

Beyond Green: Quality, Equity and Mental Health in Urban China

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DESCRIPTION

The speed and scale of urbanization in China have transformed its urban landscape, bringing profound changes to the physical and social environment. Amid this transformation, Urban Green Spaces (UGS) have emerged as critical assets for promoting mental well-being in high-density cities. However, beyond the general consensus that green spaces are beneficial, the nuance of how green space specifically its quality versus quantity impacts mental health remains underexplored. Even more overlooked are the socio economic dimensions such as housing affordability, homeownership and neighborhood dynamics that influence how different populations access and benefit from UGS.

This article presents a perspective on recent empirical research from the Pearl River Delta (PRD), China, where 1309 participants across 30 communities revealed how neighborhood ties and place attachment mediate the relationship between UGS and mental health. The findings contribute not only to theoretical debates in urban health geography but also offer practical policy implications for green space planning in rapidly urbanizing cities of the global south.

Urbanization, mental health and the role of UGS

The rise in urban mental health disorders exacerbated by density, noise, pollution and social stressors has sparked global concern. In 2022, WHO reported a significant rise in urban mental health disorders, particularly in Low-and Middle-Income Countries (LMICs), where over 81% of global cases now reside. In China, over 70% of urban residents were found to suffer from sub-health mental states, highlighting a mental health crisis paralleling its urban growth.

The relationship between nature and psychological well-being is well-documented in Global North contexts. However, in china and other parts of the global south, urban greening has faced unique challenges. Rapid land commercialization, soaring housing prices and growing inequality in access to quality green spaces complicate the urban mental health landscape. UGS, while beneficial, can also become a tool of gentrification and exclusion if not equitably planned. The study conducted in the

PRD a region emblematic of China's economic ascent and urban density.

The psychological benefits of UGS are more strongly influenced by their quality than by the total amount of green coverage. Factors such as cleanliness, biodiversity, accessibility and aesthetics play a greater role in encouraging sustained engagement with nature, which is crucial for mental well-being. High-quality UGS also promotes social cohesion by facilitating informal interactions, strengthening neighborhood ties and deepening emotional connections to place. These social dynamics are important mediators in translating green space exposure into improved mental health outcomes. Additionally, the impact of UGS varies across socioeconomic lines. Renters, especially those living in wealthier neighborhoods, often gain more from high-quality green spaces than homeowners, relying on them for social integration and psychological support. However, in affluent areas, the strength of neighborhood ties can sometimes lessen the mental health benefits of green space quantity alone, indicating that the presence of greenery is not enough without inclusive and socially supportive environments.

The research highlights a paradox at the intersection of green space planning and urban inequality. While well-intentioned greening policies aim to improve public health, they may inadvertently increase land values and rents, pricing out the very populations most in need of mental health support. This phenomenon has been observed globally from inner-city London to the outskirts of Nairobi but is especially acute in rapidly urbanizing regions like the PRD.

In cities with mixed housing tenure, renters often experience less stability and control over their living environments. When UGS development raises local property values, renters face a heightened risk of displacement, which disrupts social ties and place attachment factors crucial to psychological resilience. Thus, without targeted measures to preserve affordability, greening efforts risk becoming mechanisms of ecological gentrification.

CONCLUSION

The recent study from the Pearl River Delta adds a compelling dimension to the green space discourse in the global south. It

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demonstrates that the mental health benefits of UGS are deeply intertwined with social structures, housing tenure and the quality of urban life. Quality not quantity of green spaces plays a pivotal role in improving mental health, particularly for renters and socioeconomically vulnerable populations. Urban planners must move beyond surface-level greening metrics to embrace a

more nuanced, equity-driven approach to urban design. As cities continue to densify, the challenge is not just how much green space can be added but how to ensure that it serves everyone, fosters social bonds and strengthens emotional connections to place. Only then can green space become a true agent of public health and social justice.