



# Methodological Approaches to Investigating Informal Healthcare Provision in Urban Malawi, 2016

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## Abstract

In urban African settings, a substantial proportion of healthcare is delivered through informal channels, such as unlicensed vendors and traditional healers. Understanding these systems is crucial for public health, yet robust methodological frameworks for their investigation within the Malawian context remain underdeveloped. This methodology article details a structured approach for mapping and analysing informal healthcare provision in urban Malawi. Its primary objective is to provide a replicable strategy for identifying key actors, understanding supply chains, and documenting the types of medical products and advice circulated. The proposed methodology is a multi-stage, qualitative design. It employs purposive and snowball sampling to identify informal providers in urban markets and residential areas. Data collection combines structured observations, in-depth interviews, and informal conversations. A thematic analysis framework is used to code and analyse the data, with an emphasis on triangulation to ensure credibility. As a methodology article, this paper presents no empirical results from a specific study. Instead, it outlines the anticipated findings from applying the proposed approach. These would include a typology of informal providers and the predominant themes in their healthcare practices, such as documenting the proportion of vendors whose primary stock consists of analgesics and antibiotics. The outlined methodology provides a structured, context-sensitive approach for investigating the complex landscape of informal urban healthcare. It addresses the practical challenges of engaging with this often-hidden sector and offers a pathway to generate nuanced, actionable data. Researchers should invest significant time in community entry and building trust prior to data collection. We recommend employing local field assistants familiar with the vernacular and urban geography. Ethical protocols must be carefully considered, particularly regarding the informal status of participants. Informal healthcare, methodology, urban health, Malawi, qualitative research, medical pluralism This

article contributes a practical methodological framework designed to address the specific challenges of researching informal healthcare provision in an urban Malawian setting, offering a tool for generating systematic, credible data in this under-studied domain.

**Keywords:** *Informal healthcare, urban health systems, Sub-Saharan Africa, qualitative methodology, mixed-methods research, health services accessibility, traditional medicine*

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