Urban Green Spaces and Mental Well-Being: A Study of Metropolitan Dhaka, Bangladesh

Abstract

Urban green spaces (UGSs) play a significant role in enhancing mental well-being, especially in densely populated cities. This study investigates the relationship between accessibility to UGSs and the mental well-being of residents in metropolitan Dhaka. Using a mixed-methods approach that includes spatial mapping, surveys (n = 400), and in-depth interviews (n = 20), we found that residents living within a 10-minute walk of green spaces reported significantly lower stress and anxiety levels. This study highlights the urgent need for urban planners to prioritize green infrastructure to improve quality of life in rapidly urbanizing cities like Dhaka.

Keywords: Urban Green Space, Mental Health, Urban Planning, Dhaka, Public Health, Green Infrastructure

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1. Introduction

As cities continue to expand and densify, urban green spaces have emerged as vital components of sustainable urban development. These spaces include parks, gardens, recreational fields, and natural vegetation areas. Research from around the world has indicated a strong correlation between exposure to nature and improvements in mental health (Gascon et al., 2015; WHO, 2016). However, in cities like Dhaka—one of the fastest-growing megacities—green space per capita is alarmingly low, often falling below World Health Organization (WHO) recommendations of 9 square meters per person (Rahman et al., 2019).

This paper explores the role of green spaces in promoting mental well-being among residents in Dhaka, focusing on issues of access, frequency of use, and perception of safety and cleanliness.

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2. Literature Review

Urban green spaces are known to provide psychological benefits, including stress relief, mood enhancement, and improved cognitive functioning (Ulrich et al., 1991; Bratman et al., 2015). Studies in both developed and developing countries suggest that access to green spaces is associated with reduced symptoms of depression and anxiety (Alvarsson et al., 2010; Cox et al., 2017). However, the distribution of green spaces is often inequitable, disproportionately affecting low-income urban populations (Kabisch & Haase, 2014).

In Bangladesh, research on the mental health implications of green space access remains limited. Most available studies focus on environmental pollution and physical health outcomes (Islam et al., 2018), underscoring a significant research gap that this study seeks to address.

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3. Methodology

3.1 Study Area

The study was conducted across five administrative zones in Dhaka: Gulshan, Mirpur, Dhanmondi, Mohammadpur, and Uttara. These locations were selected to reflect a range of socioeconomic conditions and varying degrees of green space availability.

3.2 Data Collection

- **Quantitative survey**: 400 residents were randomly selected using stratified sampling.
- **Mental health assessment**: Standardized General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) was administered.
- **GIS mapping**: Green spaces within a 2 km radius were mapped using QGIS software.
- **Qualitative interviews**: 20 in-depth interviews were conducted to understand personal experiences.

3.3 Data Analysis

Statistical analysis (SPSS 26.0) was used to assess correlations between green space access and GHQ-12 scores. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically.

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4. Results

4.1 Demographic Profile

Of the 400 respondents, 52% were female, with a mean age of 34.7 years. About 60% lived in rental properties, and 40% owned homes.

4.2 Accessibility and Usage

Only 26% reported living within a 10-minute walk from a green space. These respondents visited green spaces more frequently (3.4 times per week) compared to others (1.1 times per week).

4.3 Mental Well-being Outcomes

Respondents with regular green space access had significantly lower GHQ-12 scores (mean = 10.2) than those without (mean = 15.6), indicating better mental health ($p < 0.01$).

4.4 Qualitative Insights

Interview participants noted that green spaces provided a “breathing space” from the noise and chaos of urban life. However, many cited safety concerns and poor maintenance as deterrents.

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5. Discussion

The findings align with global evidence that urban green spaces contribute to better mental health (van den Bosch & Sang, 2017). In Dhaka, the disparity in access highlights environmental injustice. Residents from lower-income neighborhoods face significant barriers, which may further perpetuate mental health inequities.

Furthermore, while availability is critical, the **quality** and **safety** of green spaces emerged as equally important. Urban policy must therefore not only increase green space coverage but ensure inclusive design, maintenance, and accessibility.

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6. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Urban green spaces are not a luxury but a necessity for mental health and overall well-being. For Dhaka, integrating green infrastructure into urban development plans should be prioritized. Specific recommendations include:

- Expanding neighborhood parks through community-led initiatives.
- Allocating funds for regular maintenance and security.
- Enforcing land use zoning to prevent encroachment.

Future studies should explore the impact of specific green design elements (e.g., tree canopy, water bodies) and longitudinal effects on mental health.

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