

# PRESCRIPTIONS

## RESEARCH BRIEF

### A Look at Urban Health Inequalities in the Philippines

#### HIGHLIGHTS

- Inequities in urban areas are not yet well studied.
- Health outcomes of Filipinos living in urban slums are worse than those living in non-slums, and sometimes worse than those living in rural areas.
- Intersectoral action involving all levels and agencies of government, not just the Department of Health, is needed to address the challenges of urban health inequalities.

Urban-rural health inequities are well-documented, but little is understood about disparities within urban areas. Inequities in urban populations are masked by aggregate statistics that may skew priorities away from disadvantaged groups.<sup>1</sup> Urban health inequalities are becoming more serious policy issues as rapid urbanization is overwhelming the capacity of social services, housing, and infrastructure. This policy brief describes health inequalities between slum and non-slum households in the Philippines using data from the 2013 National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS).

Overall urban rates mask inequalities between slums and non-slums. Across the first five years of life, the mortality gap between slums and non-slums is widening (Figure 1). Moreover, while aggregate child mortality rates are lower in urban areas than in rural areas, rates in urban slums are like those in rural areas.

These inequalities are not only apparent in health outcomes such as mortality rates, but also in service utilization, such as antenatal care (ANC) visits, facility-based delivery (FBD) rates, and immunization (Figure 2). The inequalities also exist in social determinants of health like poverty and education, as well as health financing indicators like PhilHealth coverage (Figure 3).

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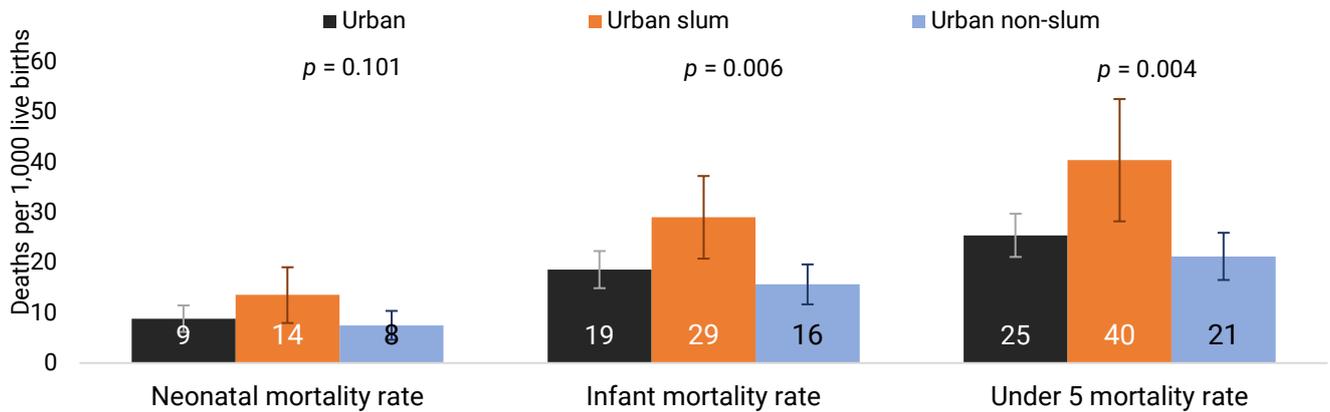
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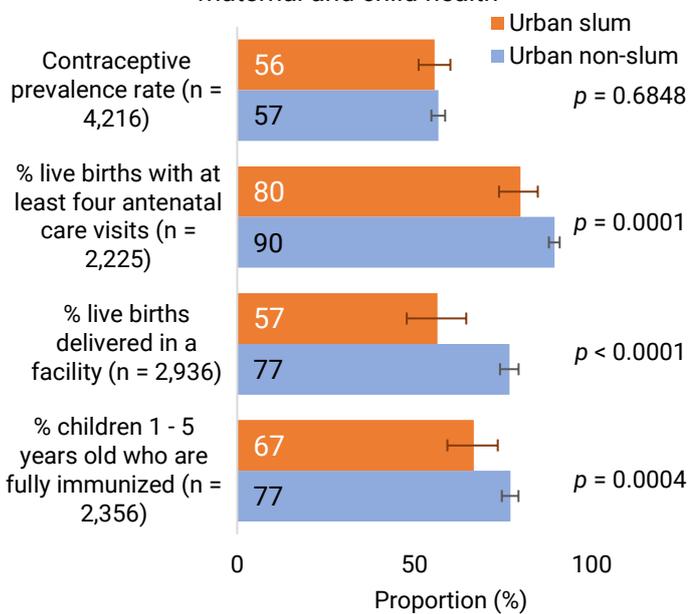
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**Reference:** 1. World Health Organization, WHO Centre for Health Development. Hidden cities: Unmasking and overcoming health inequities in urban settings. Kobe: World Health Organization; 2010.

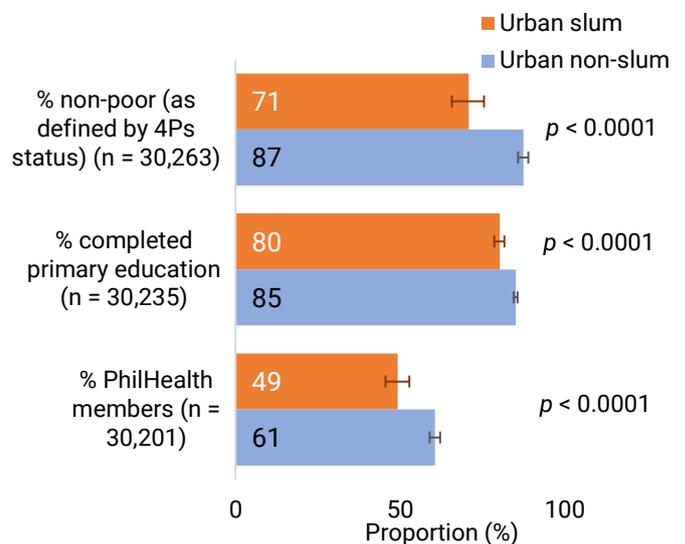
**Figure 1.** Mortality rates among live births reported in the 10 years preceding the survey (n = 5,872)



**Figure 2.** Key service utilization indicators for maternal and child health



**Figure 3.** Other key health indicators



**Note for all three figures:** Error bars show 95% confidence intervals; p-values are reported for chi-square tests comparing slum vs. non-slum; All data came from a secondary analysis of the 2013 NDHS

The study also opens opportunities for future research questions to better understand these inequities. As the NDHS is a cross-sectional survey, causality between residence in slum areas and poor outcomes cannot be established. This analysis was limited to the available variables in the 2013 NDHS, but it is ideal that a future national survey on slum households be conducted. Understanding these inequities is crucial in identifying the special needs of disadvantaged groups.

Finally, many of the risks that define the living conditions of slum households exist outside of the health sector. Urban health is determined by a broad range of factors: governance, the physical environment (e.g. housing, infrastructure, pollution, climate), social and economic security, and access to health services.<sup>1</sup> Interventions that help close the inequality gap should not only revolve around improving access to health services, but also address structural inequalities in sectors outside of health. This means that the Department of Health should engage in interagency discussions with other government agencies to tackle the growing health issues of slum areas. A possible first step in this direction could be the identification of a list of urban slum areas to prioritize for intervention.