

Interactions between quality of life and sanitation: An analysis of informal settlements through a systematic review

Interacciones entre calidad de vida y saneamiento: un análisis de los asentamientos informales mediante una revisión sistemática

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Abstract

Access to basic services (BS) and legal physical sanitation (LPS) are critical aspects in the discussion on the well-being of inhabitants of informal settlements (IS), where housing precariousness can perpetuate unhealthy and dangerous living conditions. This article aims to systematically assess the relationship between specific quality of life indicators—such as access to BS, public health, and social security—and the effects of the LPS process on these communities. To this end, the systematic review methodology was used, applying the guidelines of the PRISMA method (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). The sample consisted of 20 academic articles from journals indexed in Scopus, Web of Science (WOS), Scielo and Latindex, which analyze how the implementation of the LPS contributes to substantial improvements in quality of life. Among the benefits identified are access to essential services, the reduction of neighborhood conflicts and the strengthening of social cohesion. However, there are also gaps in the literature regarding the variability in the perception of these benefits, especially according to demographic and socioeconomic differences. This study highlights the role of LPS not only as a necessary technical intervention, but also as a driver of social transformation. It is recommended that future research be oriented towards the longitudinal analysis of these processes and the sustainability of their effects on informal communities.

Keywords: basic services, social cohesion, legal physical sanitation.

Resumen

El acceso a servicios básicos (SB) y el saneamiento físico legal (SFL) son aspectos críticos en la discusión sobre el bienestar de los habitantes de asentamientos informales (AI), donde la precariedad habitacional puede perpetuar condiciones de vida insalubres y peligrosas. El presente artículo tiene como objetivo evaluar sistemáticamente la relación entre indicadores específicos de calidad de vida —como el acceso a SB, la salud pública y la seguridad social— y los efectos del proceso de SFL en estas comunidades. Para ello, se utilizó la metodología de revisión sistemática, aplicando los lineamientos del método PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses). La muestra estuvo conformada por 20 artículos académicos de revistas indexadas en Scopus, Web of Science (WOS), Scielo y Latindex, los cuales analizan cómo la implementación del SFL contribuye a mejoras sustanciales en la calidad de vida. Entre los beneficios identificados se destacan el acceso a servicios esenciales, la reducción de conflictos vecinales y el fortalecimiento de la cohesión social. No obstante, también se evidencian vacíos en la literatura respecto a la variabilidad en la percepción de estos beneficios, especialmente según diferencias demográficas y socioeconómicas. Este estudio destaca el rol del SFL no solo como una intervención técnica necesaria, sino también como un motor de transformación social. Se recomienda que futuras investigaciones se orienten hacia el análisis longitudinal de estos procesos y la sostenibilidad de sus efectos en comunidades informales.

Palabras clave: servicios básicos, cohesión social, saneamiento físico legal.

Introduction

The legal physical sanitation (LPS) of properties is a crucial aspect of urban development, especially in metropolitan areas where informal settlements (IS) proliferate. This process, beyond the legal formalization of property, directly impacts the quality of life of its inhabitants, evaluated through indicators such as access to basic services (BS), public health, social security, among others. However, there is a notable lack of systematic research exploring the interrelation between these indicators and the effects of LPS, which justifies the need for a mixed-methods study: both quantitative and qualitative.

Quality of life is determined by multiple components that range from access to essential services to perceptions of safety. Recent studies highlight that the lack of potable water and adequate sanitation leads to consequences for health and social well-being (Calva et al., 2021). Other research has shown a direct relationship between access to health BS and improvements in quality of life (Mosquera, 2020). Nevertheless, these dynamics must be analyzed more deeply in informal contexts.

Social security also plays a relevant role, especially in communities characterized by precarious employment and limited protection coverage (Castillo et al., 2020). These conditions weaken the capacity to respond to health or social crises, underscoring the importance of analyzing how LPS could contribute to creating safer and more resilient environments.

This process should not be understood solely as an administrative measure, but as a structural intervention with profound social implications. Previous research argues that property formalization strengthens social cohesion and promotes community participation, which can lead to sustained improvements in quality of life (Godos & Villa, 2022). Despite this, much of the research has primarily focused on physical health, overlooking key dimensions such as mental health or emotional well-being, which highlights the need for a more holistic approach (Acevedo-Benavides et al., 2022).

This systematic review article aims to examine the relationship between LPS and three main indicators: access to BS, public health, and social security in IS. Although some recent studies have addressed these links, significant gaps remain in the literature.

Among the relevant studies is that of Mosquera (2020), who examined the existential quality of cancer patients in Ecuador, concluding that access to health BS is an essential determinant of well-being. This finding can be extrapolated to informal contexts, where vulnerability is even greater. In a similar vein, Tarazona & Ríos (2021) emphasized how the notion of anxiety affects overall well-being, a key factor in areas where violence limits access to services and impacts social cohesion.

Landa & Manzano (2023) explored the connection between distress and existential quality in educational contexts, and although their focus was different, the results are applicable to informal communities, where insecurity and lack of resources create conditions conducive to mental health deterioration. García et al. (2022)

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stress the importance of community support as a protective element for existential quality in caregivers of patients with persistent ailments, a logic that can also be applied to informal contexts. Finally, Chalco & Calle (2023) highlighted that physical and psychological health, as well as the environment, are fundamental dimensions for evaluating quality of life, not only in the elderly but in any vulnerable group.

While these studies provide valuable insights, a clear line of research linking the effects of LPS with quality of life in IS has yet to be established. This gap aims to provide a theoretical and empirical foundation for formulating more effective public policies.

During the analysis of the scientific literature, thematic gaps were identified that confirm the relevance of the study. Vizúete-Salazar et al. (2024) establish a relationship between BS consumption and poverty but do not explore how land formalization could facilitate effective access to such services.

Downs et al. (2022) investigated food environments in IS without considering public health as a critical dimension. Focusing on food availability, they omitted to connect this variable with sanitary infrastructure, representing a significant oversight. Nchor & Ukam (2024) demonstrate that the responsibility for water supply falls on the residents themselves, exacerbating inequality.

Abood et al. (2023) proposed the concept of settlement service literacy as a useful strategy in migrant communities, although this approach has yet to be systematically applied in informal contexts, leaving a significant gap in understanding citizens' rights and capacities. Finally, Mutyambizi et al. (2020) showed that despite some interventions, satisfaction with access to BS remains low, reflecting the ineffectiveness of certain policies implemented to date.

The review of these gaps highlights the need to undertake methodical studies that holistically examine the relationship between LPS and parameters of existential quality. This article seeks not only to contribute to scientific knowledge but also to provide a basis for decision-making in public policy, especially in vulnerable urban contexts.

In summary, by addressing the identified gaps in the literature, this research proposes a comprehensive analysis that contributes to existing knowledge and provides useful recommendations for formulating public policies aimed at improving the quality of life for residents of informal settlements. This objective reflects a clear intention to tackle the thematic gaps identified in the literature review and advance knowledge in the field of sanitation and its impact on urban quality of life.

Methodology

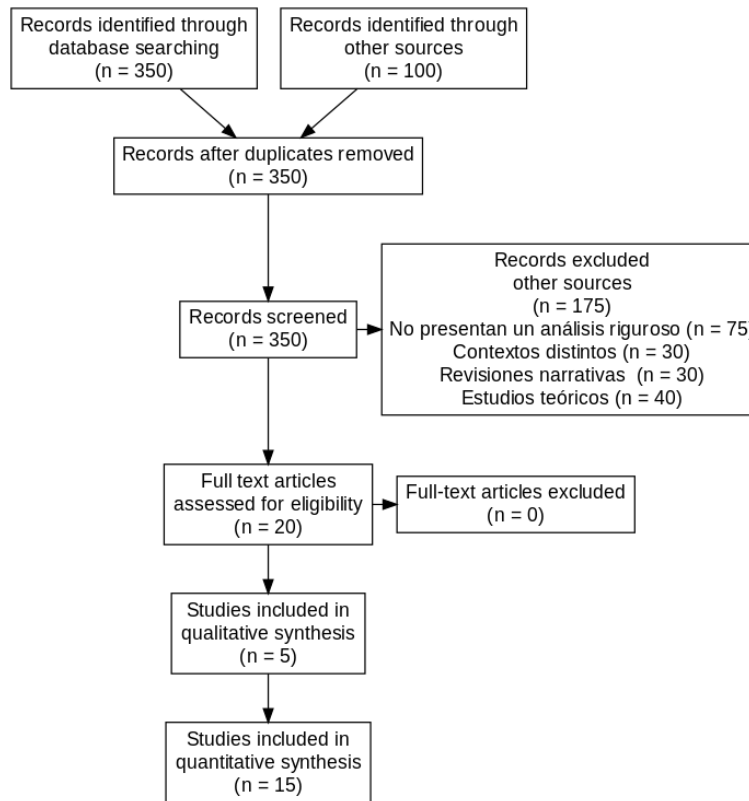
The PRISMA method (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) was applied as a methodological protocol to rigorously organize the systematic review. The process began with the formulation of four research questions: 1) What specific quality of life indicators are affected by the implementation of LPS in informal settlements (IS)? 2) How does access to basic services (BS) influence the public health of IS residents after LPS implementation? 3) What changes are observed in the perception of social security following LPS implementation in these settlements? 4) What is the relationship between LPS and social cohesion in informal communities?

For the search, keywords in English were used, such as "legal physical sanitation," "quality of life," "basic services," "public health," and "informal settlements." These were employed in academic databases such as Scopus, Web of Science (WOS), SciELO, and Latindex. To ensure the timeliness and relevance of the reviewed studies, the search was restricted to publications from 2020 to 2025.

Inclusion criteria included empirical studies that directly addressed the relationship between LPS and quality of life in informal contexts, research developed with quantitative, qualitative, or mixed approaches, peer-reviewed articles published in indexed scientific journals, and studies focused on adult residents in IS.

In contrast, studies that did not present a rigorous analysis of the connection between LPS and quality of life indicators were excluded, as well as those focused on contexts other than informal settlements. Narrative reviews without empirical backing and theoretical studies that did not provide applied evidence were also discarded.

Figure 1
Identification of studies using the PRISMA method



Results

Below is a thorough examination of the authors proposing responses to each of the research questions posed.

Table 1
Specific quality of life indicators and LPS

What specific quality of life indicators are affected by the implementation of LPS in IS?	
Author	Bravo Vilela, L. I., & Sánchez Dávila, K.
Journal	Revista de Climatología – Edición Especial Ciencias Sociales
Conclusion	Access to BS (water, sewage, electricity), property formalization, land use planning, reduction of neighborhood conflicts, and improvement of legal security and habitability.
Author	Tomalá-Parrales, M.
Journal	Revista Económica
Conclusion	BS such as potable water, electricity, health, education, paved roads, public lighting, and digital connectivity all directly impact quality of life.
Author	López Moncada, G. V.

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Journal	LATAM Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades
Conclusion	Efficient access to water and sanitation, user satisfaction perception, health security, and environmental safety; these BS improve health, comfort, and urban equity.
Author	Asprilla Córdoba, K. L., & Montenegro Martínez, G.
Journal	Revista CES Derecho
Conclusion	Access to health services is restricted by structural obstacles linked to settlement irregularity, affecting medical existential quality and community well-being.
Author	Chicaiza Ganán, Y. F., & Macías Ferreiro, K.
Journal	Reincisol
Conclusion	Physical health, pain perception, enjoyment of life, concentration, and need for medical treatment; while not directly linked to sanitation, it reveals relevant dimensions for assessing quality of life.
LPS is a transformative tool that, beyond formalizing property, comprehensively improves material, social, and psychological conditions in informal contexts, reducing vulnerability and promoting collective well-being.	

Table 2
Impact of access to BS on public health

How does access to BS influence the public health of IS residents after LPS implementation?	
Author	Pérez Solís, L., Villacreses Medina, M., Zúñiga Llerena, M., & Salame Ortiz, V.
Journal	Boletín de Malariología y Salud Ambiental
Conclusion	The lack of potable water, sanitation, and waste control generates acute and chronic diseases, directly affecting public health in precarious settlements.
Author	Ojeda, L., Rodríguez, J. C., Mansilla Quiñones, P., & Pino Vásquez, A.
Journal	Bitácora Urbano Territorial
Conclusion	The lack of water coverage in IS perpetuates social exclusion and sanitary deterioration, directly impacting public health.
Author	Therán-Nieto, K., Pérez-Arévalo, R., & García-Estrada, D.
Journal	urbe. Revista Brasileira de Gestão Urbana
Conclusion	The precarious state of BS in urban peripheries creates unhealthy environments that deteriorate public health conditions in informal communities.

Author	Gutiérrez Nava, M. A., Dorantes Arellano, A., Garces Mendoza, I., Martínez Cárdenas, K., Serafin Badillo, M., & Nava Ortega, E.
Journal	Ciencia y Reflexión - Revista Científica Multidisciplinaria
Conclusion	Urban insecurity acts as a barrier to accessing health services, directly affecting public health in IS populations.
Author	Rodríguez-Larraburu, E., Piovet-Hernández, I. Y., & Díaz-Díaz, A. A.
Journal	European Public & Social Innovation Review
Conclusion	Deficiencies in potable water, air, and access to health in vulnerable areas lead to a high prevalence of chronic diseases, reflecting a strong impact on public health.
<hr/> Access to BS is essential for public health in IS, as its absence exacerbates exposure to health risks and deepens inequalities, negatively affecting the well-being of the population. <hr/>	

Table 3
Changes in the perception of social security after sanitation

What changes are observed in the perception of social security after the implementation of LPS in these settlements?	
Author	Cabezas Uriarte, G. P., Rodríguez Barrero, M. S., Sierra Durán, J. I., & Flórez Guzmán, M. H.
Journal	Revista Logos Ciencia & Tecnología
Conclusion	After urban interventions, the perception of social security improves due to increased citizen participation and filling institutional gaps.
Author	Gallardo Corrales, N. N., Pacheco Barzallo, A. C., & Lara Calderón, M. L.
Year	2022
Journal	EÍDOS
Conclusion	The adaptation of public spaces and services related to sanitation reduces the perception of insecurity in densely populated areas.
Author	Sandoval-Núñez, R. A., Aliaga Casceres, I. Y., & Cieza-Altamirano, G.
Journal	Revista de la Universidad del Zulia
Conclusion	Perceived social security improves if there is institutional quality following urban improvements. Changes vary by gender and political factors.
Author	Leiva Tarazona, A., & Ramírez Ríos, A.
Journal	Ciencia Latina Revista Científica Multidisciplinar
Conclusion	The perception of insecurity decreases with improvements in urban infrastructure, positively impacting mental health and overall well-being.

Author	Castillo-Recalde, J. A., & Larco-Bravo, H. M.
Journal	Journal Scientific MQRInvestigar
Conclusion	Greater perception of security is reported following comprehensive programs against organized crime, strengthening social cohesion.
LPS improves the perception of social security in informal settlements by transforming vulnerable environments into safer, more organized, and dignified spaces, strengthening citizen trust, social cohesion, and collective well-being.	

Table 4
Relationship between LPS and social cohesion

What is the relationship between LPS and social cohesion in informal communities?	
Author	Sarmiento, J. P., Castro Correa, C. P., Sandoval, V., & Hoberman, G.
Journal	Investigaciones Geográficas
Conclusion	Social cohesion in informal settlements improves through structural interventions like legal sanitation, which strengthen community organization, reduce state indifference, and generate effective local governance.
Author	Ruiz Camus, C. N., Delgado Bardales, J. M., Ruiz Camus, C. E., Guerrero Mera, J. N., Montilla Pérez, L., Vílchez Ordoñez, M., Sánchez Dávila, K., & Contreras Julián, R. M.
Journal	Revista de Climatología – Ed. Especial Ciencias Sociales
Conclusion	Strengthening sanitation infrastructure through municipal management contributes to improving socio-sanitary conditions, indirectly enhancing community spirit and promoting social cohesion.
Author	Millán-Franco, M., Domínguez de la Rosa, L., Hombrados-Mendieta, I., & Gómez-Jacinto, L.
Journal	Itinerarios de Trabajo Social
Conclusion	It is demonstrated that neighborhood participation and community strengthening are strongly associated with a sense of community, which can be enhanced through legal sanitation processes and provision of common spaces.
Author	Vergara-Perucich, F., & Barramuño, M.
Journal	Revista AUS
Conclusion	In the case of the macro-camp Los Arenales, the legalization of land tenure strengthens community fabric and collective organization, promoting cohesion through territorial recognition.
Author	Del Campo, C., Betancur, M., & González, A.
Journal	Revista Hábitat y Sociedad

Conclusion The article highlights that land regularization generates processes of neighborhood identity, institutional trust, and community participation, which are key pillars of social cohesion in vulnerable contexts.

LPS is an essential tool for social transformation, as it promotes community cohesion, strengthens neighborhood organization, and facilitates sustainable urban integration in informal communities.

Discussion

The systematic review conducted allowed for the identification of significant findings regarding the relationship between legal and physical sanitation (LPS), quality of life, public health, and social cohesion in informal settlements (IS). Firstly, it was evident that access to basic services (BS), such as potable water and sanitation, constitutes a fundamental factor for improving living conditions in these contexts, serving as a prerequisite for ensuring a healthy and dignified environment.

The data analyzed in Table 1 indicate that LPS not only improves access to essential services but also contributes to property formalization and the reduction of conflicts between neighbors. This finding aligns with previous studies that assert that improving sanitation infrastructure increases resident satisfaction and directly benefits public health (Gómez-Villanueva et al., 2021). However, other research, such as that by León Asprilla Córdoba & Montenegro Martínez (2022), warns about the persistence of structural barriers that continue to limit access to health services, perpetuating inequalities even in those environments where advancements in sanitation have been made.

Regarding the effects on public health, the studies summarized in Table 2 show a direct relationship between the lack of potable water and adequate sanitation and the increase of both acute and chronic diseases. This situation reinforces the urgent need to design and implement comprehensive public policies that address these structural deficiencies from a community health perspective (Valencia, 2020; Rodríguez-Larraburu et al., 2024; Castillo, 2021).

Concerning the perception of social security, the information presented in Table 3 suggests that LPS tends to strengthen the links between communities and state institutions by improving perceptions of stability and legality in the living environment (Gómez-Villanueva et al., 2021). However, this positive perception is not homogeneous and may vary according to factors such as gender, income level, or age, highlighting the importance of designing inclusive policies that consider these demographic and social differences.

On the other hand, Table 4 reveals that LPS has a positive impact on social cohesion. Evidence shows that when formalization processes are accompanied by community participation and improvements in collective infrastructure, cooperation among neighbors is strengthened, which is essential for the sustainability of any urban intervention (Lozano, 2022; Ruiz Camus et al., 2023). In this regard, legal access to property appears as a key factor for the development of a more robust and organized social fabric (Dolores-Bautista & García-Guzmán, 2020). However, there is a significant lack of longitudinal studies that allow for understanding whether these effects are sustained over time or if they diminish in the face of new social and economic challenges.

Despite the relevant contributions of the analyzed studies, certain methodological limitations are acknowledged, which restrict the possibility of generalizing the results obtained. The geographical and population heterogeneity of the included research, along with the predominance of cross-sectional designs, complicates a deep understanding of the long-term effects of LPS. Additionally, the scarcity of disaggregated data by age group, gender, or other sociodemographic factors prevents a more detailed analysis of the differentiated impact of sanitation across various sectors within informal settlements.

Conclusions

The findings obtained in this systematic review underscore the importance of legal and physical sanitation (LPS) as a key factor in improving various quality of life indicators in informal settlements (IS). The analyzed studies show that access to basic services (BS)—such as potable water, sewage, and electricity—is directly related to improvements in public health, the perception of social security, and community cohesion. In particular, it is observed that property formalization and land use planning not only reinforce legal security but also create an environment where residents feel more supported by local institutions and more secure in their surroundings.

These results highlight the need to implement comprehensive public sanitation policies that do not solely focus on improving material conditions but also promote active community participation and the strengthening of

social fabric. Thus, LPS becomes a tool with multiplier effects, satisfying essential needs while contributing to the construction of more organized and cohesive communities.

This study fulfilled the objective of systematically evaluating the relationship between specific quality of life indicators—such as access to BS, public health, and social security—and the effects of the LPS process in IS. The reviewed evidence allows us to assert that sanitation interventions positively impact quality of life by reducing the risk of diseases, mitigating neighborhood conflicts, and fostering a more positive perception of the social and institutional environment.

As a systematic review article, this work offers a solid conceptual framework that enables comprehensive comparison and contrast of previous studies. This has allowed for a more robust and multidimensional analysis of the effects of sanitation in vulnerable contexts. However, significant gaps in the literature have also been identified, such as the lack of longitudinal studies assessing the sustained effects of LPS over time.

Furthermore, it is deemed necessary to deepen the analysis of the sociocultural and economic factors that influence the perception and use of formal services. Future studies could explore how community participation impacts the implementation and sustainability of sanitation programs, and how this process affects residents' subjective well-being, mental health, and sense of belonging.

Therefore, it is recommended that future research adopt longitudinal designs that allow for observing the sustained impact of LPS, also considering sociodemographic variables such as gender, age, and socioeconomic level. Similarly, it is pertinent to incorporate economic and psychological indicators, as well as promote participatory approaches that actively engage the community in all phases of the research process.

In conclusion, LPS should not be conceived solely as a technical or administrative intervention but as a catalyst for social transformation. Recognizing its potential to empower communities, reduce inequality gaps, and promote inclusive urban planning is crucial for achieving more resilient, sustainable, and equitable cities.

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