

# Recreational Activities In Public Spaces: Impacts On Social Life And Community Health

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## Abstract

*This article comprehensively examines the impacts of recreational activities conducted in public spaces (e.g., parks, recreational areas, squares, waterfronts, and promenades) on individuals' health and well-being as well as on the social cohesion of communities. The study is based on a systematic review approach, drawing on national and international research in the current literature. The review process is structured under four main dimensions: physical health (participation in regular physical activity, reduction of obesity and chronic disease risks, improvement of cardiovascular health indicators), mental health (reduction in stress levels, alleviation of depression and anxiety symptoms, strengthening of psychological well-being), social health (social integration, sense of belonging, strengthening of social bonds, and formation of social capital), and environmental/urban processes (equitable distribution of public spaces, accessibility, sustainability, and micro-climate effects).*

*The findings reveal that regularly utilized public spaces not only promote greater mobility in individuals' daily lives but also enhance psychological resilience and strengthen social interactions. Furthermore, access to parks and green areas appears to hold potential for reducing health inequalities among different socio-economic groups living in urban settings (Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018).*

*In conclusion, the multidimensional benefits of recreational activities in public spaces play a critical role both in improving individual health indicators and in reinforcing social solidarity and community cohesion. In this context, the planning, management, and functionality of public spaces should be considered a strategic priority in public health policies.*

**Keywords:** recreation, social cohesion, community health

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## INTRODUCTION

Today, rapid urbanization, intensive working conditions, increasing population density, and the influence of technology on daily life have led individuals to adopt a more passive lifestyle, both physically and socially. This situation, particularly in large cities, increases the risk of social isolation and negatively affects public health (Cohen et al., 2007; Duyan et al., 2024). In this context, public spaces are regarded as significant areas where individuals can detach from daily routines and experience renewal both physically and psychosocially. Parks, gardens, waterfronts, walking paths, urban squares, and other recreational areas not only serve as places for rest and leisure activities but also play a critical role in fostering social integration, cultural exchange, social interaction, and the maintenance of healthy lifestyles (Jennings et al., 2019; Yurtseven et al., 2024).

The literature highlights the multidimensional impacts of green and open spaces on community health. Access to these areas increases individuals' levels of daily physical activity, contributing to the prevention of chronic health problems such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases (Maas et al., 2006; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018). Moreover, the positive effects of spending time in natural environments on mental health are frequently emphasized. Research demonstrates that interaction with nature reduces stress levels, alleviates symptoms of depression and anxiety, and enhances overall psychological well-being (Shanahan et al., 2016; Ulrich et al., 1991; Sekban et al., 2022).

From a social perspective, recreational activities in public spaces strengthen interpersonal relationships, foster a sense of belonging, and enhance social capital (Peters et al., 2010). Particularly in cities with heterogeneous social structures, these spaces, which enable individuals from different ages, genders, cultures, and socioeconomic groups to come together, function as a fundamental tool in building social cohesion (Jennings et al., 2019).

On the other hand, public spaces are not only important for individual and social health but also for environmental and urban sustainability. Green areas contribute positively to microclimates by reducing air pollution, mitigating the urban heat island effect, and supporting biodiversity, thereby playing a critical role in enhancing cities' resilience to climate change (Kabisch et al., 2017; WHO, 2016). Furthermore,

recent studies indicate that public green spaces contribute to reducing health inequalities, particularly for disadvantaged groups (Mitchell & Popham, 2008).

In conclusion, recreational activities in public spaces—through their physical, mental, social, and environmental dimensions—constitute an integral element of urban life that supports community health. Therefore, the planning, design, and accessibility of public spaces should be regarded not only as a matter of individual health but also as a fundamental strategy for building healthier, more resilient, and socially cohesive communities (UN-Habitat, 2025).

## METHOD

This study is a narrative-systematic literature review.

**Search strategy:** Studies published between 2000 and 2025 were searched in PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The keywords used were: “urban parks,” “public spaces recreation,” “green space health,” “social cohesion AND parks.”

**Inclusion/exclusion criteria:** Empirical and review studies focusing on health and social outcomes of recreational activities conducted in public spaces were included (Shanahan et al., 2016).

**Data extraction:** From each study, information on sample characteristics, type of space, activity, and health/social outcomes was extracted and thematically categorized.

**Limitations:** Since most of the included studies were cross-sectional and observational in nature, causal inferences remain limited (Shanahan et al., 2016).

## Findings

### 1. Physical Health and Activity

The presence of parks and open spaces increases daily physical activity levels. Park users are more likely to meet recommended levels of physical activity (Cohen et al., 2022). Moreover, studies have shown that the duration and frequency of park visits reduce the risk of depression and hypertension (Shanahan et al., 2016).

### 2. Mental Health and Well-Being

There is strong evidence that spending time in green spaces lowers stress levels, improves attention and cognitive capacity, and reduces depression and anxiety (Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018; WHO, 2016). During the COVID-19 pandemic, parks were also reported to play a critical role in fostering psychological resilience (Jennings et al., 2019).

### 3. Social Impact: Cohesion, Capital, and Inclusivity

Public spaces bring together diverse social groups, thereby strengthening trust, mutual support, and social connectedness (Jennings et al., 2019). A study conducted in Turkey (Alaeddin Hill Park, Konya) revealed that parks fulfill an important function in terms of identity, social cohesion, and accessibility; however, improvements in safety and comfort are still needed (Büyükağaçcı, 2024).

### 4. Equity, Access, and Planning

Inequities in the distribution of green spaces can exacerbate health disparities. Therefore, park planning in low-income neighborhoods should be prioritized (UN-Habitat, 2025).

## DISCUSSION

The findings of this study clearly demonstrate that recreational activities in public spaces support public health in multidimensional ways. In terms of physical health, regular access to parks and green spaces has been shown to increase individuals' daily levels of physical activity and reduce the risks of chronic conditions such as obesity, hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases (Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018; Maas et al., 2006). These findings highlight not only the effects of public spaces on individual health but also their potential to reduce healthcare costs; in other words, accessible public spaces that promote physical activity may indirectly lower health expenditures at the population level.

Regarding mental health, spending time in green and open spaces has been shown to reduce stress, improve attentional capacity, and alleviate symptoms of depression and anxiety (Shanahan et al., 2016; Ulrich et al., 1991). These effects are particularly crucial in mitigating the psychosocial pressures of dense urban life. Furthermore, research conducted during the pandemic revealed that access to public green spaces enhanced psychological resilience and strengthened community health (Jennings et al., 2019).

From a social perspective, public spaces function as settings where individuals from different socio-demographic backgrounds come together, fostering social interactions and strengthening community bonds. Studies indicate that areas with high levels of social interaction promote a stronger sense of belonging and greater social capital, thereby enhancing overall community cohesion and solidarity (Peters

et al., 2010; Büyükağaçcı, 2024). However, for these social benefits to materialize, public spaces must be safe, accessible, and inclusive. For instance, studies from Turkey show that inadequacies in the physical and social infrastructure of parks limit their positive effects on social interaction and participation (Büyükağaçcı, 2024).

Urban planning and equity also occupy a critical place in this discussion. The inequitable distribution of green spaces prevents individuals—especially those living in low-income neighborhoods—from fully benefiting from health and social advantages (UN-Habitat, 2025; Mitchell & Popham, 2008). This may reinforce health inequalities and weaken social solidarity. Therefore, urban planning should prioritize the distribution and accessibility of green spaces to better serve socio-economically vulnerable groups.

Additionally, the environmental functions of public green spaces must not be overlooked. Green areas mitigate the urban heat island effect, improve air quality, and support biodiversity, thereby playing a vital role in the sustainability of urban ecosystems (Kabisch et al., 2017; WHO, 2016). These environmental contributions are significant for the long-term preservation of public health by indirectly supporting healthier urban environments.

In sum, when evaluated through physical, mental, social, and environmental dimensions, the benefits of recreational activities in public spaces are of critical importance for both community health and quality of life. To ensure their sustainability and inclusivity, the design, management, safety, and equity of such spaces must be approached holistically. Moreover, future research—particularly longitudinal and intervention-based studies—should aim to clarify the causal effects of public space use on health and social outcomes (Shanahan et al., 2016; Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018).

## CONCLUSION

This study reveals the multidimensional impacts of recreational activities conducted in public spaces on individual and community health. The findings demonstrate that these areas play an important role in reducing the risk of chronic diseases by increasing individuals' levels of physical activity (Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018). Regular use of parks and green areas—particularly through activities such as walking, running, cycling, and outdoor sports—has been widely supported in the literature as contributing to improvements in cardiovascular health and the prevention of health problems such as obesity and diabetes (Maas et al., 2006).

In terms of mental health, spending time in public spaces has been shown to lower stress levels, enhance attentional capacity, and reduce the risk of depression and anxiety (Shanahan et al., 2016; Ulrich et al., 1991). These effects mitigate the psychosocial pressures of dense urban living and strengthen individuals' overall psychological resilience. Observations made during the pandemic also revealed that access to public green spaces served as a critical buffer for community mental health (Jennings et al., 2019).

From a social perspective, public spaces contribute to strengthening social capital and community cohesion by enhancing social interaction (Peters et al., 2010; Büyükağaçcı, 2024). These areas enable individuals from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds to come together, thereby fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity. However, for these social benefits to be realized, such spaces must be designed to be accessible, safe, well-equipped, and inclusive. Improvements in accessibility for vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children, and persons with disabilities can further broaden the social benefits (Büyükağaçcı, 2024; UN-Habitat, 2025).

The dimension of urban equity also provides an important implication. The spatially unequal distribution of green areas results in disadvantaged and low-income groups being unable to fully benefit from these spaces, thereby perpetuating health and social inequalities (Mitchell & Popham, 2008; UN-Habitat, 2025). Therefore, socio-economic vulnerability and equality of access should be taken into account in urban planning and design policies.

In conclusion, recreational activities in public spaces are indispensable for physical health, psychological well-being, social cohesion, and community integration. The effectiveness and sustainability of these spaces depend on the simultaneous consideration of planning, design, maintenance, safety, and inclusivity. Future research should employ longitudinal and intervention-based designs to more clearly reveal the causal effects of public space use on individual and community health. Such an approach would facilitate the integration of public spaces into health and social policy objectives, ultimately enhancing the quality of urban life (Twohig-Bennett & Jones, 2018; Shanahan et al., 2016; UN-Habitat, 2025).

## Recommendations

Accessibility and spatial planning: Parks and green areas that can be reached by walking or short bicycle trips from every neighborhood should be prioritized in urban planning. This would make it easier for

individuals to incorporate physical activity into their daily routines and contribute to improved health outcomes (UN-Habitat, 2025). Special attention should be given to providing accessible routes and facilities for vulnerable groups such as the elderly, children, and individuals with disabilities, thereby enhancing inclusivity.

**Diversity of activities and community participation:** Organizing regular sports, arts, cultural, and social events in parks and open spaces can enhance community participation and social interaction. Planning activities for different age and interest groups would strengthen social cohesion and reinforce a sense of belonging within communities (Cohen et al., 2022).

**Safety, maintenance, and comfort standards:** The safety, cleanliness, maintenance, and comfort of public spaces are factors that directly influence usage rates. Safe and well-maintained spaces encourage regular visits, while also supporting social interaction and mental health benefits (Büyükağaçcı, 2024).

**Public health goals:** Developing simple and practical public health targets is essential. For example, goals such as “30 minutes of park visits per week” or “10,000 steps per day” can help individuals establish regular physical activity habits and improve health indicators across society (Shanahan et al., 2016). When supported by public health campaigns, the effectiveness of such targets can be significantly enhanced.

**Equity and prioritization:** Inequities in the distribution of public spaces prevent socio-economically vulnerable groups from fully benefiting from them. Therefore, prioritizing green spaces in low-income neighborhoods and improving access opportunities will contribute to reducing social inequalities and strengthening community health (UN-Habitat, 2025).

**Participatory planning processes:** Involving local communities and user groups in the design and management of public spaces ensures that these areas are shaped according to actual societal needs. This approach increases the effective use of spaces while also strengthening community ownership and social capital.

**Long-term sustainability and monitoring:** Regular evaluation of the impacts of public spaces and the integration of user feedback into planning and management processes will enhance their effectiveness. Long-term monitoring allows for the measurement of health and social outcomes and supports the development of sustainable management strategies.

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