
Urban Space and Adolescents: A Literature Review

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Abstract:

Purpose: The topic of urban spaces used by adolescents during their leisure time remains relatively underrepresented in the field of socio-economic geography. Researchers often approach this age group with caution due to the complex developmental dynamics of adolescence, a phase marked by identity formation and expressions of rebellion. These factors present numerous challenges to research design, such as issues of responsiveness, data reliability, and procedural disruptions. Given this context, the aim of the article is to present the results of a systematic literature review that maps social science researchers' interests at the intersection of urban space, adolescence, and leisure time.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study involved the analysis of academic publications indexed in the international Scopus and Web of Science databases, using the keywords: youth, space, and leisure. The focus was narrowed to social science literature, and only those publications whose abstracts incorporated all three keywords were selected. The gathered data were visualized both in tabular PRISMA form and through bibliometric mapping using the VOSviewer software.

Findings: The findings reveal limited scholarly attention among geographers to the subject of adolescents in urban environments—a gap the author identifies as a research niche within the discipline.

Practical Implications: This review highlights the need for more spatially grounded research on youth experiences in urban environments. The findings suggest that urban planners, educators, and social scientists should adopt interdisciplinary and youth-inclusive approaches when designing public spaces and urban policies. Greater attention to adolescent perspectives can lead to more inclusive, equitable, and developmentally supportive urban environments.

Originality/Value: The study offers a critical reflection on disciplinary gaps and provides a foundation for future research in urban geography that centers youth as legitimate social and spatial actors.

Keywords: Urban space, youth, leisure time, systematic review

JEL codes: R23, Z13, I23, J13

Paper type: Literature review article.

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1. Introduction

Despite the growing scholarly interest in civic participation and public involvement in shaping urban space, adolescents remain a marginalized group in both academic discourse and urban planning practice (Smagacz-Poziemska, 2015). Researchers often approach studies involving adolescents with caution—an attitude that Matthews, Limb, and Taylor (1999) attribute to the perceived immaturity and lack of internal readiness among youth to meaningfully engage in spatial debates.

Adolescence is a period of intense psychosocial transformation (Steinberg, 2014). It is characterized by identity formation, a drive for independence, and the testing of social boundaries (Brzezińska, 2005). These tendencies can lead to resistance, which in turn may affect participants' engagement, the quality of their responses, and the procedural integrity of the research process.

Given these complexities, working with adolescents requires not only interdisciplinary knowledge but also heightened sensitivity to ethical and interpersonal dynamics. In socio-economic geography, this means developing research tools and strategies that can accurately capture the spatial dimensions of young people's experiences, while also respecting their rights and developmental needs.

This constitutes a significant methodological challenge, particularly due to the limited availability of targeted academic literature. Much of the existing research originates from fields such as pedagogy, sociology, psychology, or medicine. These studies tend to treat youth primarily as subjects of social, health, or educational processes, while often neglecting the spatial context as a critical factor.

As a result, space—a core analytical category in socio-economic geography—is frequently relegated to the background, rather than treated as the focus of inquiry. Yet it is precisely this discipline that possesses the theoretical and methodological apparatus needed to examine adolescents' positioning within spatial and social structures.

It is therefore not surprising that geographers have predominantly focused on adult urban residents and institutional actors in spatial policy. In contrast, the spatial experiences of adolescents in cities—and their right to the city—remain largely overlooked (Lefebvre, 1991; Valentine, 1996). In light of this situation, the objective of this study is to synthesize existing scientific contributions on the topic of teenagers' leisure time in urban environments through a systematic literature review. The chosen methodology provides a foundation for summarizing previously explored themes and identifying promising directions for future research.

2. Research Methodology

To conduct this review, the study adopted the **scoping review** method as defined by Snyder (2019). This approach enables the identification of the availability of academic literature

within a given discipline and the evaluation of how research is conducted. The review was modeled after the procedures presented in studies by Czapliński, Rachwał, and Tobolska (2023), and followed the methodological guidelines provided by Lenart-Gansiniec (2021). In accordance with the standard procedure, the first step involved formulating the research question: *How is adolescents' leisure-time urban space described in the academic literature?*

Two international, online, interdisciplinary databases were selected for analysis:

1. Scopus – Elsevier's journal database, providing access to high-quality publications that are carefully selected and indexed by an independent international panel of experts.
2. Web of Science (WoS) – A database by Clarivate Analytics offering access to publications from hundreds of international repositories, with tools to assess citation metrics and Impact Factors.

These databases were chosen for their advanced search tools and rich metadata concerning authorship, publication venues, and citations. Each database was queried using combinations of keywords relating to youth, leisure, and urban space. The search strategy aimed to maximize the number of relevant records and employed fuzzy logic (Bolle, as discussed by Stapleton, Carter, & Bredahl, 2020) to generate variations of search terms.

Keyword combinations were constructed using the Boolean operators AND (to link core conceptual categories) and OR (to aggregate semantically similar terms). The following query served as a representative example:

youth OR teenagers OR adolescents AND leisure OR "leisure time" OR "free time" OR "spare time" AND urban OR city OR "public space"

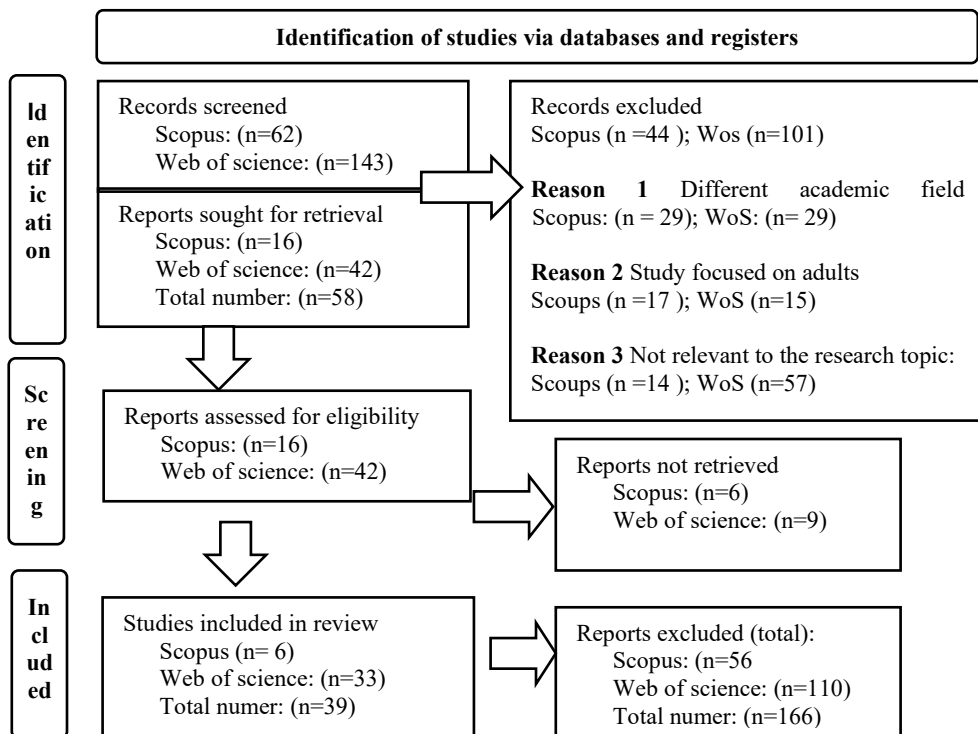
To enhance result accuracy, a disciplinary filter was applied, limiting the scope of retrieved publications to the social sciences. This search strategy aligns with best practices for systematic reviews (Lenart-Gansiniec, 2021), ensuring transparency, reproducibility, and methodological rigor. Author data were imported into the VOSviewer software to generate a bibliometric network visualization (van Eck and Waltman, 2010). Then the final report of the review process was structured using a PRISMA flow diagram (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses; <http://www.prisma-statement.org/statement.htm>) (Page *et al.*, 2021), which graphically represents the data selection and exclusion process.

3. Literature Review

Figure 1 presents the selection process of publications included in the systematic literature review, conducted in accordance with the PRISMA protocol. During the initial screening phase, a total of 205 records were retrieved using keyword combinations related to youth, urban space, and leisure. Of these, 62 records (approximately 30%) came from the Scopus

database, while 143 (approximately 70%) were sourced from Web of Science. Based on the predefined criteria, all retrieved articles were considered to be potentially relevant to the thematic scope of the review.

Figure 1. PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) flow diagram illustrating the search results from Scopus and Web of Science databases, including reasons for exclusion and the number of records that could not be retrieved.



Source: Author's own elaboration based on the conducted literature review.

Following a preliminary review of titles and publication metadata, non-peer-reviewed materials—such as conference papers, abstracts, and book reviews—were excluded. During this process, it became apparent that the disciplinary filter had limited effectiveness. Despite applying the "Social Sciences" category, a significant number of the retrieved records originated from adjacent fields such as medicine, psychology, or health sciences.

Due to the relatively small number of publications clearly affiliated with the social sciences, the author implemented a second stage of screening. This phase involved an in-depth analysis of article abstracts to assess the contextual use of the selected keywords.

Special attention was given to determining whether the publication addressed the issue of adolescents' leisure time in spatial terms, particularly focusing on geographic, urban, or socio-spatial aspects.

While every effort was made to ensure objective and consistent evaluation of each article's thematic relevance, it must be acknowledged that the final decision to include a publication in the review was ultimately subjective—based on the perceived alignment of the content with the study's research profile.

After reviewing all abstracts, approximately 70% of the publications were excluded—44 from Scopus and 101 from Web of Science (Figure 1). The most common reason for exclusion was disciplinary misalignment. In the case of Scopus, fewer than half of the retrieved records actually belonged to the social sciences and addressed the research problem. Publications that focused on adult respondents rather than adolescents were also removed. A third common reason for exclusion was general irrelevance to the research topic. As a result, a total of 58 publications—28% of the original dataset—were selected for further analysis (Figure 1).

The next stage of the review involved screening for the availability of full-text versions of the selected articles. Efforts were made to access all 58 publications using Scopus, Web of Science, and the public search engine Google Scholar. Despite these efforts, full texts could not be obtained for 15 articles—6 from Scopus and 9 from Web of Science.

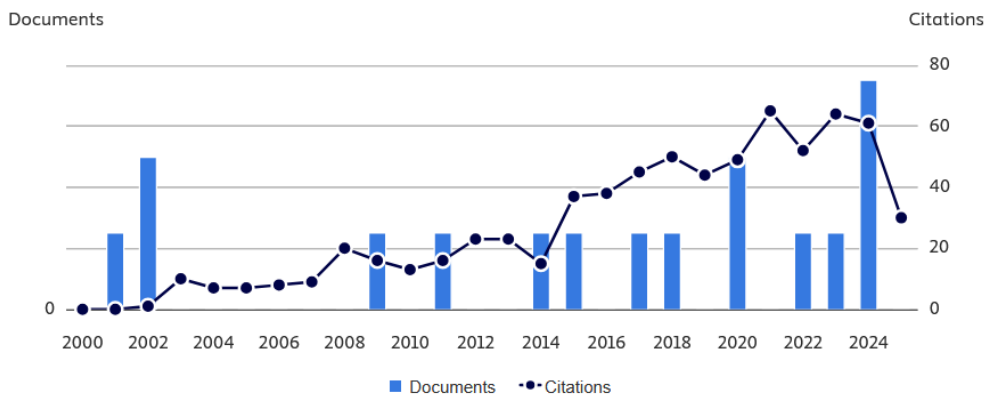
The primary barriers to access were institutional subscription limitations and the lack of open access versions. This limitation hindered the possibility of deeper analysis for a portion of the material and highlights the persistent challenge of restricted access to scientific knowledge for researchers without comprehensive institutional resources.

In the final stage of the review process, 39 publications were qualified for inclusion—representing only 19% of the total records. Of these, 6 were from Scopus and 33 from Web of Science. This means that approximately 80% of all initially identified publications were ultimately excluded from the systematic literature review (including 56 from Scopus and 110 from Web of Science).

4. Analysis of Publications from the Scopus Database

An analysis of publication frequency over the examined period (2000-2025) revealed a growing interest in the topics of adolescence, leisure time, and urban space starting around 2007–2010 (Figure 2). During this time, the number of publications increased from one to five per year. This upward trend—with minor fluctuations—continued, reaching a peak in 2024, when a total of eight relevant studies were published.

The geographical distribution of authors indicates a strong dominance of researchers from Anglophone countries. The highest concentration of publications originated from the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom. This trend may reflect the well-established academic tradition of youth and urban studies in these countries, as well as the availability of research infrastructure that supports investigations into spatial experiences of young urban residents.

Figure 2. Publication and citation trends over two decades (1996–2026),

Source: Scopus.

A complementary bibliometric analysis, based on citation counts, identified three key articles with the highest number of citations within the dataset. The first was by Seeland, Dübendorfer, and Hansmann (2009), which examined the role of inclusive urban green spaces in fostering social relationships among adolescents; this article had been cited 178 times. The second was authored by Cain *et al.* (2014) and explored how pedestrian environment quality affects physical activity levels across age groups, including adolescents; it received 168 citations.

The third highly cited work, by Larson, Richards, Sims, and Dworkin (2011), investigated how African-American urban adolescents spend their free time—considering locations, activity types, and companionship. According to database tools, this article had been cited 111 times.

In total, the publications included in the analysis were cited 703 times, and their Hirsch index (h-index) was 9, indicating a moderate yet recognizable impact within the international academic discourse.

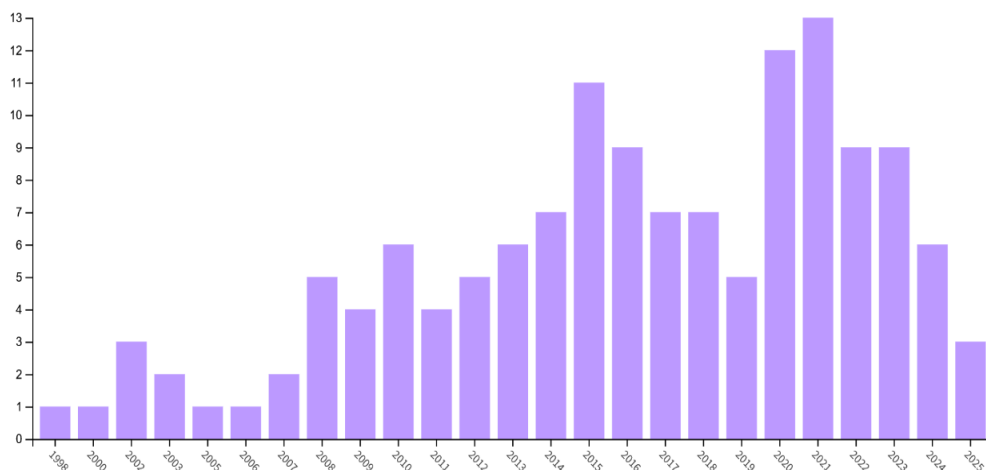
5. Analysis of Publications from the Web of Science (WoS) Database

The greatest interest in the topic of adolescents' leisure spaces was again observed in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia, reaffirming the dominance of Anglophone countries in shaping the global discourse on urban space and youth.

According to the WoS analysis, all retrieved articles fell within the domain of geography; however, in most cases, they were combined with other disciplines. The most frequent overlaps occurred with environmental sciences and technology, as well as with social science fields such as psychology and sociology.

An analysis of the number of publications by year (1998–2025) showed a steady increase in interest in the topics of adolescence, leisure time, and urban space beginning in 2007. The highest number of publications was recorded in the years 2021–2022 (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Trends in the publication of articles matching the selected keywords between 1996 and 2025,



Source: Web of Science.

6. Thematic Area Analysis

Analytical tools available in the database enabled a preliminary exploration of the thematic scope of the dataset and helped identify periods of heightened academic interest in the topic. Detailed thematic areas for articles from both Scopus and Web of Science are presented in Table 1.

The analysis revealed a marked fragmentation and diversity of research topics. The thematic scope of the analyzed articles can be described as interdisciplinary, with geography playing a central role and complemented by a wide array of social, environmental, health-related, and technological perspectives (Table 1).

It is worth noting that most of the reviewed publications could be assigned to more than one thematic category. Given the frequent intersection of disciplines, assigning each article to a single topic would have been overly reductive. As such, it was assumed that each publication could be associated with up to two thematic areas.

The largest number of publications addressed issues related to adolescents' activities, including time budgeting, movement patterns, and the use of spatial affordances. This topic was represented by 5 publications in the Scopus database and 10 in Web of Science, making it the most frequently explored theme (Larson *et al.*, 2001; Aradi *et al.*, 2016).

Table 1. Research areas covered in the scientific articles identified during the search process, falling within the field of socio-economic geography.

No.	Topic Addressed in the Publication	Number of Publications (Scopus)	Number of Publications (WoS)
1	Social issues (related to or affecting adolescents)	4	5
2	Quality of life (access to green areas, well-being)	4	6
3	Consumerism / Shopping malls	1	3
4	Methodological testing	2	4
5	Spatial impact (on behavior, social bonding, perception)	6	8
6	Video games and technology	1	1
7	Right to the city and place-making	–	10
8	Diversity (in terms of age, gender, social status, culture, ethnicity, urban vs. rural residence)	6	6
9	Activity characteristics (time budget, companionship and types of activity, affordances, mobility routes)	5	10

Source: Author's own elaboration.

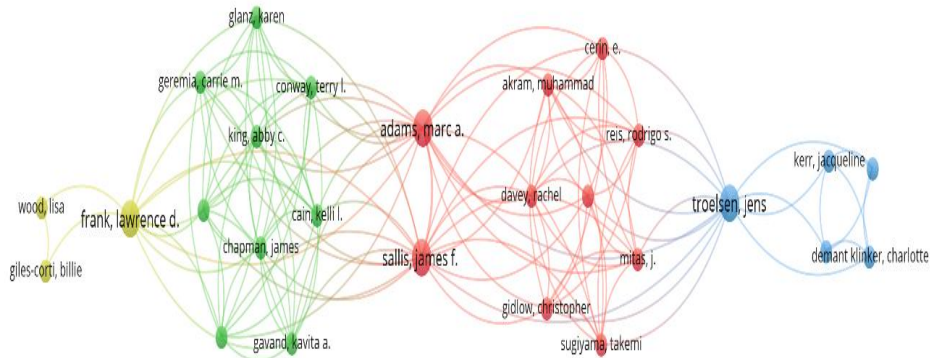
A significant number of studies also focused on the influence of space on youth behavior, the formation of social bonds, and interactions. This category included 5 articles from Scopus and 7 from WoS (Seeland *et al.*, 2009; Höglhammer *et al.*, 2018). The quality of life of adolescents in urban settings was equally prominent, particularly in relation to access to green spaces and issues of psychological and physical well-being. This topic appeared in 4 publications from Scopus and 6 from WoS (Reshad *et al.*, 2024; Puhakka and Hakoköngäs, 2024).

Researchers also investigated the diversity among adolescents in terms of social status, ethnic background, gender, and place of residence. In this area, both databases identified 6 publications each (Holdsworth *et al.*, 2017; Gauthier *et al.*, 2012). One notable observation is the striking difference in coverage of the "right to the city" and place-making themes between the two databases. The Web of Science database included 10 publications on this topic, while Scopus contained none (Ramos, 2018; Egea Jiménez and Fabre Platas, 2018). This may indicate that Web of Science tends to index more exploratory, theoretical, and conceptual research, whereas Scopus more frequently features empirical and quantitative studies.

7. Co-authorship Network (VosViewer)

Figure 4 illustrates the structure of co-authorship among authors of the most frequently cited publications on youth, urban space, and leisure time. The network was generated based on data from the Scopus and Web of Science databases.

Figure 4. Co-authorship network of the most frequently cited authors publishing on youth, urban space, and leisure time, based on data from Scopus and Web of Science. Visualization generated in VOSviewer.



Source: Author's own elaboration.

The network structure reveals four interconnected thematic clusters, with strong ties between key academic leaders—particularly Sallis, Adams, and Frank. While the collaboration is international in scope, the majority of contributors are affiliated with institutions in the United States, Australia, and Northern Europe.

The VOSviewer analysis highlights two major co-authorship clusters and two smaller ones, each visually differentiated in the diagram (Figure 4). The largest cluster (red) centers on James F. Sallis, Marc A. Adams, Rodrigo S. Reis, and E. Cerin.

These researchers focus on spatial determinants of adolescent health, physical activity, and quality of life. They are heavily interlinked through mutual citations and co-authorships, forming the core of a research stream on public health and spatiality in youth contexts.

The green-yellow cluster addresses themes related to urban planning, mobility patterns, and sustainable development. Key figures here include Lawrence D. Frank, Carrie M. Geremia, Karen Glanz, Kelli L. Cain, and Abby C. King. This group maintains strong thematic and methodological connections with the Sallis–Adams cluster.

The blue cluster is composed of authors exploring walkability, child- and youth-friendly neighborhood planning, and inclusive public spaces. Prominent scholars in this group include Jens Troelsen, Jacqueline Kerr, and Charlotte Demant Klinker.

The co-authorship analysis reveals clear thematic and personal linkages among researchers, with a notable dominance of clusters focused on public health and sustainable urban planning for youth. The network illustrates strong, international academic collaboration, particularly among scholars from the United States, Australia, and Northern Europe.

8. Conclusions

The conducted analysis confirms the relative underrepresentation of adolescent-focused research within the field of socio-economic geography. The reviewed literature reflects both well-established areas of inquiry and notable research gaps. In particular, there is a lack of in-depth studies on how young people perceive urban space, how they incorporate digital technologies into spatial practices, and how they engage with commercial environments.

Although the identified publications are valuable and interdisciplinary in nature, they tend to concentrate on public health, physical activity, and well-being. As a result, critical issues such as urban perception, place-making, and adolescents' right to co-create urban environments remain underexplored. The findings point to a dominant reliance on health and psychological frameworks, with limited engagement in spatial theory and socio-geographic analysis.

This highlights the need for further development of youth-oriented research within the discipline of social geography—research that recognizes adolescents not only as study subjects but as active co-creators and co-definers of urban life. Addressing this need will require methodological tools tailored to the developmental specifics of this age group, along with broader reflections on spatial justice and the inclusivity of planning processes.

It is also worth noting that a large number of publications were excluded due to misalignment with the search criteria. Some diverged significantly from the social sciences, while others focused on young adults rather than teenagers. Nevertheless, the applied methods yielded a valuable dataset that can serve as a foundation and inspiration for future research aimed at filling the identified gap.

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