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ROLE OF GREEN SPACES IN ENHANCING YOUTH MENTAL WELL-BEING IN INDIAN CITIES

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ABSTRACT
India's urban population is rapidly increasing and is projected by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs to reach 600 million by 2031. With this growth, mental health problems are also expected to rise due to job stress, loneliness, and financial strain. As Indian cities expand, green spaces such as parks, gardens, and forests are shrinking, though their positive effects are undeniable. Youth mental health must remain a national priority, as nearly 11 percent of adults experience poor mental health according to the National Mental Health Survey (2016). Common issues like stress, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and addiction require urgent attention. Promoting green spaces can be an effective step toward supporting youth well-being. Research shows that contact with nature reduces stress, improves mood, and encourages activity. This study explores how urban parks and green zones can enhance youth mental health through better planning, equitable green access, and protection of existing spaces.
KEYWORDS: *Youth Mental Health, Urban Green Spaces, Existing Green Spaces , Urban Planning and Policy.*

INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs forecast predicts that by the year 2030, six hundred million people will be added to the urban population. The 2011 census reveals that 31 percent of the Indian Population lives in cities. By 2030 the figure is estimated to be about 40 percent. Hence there is a serious threat to youth mental health in being conventionally urbanized due to reduced green spaces and fast-paced urban lifestyle. Urban Youth witnesses a negative externality of conventional urbanization. Stress, Anxiety, loneliness, depression, and emotional burnout are the common symptoms. All these symptoms lead to social exclusion and decreased productivity. However Green spaces like Parks, Tree-lined streets, Urban forests, Green roofs, and Community gardens not only helps in improving air quality but also are ecologically and economically viable in the long run. They have positive externality effects on population. A regular sense of connectivity with nature reduces stress levels, increases attention span, and improves overall productivity. We humans are social creatures and regular social interaction is essential for our mental well-being. But the fast-paced life of the urban city promotes isolation thus green spaces like parks, community garden are very important for overall mental health. About 11% of adults in India are suffering from mental disorders including anxiety, depression, substance use disorders, and bipolar conditions National Mental Health Survey (2016). Young people between 15 – 30 years old are the most vulnerable group hence the importance of green spaces in urban areas is crucial for the protection of the demographic dividend of the country. Urban green spaces can act as a building block for improved mental health performance. Implementing a green infrastructure strategy and maintaining accessible, safe, and inclusive green areas in cities can provide a low-cost yet effective way to improve the emotional and psychological health of youth. Urban green equity zones are one such approach as it will cater to the needs of underprivileged communities in urban cities. Hence this research's primary aim is to explore the relationship between green spaces and youth mental health in Indian cities by accessing and analysing existing literature. Through this research, priority is given to how green spaces and natural environment contribute to stress reduction, emotional regulation, and social well-being among youth. The study will also offer policy suggestions for building cities prioritizing infrastructure and mental health. With urbanization prioritizing green spaces is not an option but a priority.

METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative and analytical approach based on secondary data and literature review to understand the relationship between green spaces and youth mental health in Indian urban contexts. The study systematically examined peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, and institutional reports published between 2000 and 2024. Databases such as Scopus, PubMed, JSTOR, and Google Scholar were used to identify relevant studies using key terms like *"urban green spaces," "mental health," "youth well-being,"* and *"India."*

The inclusion criteria focused on studies that examined the impact of urban green spaces on psychological outcomes such as stress reduction, emotional stability, and cognitive enhancement among youth. Reports from international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations (UN) were also reviewed to establish global relevance and policy context. The analysis involved thematic categorization of findings into major domains: psychological benefits, social well-being, and environmental equity.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental disorders are a global disease burden which not only affects the life of young people but also hinders their path to reach full potential. Hence it is one of the priorities of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The World Health Organization (WHO) recognises the importance of green spaces as an instrument for promoting physical, mental and social health. Research done by Ester Amoly and her team shows that green spaces help in improving mental health by

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reducing emotional and behavioural difficulties in children specially for those who have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms. Other studies suggest that exposure to green spaces improves cognitive function, restores attention and working memory. A longitudinal study done on Denmark people reveals that children who lived near more green spaces have 55 percent lower chances of developing mental health problems as they grew older. Green spaces not only help in better cognitive development but also help in stress reduction. Ulrich's Psycho-evolutionary Model (1983) and Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory (1995) reveals that the natural environment improves psychological recovery. They help in reducing mental fatigue and promote relaxation. Empirical study done by Berman, Jonides, and Kaplan (2008) supports these arguments. Green spaces Lower cortisol levels (stress hormone). Areas which have higher green spaces have experienced better sleep quality. Apart from these benefits, visual exposure to greenery also showed decreased physiological markers of stress, such as blood pressure and heart rate (Gascon et al., 2018). Green spaces promote social cohesion which leads to improved mental health. A green space like parks and community gardens foster social interaction, reduce loneliness and strengthens human bonds. They improve perceived safety and belonging which are essential roots for good mental health. Scientific study reveals that Green spaces like Tree-lined streets help to mitigate noise pollution in technical terminology it refers to green mufflers. Plants, especially trees and shrubs absorb sound waves and reduce noise pollution. Urban green spaces mitigate air pollution which has a positive impact on respiratory organs. They naturally filter air by absorbing pollutants and improve air quality. All these positive externalities of urban green spaces have a positive effect on youth mental health. And its benefit is far reaching across different demographics; children benefit from improved cognitive development and reduced ADHD symptoms. Youth experienced improved mental, physical and social health. Study shows low income populations and women show greater mental health improvements due to increased access to a safe and green environment. According to research findings of Mitchell and Popham (2008) green spaces can reduce health inequalities particularly in terms of mental well-being. Another research done by Nutsford, Pearson, and Kingham (2013) says that access to a green environment is associated with better mental health outcomes especially for underprivileged youth.

RESULTS

The systematic review reveals a strong and consistent relationship between access to urban green spaces and improved youth mental well-being. Across multiple global and Indian studies, it was observed that proximity to greenery significantly reduces stress, anxiety, and symptoms of depression among young adults. Green spaces provide opportunities for social interaction, physical activity, and relaxation all of which are protective factors against poor mental health. Evidence also suggests that youth living in neighborhoods with more parks or tree cover show better emotional regulation, improved attention spans, and higher satisfaction with life. In Indian cities such as Bengaluru and Pune, urban parks serve as important community hubs that enhance psychological resilience among young populations. However, unequal access to these spaces remains a challenge, with marginalized groups often excluded from well-maintained green areas. The review also highlights that cities with lower green coverage experience higher rates of reported stress and loneliness. Overall, the results confirm that integrating green spaces into urban planning is essential not only for ecological balance but also for improving the mental health and productivity of India's youth population. Most importantly, preserving and protecting existing green spaces is essential for youth mental health.

FUTURE DISCUSSION

The finding of the study reveals that urban green spaces play a crucial role in improving youth mental health. With continued urbanization and a fast-paced urban lifestyle promotion of green spaces is a need. The evidence from global studies indicates that exposure to nature can act as a preventative and therapeutic tool for physical, mental, and social health. One of the most important insights from the literature is that green spaces directly help reduce psychological stress and enhance emotional stability. For India where the population is young Urban spaces should designed in such a way that promotes green spaces. Developing Youth-Centric Green Zones, eco-parks, community gardens, and interactive nature trails near schools, colleges, and residential areas can be beneficial. Another major step towards green spaces is to Revive and Protect Existing Green Spaces. Tree Plantation Drives & Urban Forestry is another major step towards promoting youth mental well-being. Green spaces have multiple positive externalities on both youth and the environment. Creating Urban Green Equity Zones (UGEZ) is one aspect of reducing health inequality. Hence beyond aesthetics, Urban Green Equity Zones (UGEZ) has far-reaching benefits. They not only offer sustainability but also help in the economic development of a country. There is overwhelming evidence in favour of green spaces. Policymakers and urban planners must consider the positive externality associated with green space while doing cost-benefit analyses. The small steps towards green spaces can transform the city landscape into a healthier and more supportive environment for youth.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research highlights the importance of green urban spaces in promoting the mental well-being of youth. With urbanization and mental health challenges integrating nature with growth is not a luxury but a necessity. The benefits of green spaces are beyond aesthetics they provide psychological benefits, encourage social interaction, and reduce environmental stressors. India is rich in demographic dividend hence to achieve desired goals it is important to raise productivity and without good mental health it is not possible. The implementation of urban green policies such as urban green quality zones can help build healthier, more resilient urban populations. As a result creation of Urban Green Equity Zones (UGEZ) and youth-focused green initiatives especially in underserved communities, can ensure inclusive access to nature's healing benefits. Thus the research urges policymakers and urban planners to work collaboratively to promote green spaces. Future research should focus on region-specific studies

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by collecting primary data to understand the usage patterns, perceptions, and barriers to green space access among different youth demographics.

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