



Urbanicity

Introduction

There is evidence that urban settings are associated with higher rates of some psychiatric disorders. Studies of urbanicity have defined exposure to urban environs in various ways, either consisting of urban-rural comparisons or defined according to population density which can include mixed urban-suburban-rural areas. The majority define urbanicity by degrees of population density, defined either as population per square kilometer or as the number of inhabitants within a defined location (e.g., capital, city, or town). It is not clear whether urban living is itself associated with a higher risk for bipolar disorder, as other factors may influence this association such as social class and access to treatment. Time of exposure also varies in different studies. Exposure may be assessed at birth, during upbringing or at illness onset.

Method

We have included only systematic reviews (systematic literature search, detailed methodology with inclusion/exclusion criteria) published in full text, in English, from the year 2010 that report results separately for people with a diagnosis of bipolar or related disorders. Due to the high volume of systematic reviews we have now limited inclusion to systematic meta-analyses. Where no systematic meta-analysis exists for a topic, systematic reviews without meta-analysis are included for that topic. Reviews were identified by searching the databases MEDLINE, EMBASE, and PsycINFO. Hand searching reference lists of identified reviews was also conducted. When multiple copies of reviews assessing the same topic were found, only the most recent and/or comprehensive review was included.

Review reporting assessment was guided by the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses ([PRISMA](#)) checklist that describes a preferred way to present a meta-analysis¹. Reviews with less than 50% of items checked have been

excluded from the library. The PRISMA flow diagram is a suggested way of providing information about studies included and excluded with reasons for exclusion. Where no flow diagram has been presented by individual reviews, but identified studies have been described in the text, reviews have been checked for this item. Note that early reviews may have been guided by less stringent reporting checklists than the PRISMA, and that some reviews may have been limited by journal guidelines.

Evidence was graded using the Grading of Recommendations Assessment, Development and Evaluation ([GRADE](#)) Working Group approach where high quality evidence such as that gained from randomised controlled trials (RCTs) may be downgraded to moderate to low if review and study quality is limited, if there is inconsistency in results, indirect comparisons, imprecise or sparse data and high probability of reporting bias. It may also be downgraded if risks associated with the intervention or other matter under review are high. Conversely, low quality evidence such as that gained from observational studies may be upgraded if effect sizes are large, there is a dose dependent response or if results are reasonably consistent, precise and direct with low associated risks (see end of table for an explanation of these terms)². The resulting table represents an objective summary of the available evidence, although the conclusions are solely the opinion of staff of NeuRA (Neuroscience Research Australia).

Results

We found two systematic reviews that met our inclusion criteria^{3,4}.

- Moderate quality evidence suggests a higher risk of bipolar disorder with urban birth but not urban living later in life.



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Laurens KR, Luo L, Matheson SL, Carr VJ, Raudino A, Harris F, Green MJ

Common or distinct pathways to psychosis? A systematic review of evidence from prospective studies for developmental risk factors and antecedents of the schizophrenia spectrum disorders and affective psychoses

BMC Psychiatry 2015; 15(1): 205

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Comparison	Urbanicity in people with bipolar disorder vs. controls.
Summary of evidence	Moderate to low quality evidence (precise, direct for birth only, large sample, appears inconsistent) suggests there may higher risk of bipolar disorder with urban birth vs. rural birth, although there may be decreased risk of affective psychoses in general with urban birth.
Urban birth	
<p><i>A significant, small effect of increased risk of bipolar disorder with higher levels of urbanicity (vs. rural);</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">1 study, N = 49,539, RR = 1.20, 95%CI 1.09 to 1.31, $p < 0.05$</p> <p><i>However, another study found decreased risk of affective psychoses (which includes bipolar disorder) with higher levels of urbanicity;</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">1 study, N = 42,115, OR = 0.84, 95%CI 0.80 to 0.88, $p < 0.05$</p>	
Consistency in results	Appears inconsistent
Precision in results	Precise
Directness of results	Direct for urbanicity at birth, indirect for urbanicity after birth.

Rodriguez V, Alameda L, Trotta G, Spinazzola E, Marino P, Matheson SL, Laurens KR, Murray RM, Vassos E

Environmental Risk Factors in Bipolar Disorder and Psychotic Depression: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Prospective Studies

Schizophrenia Bulletin 2021; <https://doi.org/10.1093/schbul/sbaa197>

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Comparison	Risk of bipolar disorder after exposure to urbanicity at birth and later in life vs. no exposure.
Summary of evidence	Moderate quality evidence (large sample, some imprecision, direct, inconsistent were applicable) finds a small increase in the risk of bipolar disorder with urban birth, and no increased risk with urban living.
Urbanicity at birth	
<i>A small increased risk of bipolar disorder with exposure to urban birth;</i> 1 study, N = 1,400, OR = 1.29, 95%CI 1.12 to 1.37, $p < 0.05$	
Urbanicity later in life	
<i>No significant difference between groups;</i> 4 studies, N = 624, OR = 1.16, 95%CI 0.64 to 2.07, $p > 0.05$, $I^2 = 95\%$	
Consistency in results	Not applicable; 1 study for birth, inconsistent for later exposure.
Precision in results	Precise for birth, imprecise for later exposure.
Directness of results	Direct

Explanation of acronyms

CI = confidence interval, I^2 = the percentage of the variability in effect estimates that is due to heterogeneity rather than sampling error (chance), N = number of participants, OR = odds ratio, p = statistical probability of obtaining that result ($p < 0.05$ generally regarded as significant), RR = risk ratio, vs. = versus

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Explanation of technical terms

Bias has the potential to affect reviews of both RCT and observational studies. Forms of bias include; reporting bias – selective reporting of results; publication bias - trials that are not formally published tend to show less effect than published trials, further if there are statistically significant differences between groups in a trial, these trial results tend to get published before those of trials without significant differences; language bias – only including English language reports; funding bias - source of funding for the primary research with selective reporting of results within primary studies; outcome variable selection bias; database bias - including reports from some databases and not others; citation bias - preferential citation of authors. Trials can also be subject to bias when evaluators are not blind to treatment condition and selection bias of participants if trial samples are small.

Prevalence refers to how many existing cases there are at a particular point in time. Incidence refers to how many new cases there are per population in a specified time period. Incidence is usually reported as the number of new cases per 100,000 people per year. Alternatively some studies present the number of new cases that have accumulated over several years against a person-years denominator. This denominator is the sum of individual units of time that the persons in the population are at risk of becoming a case. It takes into account the size of the underlying population sample and its age structure over the duration of observation.

Median rate ratio refers to the ratio between prevalence or incidence rates of two groups, based on the median rather than the mean. The median is often used as a better measure of central tendency than the mean when data are skewed. Harmonic means are also used when data are skewed and are appropriate for rate data.

Reliability and validity refers to how accurate the instrument is. Sensitivity is the proportion of actual positives that are correctly identified (100% sensitivity = correct identification of all actual positives) and specificity is the proportion of negatives that are correctly identified (100% specificity = not identifying anyone as positive if they are truly not).

Weighted mean difference scores refer to mean differences between treatment and comparison groups after treatment (or occasionally pre to post treatment) and in a randomised trial there is an assumption that both groups are comparable on this measure prior to treatment. Standardised mean differences are divided by the pooled standard deviation (or the standard deviation of one group when groups are homogenous) that allows results from different scales to be combined and compared. Each study's mean difference is then given a weighting depending on the size of the sample and the variability in the data. 0.2 represents a small effect, 0.5 a medium effect, and 0.8 and over represents a large effect⁵.

Odds ratio (OR) or relative risk (RR) refers to the probability of a reduction (< 1) or an increase (> 1) in a particular outcome in a treatment group, or a group exposed to a risk factor, relative to the comparison group. For example, a RR of 0.75 translates to a reduction in risk of an outcome of 25% relative to those not receiving the treatment or not exposed to the risk factor. Conversely, a RR of 1.25 translates to an increased risk of 25% relative to those not receiving treatment or not having been exposed to a risk factor. A RR or OR of 1.00 means there is no difference between groups. A medium effect is considered if $RR > 2$ or < 0.5 and a large effect if $RR > 5$ or < 0.2 ⁶. InOR stands for logarithmic OR where a InOR of 0 shows no difference between groups. Hazard ratios measure the effect of an explanatory variable on the hazard or risk of an event.

Correlation coefficients (eg, r) indicate the strength of association or relationship between



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variables. They are an indication of prediction, but do not confirm causality due to possible and often unforeseen confounding variables. An r of 0.10 represents a weak association, 0.25 a medium association and 0.40 and over represents a strong association. Unstandardised (b) regression coefficients indicate the average change in the dependent variable associated with a 1 unit change in the dependent variable, statistically controlling for the other independent variables. Standardised regression coefficients represent the change being in units of standard deviations to allow comparison across different scales.

Inconsistency refers to differing estimates of treatment effect across studies (i.e. heterogeneity or variability in results) which is not explained by subgroup analyses and therefore reduces confidence in the effect estimate. I^2 is the percentage of the variability in effect estimates that is due to heterogeneity rather than sampling error (chance) - 0% to 40%: heterogeneity might not be important, 30% to 60%: may represent moderate heterogeneity, 50% to 90%: may represent substantial heterogeneity and 75% to 100%: considerable heterogeneity. I^2 can be calculated from Q (chi-square) for the test of heterogeneity with the following formula:

$$I^2 = \left(\frac{Q - df}{Q} \right) \times 100\%$$

Imprecision refers to wide confidence intervals indicating a lack of confidence in the effect estimate. Based on GRADE recommendations, a result for continuous data (standardised mean differences, not weighted mean differences) is considered imprecise if the upper or lower confidence limit crosses an effect size of 0.5 in either direction, and for binary and correlation data, an effect size of 0.25. GRADE also recommends downgrading the evidence when sample size is smaller than 300 (for binary data) and 400 (for continuous data), although for some topics, this criteria should be relaxed⁷.

Indirectness of comparison occurs when a comparison of intervention A versus B is not available but A was compared with C and B was compared with C that allows indirect comparisons of the magnitude of effect of A versus B. Indirectness of population, comparator and or outcome can also occur when the available evidence regarding a particular population, intervention, comparator, or outcome is not available so is inferred from available evidence. These inferred treatment effect sizes are of lower quality than those gained from head-to-head comparisons of A and B.

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