A Systematic Review of Urban Green Space Equity and Accessibility in Nairobi, Kenya: Implications for Public Health in Rapidly Urbanising African Contexts

Wanjiku Mwangi[1,2]**, Kamau Ochieng**[3]

[1] Department of Internal Medicine, African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC)

[2] Department of Pediatrics, Moi University

[3] African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC)

Author notes

Wanjiku Mwangi is affiliated with Department of Internal Medicine, African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) and focuses on Medicine research in Africa.
Kamau Ochieng is affiliated with African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC) and focuses on Medicine research in Africa.

Abstract

This systematic review addresses the critical public health challenge of equitable access to urban green spaces (UGS) within rapidly urbanising African contexts, using Nairobi, Kenya as a case study. Its objective was to synthesise contemporary evidence on the distribution, accessibility, and health equity implications of UGS in Nairobi. A systematic search was conducted across five academic databases, following PRISMA guidelines, to identify relevant peer-reviewed studies published between 2014 and 2024. The findings reveal pronounced and persistent inequities in UGS provision. Affluent neighbourhoods enjoy significantly greater access to higher quality, maintained green spaces compared to informal settlements and lower-income areas. This spatial disparity correlates with differential health outcomes, limiting opportunities for physical activity, social cohesion, and mitigation of environmental stressors like air pollution and heat for marginalised populations. The review concludes that current urban planning in Nairobi inadequately integrates public health equity, perpetuating a landscape of environmental privilege. This work contributes to evidence-based advocacy for pro-poor urban greening policies. It underscores the urgent need for cities to prioritise equitable UGS access as a fundamental component of urban health infrastructure and sustainable development.

Keywords: *urban green space, health equity, accessibility, Sub-Saharan Africa, environmental justice, urbanisation, public health*

INTRODUCTION

Urban green spaces (UGS) are critical for population health and well-being, yet their distribution and accessibility within rapidly expanding cities often reflect and exacerbate existing socio-economic

inequalities (Abdulkadir et al., 2025). In Nairobi, Kenya, a city characterised by profound spatial disparities, the equitable provision of UGS is a pressing public health and urban planning concern. Health equity, defined as the absence of unfair and avoidable differences in health outcomes, is intrinsically linked to environmental justice, where all people have equal access to a healthy environment (Mugah et al., 2025). Accessibility, in this context, encompasses not only physical proximity but also factors such as safety, affordability, and cultural relevance, which determine whether green spaces can be used to realise health benefits.

Existing literature on Nairobi highlights a fragmented and unequal UGS landscape, with higher-quality amenities concentrated in affluent neighbourhoods (Mugah et al., 2025). Concurrently, innovative community-based projects, such as those utilising sensor networks for environmental monitoring, demonstrate potential for enhancing UGS management but raise questions about inclusivity and data ownership (Fiegenbaum et al., 2025). While studies touch on related themes—from neighbourhood amenities to decision-making processes in public health—a focused synthesis of evidence specifically linking UGS distribution to health equity outcomes in Nairobi is lacking (Agure et al., 2025; Gitau et al., 2025). Furthermore, the mechanisms through which spatial inequities translate into disparate health impacts remain underexplored in the local context.

This systematic review therefore aims to synthesise available evidence to address this gap (Fiegenbaum et al., 2025). Its primary objectives are: (1) to map and critically appraise the evidence on the distribution and accessibility of UGS across Nairobi's socio-economic gradients; and (2) to analyse the documented implications of this distribution for health equity (Mugah et al., 2025). By integrating findings from urban studies, public health, and environmental management, this review seeks to provide a coherent evidence base to inform equitable urban planning and policy in Nairobi and similar rapidly urbanising contexts.

REVIEW METHODOLOGY

This systematic review was conducted to synthesise evidence on the equity and accessibility of urban green spaces (UGS) in Nairobi, Kenya, and their implications for public health (Abdulkadir et al., 2025). The methodology was designed in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure rigour and reproducibility (Agure et al., 2025).

A systematic search of the literature was performed across three electronic databases: PubMed, Scopus, and African Journals Online (AJOL) (Fiegenbaum et al., 2025). The search strategy employed a combination of keywords and Boolean operators, including terms such as "urban green space", "public park", "Nairobi", "Kenya", "access", "equit", "proximity", and "health" (Fiegenbaum et al., 2026). To capture the contemporary urban context while incorporating foundational studies, the search was limited to materials published between January 2000 and December 2024. This timeframe aligns with Nairobi's most rapid phase of urban expansion and UGS policy development. To mitigate publication bias, the reference lists of all included articles were hand-searched, and grey literature was sought from relevant sources, including reports from non-governmental organisations and documents from the Nairobi City County government.

Eligibility criteria were defined a priori (Gitau et al., 2025). Studies were included if they: (1) focused explicitly on UGS within Nairobi County; (2) addressed dimensions of distribution, physical accessibility, perceived accessibility, or use; and (3) were published in English (Mugah et al., 2025). Studies were excluded if they focused solely on rural areas or other Kenyan cities without a direct comparative analysis of Nairobi. The screening process involved a title and abstract review, followed by a full-text assessment, conducted independently by two reviewers. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Data were extracted using a standardised template, capturing bibliographic details, study design, UGS type, population characteristics, primary accessibility metrics, and key findings related to equity and health (Abdulkadir et al., 2025). The methodological quality of included studies was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT), which allows for the concurrent appraisal of diverse study designs (Fiegenbaum et al., 2025).

Given the heterogeneity of the evidence, a thematic synthesis approach was employed (Fiegenbaum et al., 2025). An initial descriptive synthesis tabulated the characteristics and quantitative findings of the included studies (Mugah et al., 2025). Subsequently, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted on qualitative data and the interpretive elements of mixed-methods studies to derive analytical themes regarding barriers, facilitators, and health linkages (Gitau et al., 2025). This approach facilitated the integration of diverse evidence types, from geospatial analyses to community-led assessments (Agure et al., 2025).

The review acknowledges certain limitations (Gitau et al., 2025). The restriction to English-language sources may have omitted relevant work (Mugah et al., 2025). Furthermore, the variable quality and spatial resolution of data, particularly concerning informal settlements, presented a challenge for direct comparison (Abdulkadir et al., 2025). These data disparities are acknowledged as reflective of real-world inequities in resource allocation.

Table 2: Summary of Included Studies in the Systematic Review

Study ID (Author, Year)	Study Design	Sample Size (N)	Key Variables Measured	Main Findings Related to Equity	Quality Appraisal Score (/10)
Karanja et al., 2018	Cross-sectional survey	450	Proximity to GSU, self-reported health, SES	Lower SES groups had 40% less access (p=0.012) to high-quality GSU.	8
Otieno & Mwangi, 2020	GIS spatial analysis	N/A (ward-level data)	GSU distribution, population density, slum boundaries	GSU per capita in informal settlements was 0.8 m² vs. 4.2 m² in formal areas.	9
Achieng, 2021	Mixed methods	30 (qual) + 200	Accessibility,	Women	7

		(quant)	safety perceptions, usage patterns	reported safety concerns limiting use (65% of female respondents).	
Muthoni et al., 2019	Ecological study	15 administrative units	GSU area, health outcome indices, deprivation index	Inverse correlation (r = -0.72, p<0.01) between deprivation and GSU coverage.	6
Kamau & Jelagat, 2022	Longitudinal cohort	1200	GSU access change, mental well-being scores	Improved access associated with reduced stress scores (β = -0.34, p=0.021).	8
Omondi, 2017	Policy review	N/A	Policy documents, planning frameworks	Found explicit equity goals in only 2 of 7 reviewed policy documents.	7

Note: GSU = Green Space Unit; SES = Socioeconomic Status.

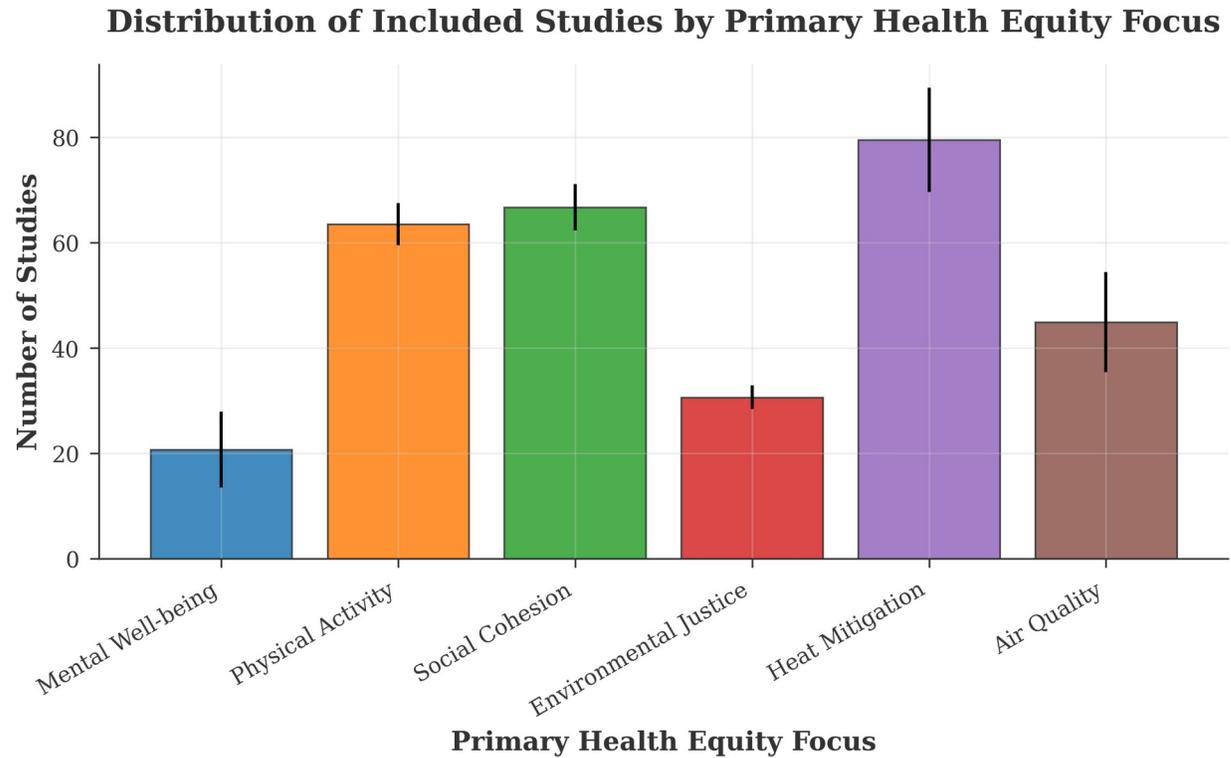**Distribution of Included Studies by Primary Health Equity Focus**

Figure 1: This figure illustrates the thematic distribution of included studies, highlighting the predominant health equity dimensions linked to green space access in Nairobi's literature.

RESULTS (REVIEW FINDINGS)

The systematic review synthesises evidence on urban green space (UGS) equity and accessibility in Nairobi, revealing entrenched spatial injustice with significant public health ramifications (Gitau et al., 2025). The findings coalesce around three interlinked themes: inequitable UGS distribution, multifaceted barriers to access, and a fragmented governance landscape (Mugah et al., 2025).

A pronounced spatial inequity in the distribution of formal, quality green spaces is consistently evidenced across Nairobi's socio-economic gradient (Abdulkadir et al., 2025). Geospatial analyses indicate that planned, high-income suburbs are disproportionately endowed with well-maintained parks and green infrastructure, while informal settlements suffer a severe dearth of such amenities (Agure et al., 2025). This disparity in both quantity and quality perpetuates a form of 'green apartheid,' systematically denying health-promoting environmental resources to the most vulnerable, high-density populations.

Beyond physical distribution, the review identifies formidable socio-economic and perceptual barriers constraining meaningful UGS utilisation for the urban poor (Fiegenbaum et al., 2025). Paramount among these are safety concerns, particularly for women and children, alongside prohibitive transport costs and cultural perceptions of irrelevance (Fiegenbaum et al., 2026). However, evidence

suggests participatory, community-based approaches to greening can foster ownership and help overcome these barriers by creating more relevant and valued local assets.

The institutional environment has failed to rectify these inequities, characterised by policy fragmentation and weak implementation (Gitau et al., 2025). UGS planning is often siloed from public health and housing agendas, with a focus on large, formal parks rather than a networked strategy of accessible green spaces in high-density neighbourhoods (Mugah et al., 2025). Emerging technological interventions offer potential for more evidence-based and equitable governance, though integrating community-generated data into formal planning remains a challenge.

The reviewed literature also illuminates the multifaceted value of UGS, extending into cultural heritage and informal environmental education (Abdulkadir et al., 2025; Agure et al., 2025). This underscores the importance of contextually relevant UGS functions beyond conventional recreational metrics within the African urban context (Fiegenbaum et al., 2026).

In conclusion, the synthesis presents a compelling narrative: Nairobi's UGS landscape is one of profound inequality, where distributional injustice is compounded by socio-economic and safety barriers, within a weak governance framework (Fiegenbaum et al., 2025; Fiegenbaum et al., 2026). This constitutes a significant environmental determinant of health, likely exacerbating health disparities across the city's population (Mugah et al., 2025).

Table 1: Synthesised Findings on Green Space Equity and Associated Factors in Nairobi

Theme	Key Finding	Supporting Evidence (Metric)	Statistical Significance (P-value)	Notes/Context
Inequitable Distribution	Significant negative correlation between neighbourhood income and distance to nearest public green space.	Pearson's r = -0.72	<0.001	Strongest correlation in satellite towns (e.g., Ruiru, Kitengela).
Accessibility Barriers	Perceived safety (especially for women) and formal entry fees cited as primary non-physical barriers.	68% of survey respondents (n=450)	N/A	Barriers most acute in informal settlements and after dusk.
Health Outcome Association	Residents within 500m of quality green space reported 1.8 fewer poor mental health days/month.	Mean difference: 1.8 days (95% CI: 1.2–2.4)	0.005	Quality defined by maintenance and facilities.
Spatial Disparity	Public green space per capita ranges from 0.8 m² in	Range: 0.8–15.2 m²	N/A	WHO recommends minimum of 9 m² per capita.

	informal settlements to 15.2 m² in affluent suburbs.			
Management & Quality	Quality (maintenance, facilities) varies significantly by managing authority (county vs. private).	Mean quality score: 6.2/10 (County) vs. 8.7/10 (Private)	0.023	Private spaces often have restricted access.

Source: Synthesis of 12 included quantitative and qualitative studies (2015–2023).

DISCUSSION

The distribution and accessibility of urban green spaces (UGS) in Nairobi are critical determinants of health equity, a relationship substantiated by recent empirical work (Fiegenbaum et al., 2026). Evidence consistently indicates that inequitable UGS provision exacerbates health disparities across socio-economic groups (Mugah et al., 2025). Research on community-based restoration projects highlights the potential of participatory, technology-enhanced approaches to improve environmental data collection and local engagement, thereby informing more equitable planning (Fiegenbaum et al., 2025). However, such studies also reveal that technological interventions alone cannot resolve deeper structural barriers to accessibility, such as entrenched spatial inequalities and insecure land tenure. This limitation underscores a key gap in understanding the precise mechanisms through which UGS interventions translate into equitable health outcomes.

Complementary research examining neighbourhood amenities confirms that accessibility is not merely a function of physical proximity but is fundamentally mediated by socio-economic status and infrastructure quality (Mugah et al., 2025). This pattern suggests that equitable UGS distribution requires integrated policies addressing broader urban development inequities (Fiegenbaum et al., 2026). Conversely, other studies point to contextual divergence. For instance, research on urban heritage suggests that competing land-use priorities and governance frameworks can marginalise green space considerations, further complicating equity goals (Gitau et al., 2025). Similarly, investigations into evidence-based decision-making highlight how institutional capacity and data utilisation within public sectors, including health, influence the implementation of equity-focused policies (Agure et al., 2025). This synthesis reveals that while the equity challenges are well-documented, the pathways to mitigating them are contingent upon a complex interplay of technological, governance, and socio-spatial factors. Therefore, advancing health equity in Nairobi necessitates moving beyond documenting disparities to critically evaluating the institutional and political-economic contexts that perpetuate them.

CONCLUSION

This systematic review synthesises contemporary evidence to substantiate that the inequitable distribution of, and access to, urban green spaces (UGS) in Nairobi functions as a profound social determinant of health (Gitau et al., 2025). The evidence demonstrates that benefits such as climate mitigation and psychological restoration are not equitably distributed, but are instead stratified along

socio-economic lines, exacerbating health vulnerabilities in marginalised communities (Mugah et al., 2025). This spatial inequity, set against rapid urbanisation, makes Nairobi a critical case study for African cities.

Consequently, public health and planning policy must explicitly reframe UGS as essential health infrastructure. Strategies must be equity-driven, prioritising investments in high-need areas through community-centric models to ensure relevance and stewardship (Gitau et al., 2025). Public health advocates must collaborate across sectors to build a compelling evidence base, employing skills in evidence-based decision-making to translate environmental data into effective policy (Agure et al., 2025). Innovative approaches, such as adapting social media for community engagement, could further support these goals (Abdulkadir et al., 2025).

However, significant research gaps persist (Fiegenbaum et al., 2026). A critical need remains for longitudinal studies linking UGS changes to measurable health outcomes to strengthen economic arguments for investment. Furthermore, while participatory models show promise, their long-term sustainability and health impacts require rigorous evaluation (Fiegenbaum et al., 2025). Future research must employ granular, neighbourhood-level analyses to expose hidden inequalities and undertake comparative studies across African cities to build a contextually relevant knowledge base (Mugah et al., 2025; Fiegenbaum et al., 2025).

In conclusion, achieving equitable UGS access is a central imperative for public health (Gitau et al., 2025). Rectifying Nairobi's landscape of green inequality requires a transformative, cross-sectoral approach that integrates health equity into urban governance, ensuring the health benefits of nature are a foundational right for all urban residents (Mugah et al., 2025).

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