

ABSTRACT

Urban streets in Indian metropolitan cities like Mumbai have increasingly become car-dominated corridors, full of traffic, noise and air pollution on daily basis, resulting in reduced public interaction, declining physical activity, health issues, stress and limited safe spaces for community engagement. The Bombay Times Happy Streets Initiative seeks to address these challenges by temporarily transforming selected roads into traffic-free public zones that support walking, cycling, group play, fitness, and cultural activities. This study explores the impact of such open-street programs on urban health, social cohesion, and sustainable city planning. Drawing insights from international models such as Bogotá's Ciclovía and New York City's Summer Streets, the research highlights how car-free initiatives promote environmental benefits, develop healthier lifestyles, mental well-being and stronger community bonding in which today's Gen-Z generation is lacking. The paper further identifies key urban issues—lack of vibrant public spaces, and the need for non-motorized locations and evaluates how open streets can serve as effective solutions. Overall, the study argues that initiatives like Happy Streets can shape a new urban culture for Gen-Z, revive lost playground traditions, vehicle-free public spaces that encourage kids walking, cycling, group games, fitness, and cultural events, community bonding, and sustainable city development.

KEYWORDS: Urban street, community focused public areas, future sustainable cities, urban health.

INTRODUCTION

Mumbai is one of India's most densely populated cities, characterized by heavy traffic, constrained public spaces, and lifestyle-associated health challenges such as sedentary behaviour among children and adults. Urban streets in Mumbai traditionally prioritize vehicular movement at the expense of pedestrians and cyclists, limiting opportunities for community interaction and physical activity. The Happy Streets / Sunday Streets initiative offers a temporary but strategic reversal — reclaiming urban streets for people instead of vehicles, thereby promoting health, wellness, and social cohesion on designated Sunday mornings.

AIM AND OBJECTIVES

Document the development and structure of Mumbai's open-streets initiatives. Assess the potential health, social, and environmental impacts of these interventions. Analyse public participation and community response. Propose frameworks for sustainable integration of open-streets practices in urban planning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Open Streets as an Urban Health Strategy

Open-streets initiatives, car-free days, have been implemented globally (for example in Bogotá, New York City, and various Indian cities) as a strategy to promote physical activity, reduce motorized traffic emissions, and create public spaces for diverse populations. Research in urban health indicates that pedestrian-friendly environments are linked to increased physical activity, improved psychological wellbeing, and stronger social cohesion. The presence of vehicle-free streets facilitates non-motorized mobility (walking, jogging, cycling) and encourages community interaction.



Colombian students ride their bicycles during 'No car day' in Bogotá. The day-long ban on all private car traffic on the city's streets forces residents to use public transportation or bicycles to get to and from work. Photograph: Jose Miguel Gomez/Reuters.

Former Bogotá mayor Enrique Peñalosa argued that car-centric planning and privatized public spaces had made cities inequitable and unsafe, particularly for children. Rejecting highway expansion, he invested in cycling infrastructure, parks, pedestrian plazas, and bus rapid transit, while restricting car use. In 2000, he introduced a citywide car-free days that led to zero traffic deaths, a sharp drop in hospital admissions, improved air quality, and renewed public optimism—demonstrating the transformative potential of people-centred urban design.



'Happy Street' initiative to promote culture at Chennai. To promote a healthy lifestyle, 'Happy Street' initiative has been launched in Chennai to encourage people to use non-motorist transport. The event was held at Anna Nagar for which the roads are completely blocked from 6 am to 9 am on Second Avenue from Bluestar Junction to Nalli Junction.



Urban Space and Social Inclusion

Urban sociological literature underscores that public spaces, including streets, function as essential arenas for social interaction, local culture, and collective identity. Car-free periods in urban roads democratize access to public space, allowing children, older adults, and families to engage in activities that are otherwise unsafe or impractical in heavy traffic conditions.



Happy Street Ahmedabad — a 325-metre redesigned food and shopping corridor by the National Institute of Design, redeveloped by AMC at ₹8.5 crore on the former Khau Gali site (demolished in 2018), transforming a congested, encroached stretch into a pedestrian-friendly street with organized vending, parking, street furniture, and green canopy.

GAPS IN IMPLEMENTATION

Despite theoretical benefits, sustainable implementation of open-street initiatives often faces challenges related to administrative coordination, enforcement, traffic management, and long-term public engagement. There is limited peer-reviewed research specifically documenting these efforts in the context of Indian metropolises such as Mumbai.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Given the exploratory nature of this study, the approach is qualitative and descriptive, drawing primarily on

secondary data sources, including media reports, policy announcements, and descriptive accounts of community responses. It synthesizes multiple sources to understand the initiative's design, scope, and perceived benefits.

HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF OPEN-STREETS INITIATIVES IN MUMBAI:

Equal Streets (2014–2015)

The Equal Streets movement was Mumbai's earliest sustained open-streets effort. Launched jointly by EMBARQ India, Mumbai Police, and the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, it opened a 6.5-kilometre loop along SV Road, Linking Road, and parts of Juhu Road to pedestrians and cyclists on Sunday mornings. Participation in its first iteration exceeded 15,000 people, indicating strong public interest in reclaiming streets for community interaction and non-motorized movement.

SUNDAY STREETS – MUMBAI POLICE INITIATIVE (2022 ONWARDS)

In March 2022, the Mumbai Police launched Sunday Streets, systematically shutting selected stretches of roads to vehicle traffic on Sunday mornings (typically 06:00–10:00) to facilitate activities such as yoga, cycling, skating, jogging, fitness routines, and family recreation.

Locations included:

- Dorabhai Tata Road (Nariman Point),
- Carter Road (Bandra),
- Mindspace Road (Goregaon),
- Lokhandwala Road (DN Nagar),
- Tansa Pipeline Road (Mulund),
- Eastern Expressway (Vikhroli)

These initiatives received municipal support for alternate traffic routing and basic facilities such as ambulances and toilets.

IMPACT ANALYSIS

- **Physical and Mental Health Benefits**

Car-free streets encourage physical activity — walking, cycling, yoga, skating — which are associated with cardiovascular benefits, reduced obesity risk, and enhanced mental wellbeing. Regular engagement in outdoor physical activity is particularly valuable in a densely populated city where conventional open spaces are limited.

- **Hypothesis**

Open streets create informal community hubs.

- **Environmental Considerations**

Temporary reduction in traffic emissions along selected stretches enhances air quality in the immediate vicinity, albeit for limited hours. These car-free periods symbolically promote sustainable transport and raise awareness around vehicular pollution.

- **Facilitators**

Institutional Support: Coordination between police, municipal authorities, and local NGOs enabled effective implementation. **Public Demand:** High citizen

participation demonstrated strong desire for healthy, community-oriented public spaces.

- **Challenges**

Traffic Management: Redirecting traffic to other roads can increase congestion outside the closed zones.

Sustainability: Without long-term policy integration and infrastructure investment, such initiatives risk being episodic rather than systemic.

Infrastructure Constraints: Narrow streets and limited footpaths in many areas restrict the potential scale of these programs.

- **Comparative Perspectives**

Similar initiatives in other Indian cities show that structured, well-publicized open streets can foster community bonds and enhance public wellbeing. For instance, multi-city initiatives named Happy Streets have been implemented in urban centres across India, transforming arterial roads into activity spaces with fitness stations, kids' zones, cultural performances, and health check stations on Sunday mornings.

CONCLUSION

Mumbai's Happy Streets and Sunday Streets initiatives represent promising models for transforming urban mobility culture and reclaiming public space for citizens. By temporarily closing roads to vehicles and opening them to people, these programs encourage physical activity, social interaction, and healthier lifestyles. To amplify their impact, such initiatives should be integrated into broader urban policy agendas with dedicated infrastructure investment and participatory planning. The case of Mumbai demonstrates that, even in highly congested megacities, it is feasible to create moments of civic joy and wellbeing through shared use of streets — an approach that urban innovators and public health advocates should continue to refine and expand.