Héritier et al., 2017), probably not being representative of the Barcelona population, confounding by socio-economic position is unlikely, because the Swiss analyses were adjusted for socio-economic covariates.

Although our heat analyses were supported by thermal simulations, Superblock heat mitigation analyses were limited by the fact that the conversion from surface to ambient air temperature is largely uncertain and hardly generalizable because many different factors related to urban structures and macro- and microclimate play a role. Additional uncertainties might have been introduced with modeling the association between heat and mortality linearly and omission of the UHI effect possibly being protective during the winter months preventing cold-related deaths, which we did not account for.

Using cartographic data of green spaces and the corresponding exposure unit %GS does not differentiate between intensity and quality of green areas. The Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI), which detects live green vegetation canopy using multispectral remote



sensing data, has been suggested to be a better indicator (Gascon et al., 2016a), and has been linked to stronger health benefits (Crouse et al., 2017; James et al., 2016), but is more difficult to project in the future as it is vegetation type-specific. Moreover, until now, a quantifiable green space vision exists only for the Eixample neighborhood. However, the other 301 Superblocks are also expected to receive green space interventions, which would translate into larger health benefits than estimated here.

For the transport-related PA analysis, although supported by records, we assumed that Barcelona residents conduct 3.5 trips/day on average (Metropolitan Area of Barcelona, 2013). This assumption strongly determines the traveling population of Barcelona and thus the population shifting from private to public and active modes of transport and consequently the magnitude of health benefits.

Furthermore, there might have been exposure and outcome misclassification. Exposure, transport, health and demographic data were only available for different years. Additionally, it is uncertain whether people spend most of their time in their Superblock of residence and therefore if exposures were assigned correctly.

Besides the benefit of allowing the comparison of severities between the exposures, when considering multiple exposures, there may be the risk of ‘double-counting’ of premature deaths, especially if the exposures are correlated. Independence of health effects has so far only been demonstrated for noise and air pollution (Tétreault et al., 2013). Health effects of air pollution could possibly be modified by temperature (Li et al., 2017), and health benefits of green spaces may in fact result from increases in PA or mitigation of air pollution, noise and heat (Gascon et al., 2016b). In fact, exposure to multiple risk factors associated with the same health outcome (e.g. mortality) leads to the health outcome being preventable in more than one way, from which could potentially follow that preventable cases are being counted more than once (Rowe et al., 2004). Therefore, the presented sum of preventable deaths should be interpreted with caution.

Finally, this HIA study assumed immediate and simultaneous implementation of all 503 Superblocks; this is rather unlikely and also time-lags in the change of transport behaviors and exposure levels would delay health benefits. Unaccounted political, social, and cultural factors will influence the Superblock implementation process and therefore health impacts, something important to consider in times of increasing urban populations, demographic as well as climate change and transformations in transportation and vehicle fleets.

Despite these limitations, there are many strengths of this study: This HIA should be understood as a robust overall estimation, based on best epidemiological evidence according to the current research, of what health impacts of the real-life Superblock intervention may look like. The multiple urban and transport planning related exposures were considered holistically and where uncertainty on causal inferences existed, assumptions were defined with caution and impacts were estimated conservatively. Further, the presented premature mortality impact has to be understood as the ‘tip of the iceberg’ because mortality is an extreme event. Non-fatal impacts such as the expected reduction in chronic disease, improvements in quality of life, social cohesion and mental health have not been quantified in the present analysis. Consequently, the total health and well-being impact of the Superblocks can be expected to be considerably larger than the numbers presented here, which would make an even stronger case for the rapid implementation of this urban and transport planning – as well as public health – intervention.

#### 4.2. Other implications

Certain concerns and possible negative consequences of the Superblock model need to be acknowledged, especially in the context of health equity and environmental justice. Since almost half of the two million daily suburban commuter trips from the Metropolitan Region are made in car/motorcycle (Barcelona City Council, 2016), the

Superblock model calls for a simultaneous improvement of the suburban commuter network that provides people with true alternatives. Improvement of the less-well developed public transport system for the wider Metropolitan Region is therefore a prerequisite for the Superblocks to function well. Furthermore, gentrification is a potential risk, which can occur when depressed areas are occasionally improved (with green and other popular infrastructure) and become attractive for upper classes, resulting in rent rises and subsequently forced migration (Cole et al., 2017). Also, the possibility of undesired relocation of car/motorcycle traffic (to potentially already deprived areas) outside the Superblocks needs to be considered and avoided and therefore supplementary interventions that further discourage the use of private motorized transport in the city are necessary (e.g. reduction of on-road parking, congestion charging, low emission zones, etc.). In order to mitigate the identified risks, consistent and equitable implementation of the model across the entire city is recommended.

## 5. Conclusions

The Barcelona Superblock model is a promising urban model as well as public health strategy to reclaim public space for people and help the city become cleaner, greener, more physically active and climate change resilient through the reconfiguration of urban and transport structures. We showed that the Superblocks have the potential to reduce the premature mortality burden and increase LE considerably through reductions in air pollution, noise and heat and increased access to green space and transport-related PA performance. The magnitude of estimated health impacts should make a case for the rapid implementation in Barcelona and the scale-up to other cities, where similar health benefits can be expected. For full and equitable distribution of health benefits, the Superblock model should consistently be implemented across the entire city.

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## Declaration of competing interest

We declare no competing interests.

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## Appendices. Supplementary data

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