Urban areas provide tremendous opportunity for economic, social, political and technological growth; they are also creating truly congested regions where high rates of poverty, inequality, and challenges to environmental and public health are far-reaching and affecting persons of all ages, gender and economic status. While infectious diseases remain a critical public health priority for parts of the world, (Moore, Gould & Keary, 2003; WHO, 2002) many countries are grappling with a “double disease burden” (Yach, Hawkes, Gould & Hofman, 2004) as rates of non-communicable disease (NCDs), (i.e. diabetes, cardiovascular disease, obesity) reach epidemic levels worldwide, accounting for more than half of the global burden of disease† in both developing and developed countries (Ezzati, Lopez, Rodgers & Murray, 2004). As the global population continues to become more urbanized, with almost half currently residing in urban centers, this unique transition has tremendous public health impact and, more importantly, offers tremendous opportunity. Indeed, the health and vitality of global urban areas holds the promise of influencing the future health and strength of the global community. Therefore, understanding the evidence to effectively address the needs of an increasing urban population, and an increasingly older population, is a global public health priority (WHO, 2002).

Defining Urban and Urbanization Concepts

The urban environment includes a dynamic interaction between a population and its growth, the system of governance and city management, as well as the natural environment or ecological system in which the built environment and urban area is developed and located. There are many different ways to define the urban. The critical issue is that the meaning of urban is one of constant redefinition. Like health

* The views and opinions in this chapter are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention of the Department of Health and Human Services.

† Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYS) is the sum of years of potential life lost due to premature mortality and the years of productive life lost due to disability.
promotion, the urban studies field does not have any agreed upon definition of urban or urbanization. For example, the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2005), does not use the word “urban” in and of itself but uses the term “urban agglomerations,” which it defines as comprising the city or town proper as well as the suburban fringe or thickly settled territory lying outside of, but adjacent to, the city boundaries. Others define the urban in terms of the population density, or the number of persons living in a proscribed area (UN, 2006); or alternatively, in terms of the geophysical boundaries for which governance is made that also provide services and facilities. Urbanization is seen by some as the social and physical process by which a country’s population changes from primarily rural to urban or the expansion of a city or metropolitan area, namely the proportion of total population or area in urban localities or areas (cities and towns), or the increase of this proportion over time. Urbanization can thus represent a level of urban relative to the total population or area, or the rate at which the urban proportion is increasing (Satterthwaite, 2005). Both can be expressed in percentage terms, the rate of change as a percentage per year, decade or period between censuses (Wikipedia.com, 2006). Causation and by-products of this process are often offered as part of the definition. The World Bank describes urbanization as “the process by which a country’s population changes from primarily rural to urban. It is caused by the migration of people from the countryside to the city in search of better jobs and living conditions” (World Bank, 2005). Nonetheless, it is quite clear to anyone perusing these following sources that a lively effort to describe the urban phenomena is taking place.

Beyond these and many other attempts at defining urban, a number of popular urban concepts are part and parcel of many discussions now taking place. For example there is debate about what is urban, suburban, exurban and rural. What may be considered by some as patently obvious is never so simple. In antiquity, and even in recent history, most urban areas were defined by a perimeter wall, often for protection and one knew when one was inside what was known as the city. Gradually these external walls were breached by development and generally seen as the “old” city. Even until the end of the 19th century most urban areas were dense and very circumscribed. Modern transportation, particularly the automobile, has drastically changed the shape and scope of the “city.” While some ancient cities retain their dense core and original layout even today, most urban areas throughout the world now spread across wide areas, often making it impossible to tell where the urbanized area ends. Thus we are more likely to think of metropolitan urban areas today rather than “cities.” Cities tend to be defined by political boundaries that do not relate well with the built up agglomeration or urbanized areas around them. Many major metropolitan areas today may have less than 10 percent of their population living in the named central city.

In a similar fashion “cities” have changed their overall structure considerably in the past century. Many metropolitan areas have diffuse “downtowns” or multiple “business” districts. The old pattern of political center, market center, religious center being at the heart or center is a disappearing idea, though many nostalgically search for the “city center” (Lang & LeFurgy, 2003). The pattern is further