January 2020

Does sleep grow on trees? A longitudinal study to investigate potential prevention of insufficient sleep with different types of urban green space

Thomas E. Astell-Burt  
*University of Wollongong*, thomasab@uow.edu.au

Xiaoqi Feng  
*University of Wollongong*, xfeng@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers

Recommended Citation
Astell-Burt, Thomas E. and Feng, Xiaoqi, "Does sleep grow on trees? A longitudinal study to investigate potential prevention of insufficient sleep with different types of urban green space" (2020). *Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers*. 4651.  
https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/4651

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au
Does sleep grow on trees? A longitudinal study to investigate potential prevention of insufficient sleep with different types of urban green space

Abstract
2019 Introduction: To investigate association between urban green space and prevalent and incident cases of insufficient sleep (<6 h sleep per day). Methods: This longitudinal study examined the odds of prevalent and incident insufficient sleep in relation to indicators of total green space, tree canopy, open grass and other low-lying vegetation in the Sax Institute's 45 and Up Study (baseline 2006-2009; follow-up 2012-2015). Association between green space within 1.6 km road distances and insufficient sleep among 38,982 participants living in Sydney, Wollongong or Newcastle were analysed using multilevel logistic regressions adjusted for confounding. Results: Participants with more total green space had lower odds of prevalent insufficient sleep (e.g. ≥30% compared with 0-4% total green space odds ratio (OR) = 0.68, 95% credible interval (95%CI) = 0.53, 0.85). The odds of prevalent insufficient sleep were lower among participants with more tree canopy (e.g. ≥30% compared with 0-9% tree canopy OR = 0.78, 95%CI 0.69, 0.88). The odds of incident insufficient sleep were also lower with more tree canopy (e.g. ≥30% compared with 0-9% tree canopy OR = 0.87, 95%CI = 0.75, 0.99). There were no statistically significant associations between prevalent or incident insufficient sleep with open grass or other low-lying vegetation, nor incident sufficient sleep with total green space. Conclusions: Prioritising restoration and protection of urban tree canopy may help to promote population-wide prevention of insufficient sleep in middle-to-older aged adults.

Publication Details
Astell-Burt, T. & Feng, X. (2020). Does sleep grow on trees? A longitudinal study to investigate potential prevention of insufficient sleep with different types of urban green space. SSM - Population Health, 10

This journal article is available at Research Online: https://ro.uow.edu.au/sspapers/4651
Does sleep grow on trees? A longitudinal study to investigate potential prevention of insufficient sleep with different types of urban green space

Thomas Astell-Burt a,c,d,e,*, Xiaqi Feng a,b,c,e

a Population Wellbeing and Environment Research Lab (PowerLab), School of Health and Society, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW, 2522, Australia
b School of Public Health and Community Medicine, Faculty of Medicine, University of New South Wales, Sydney, NSW, 2052, Australia
c Menzies Centre for Health Policy, University of Sydney, Sydney, New South Wales Australia
d School of Public Health, Peking Union Medical College and The Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences, Beijing, China
e National Institute of Environmental Health, Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Beijing, China

A R T I C L E   I N F O

Keywords:
Urban green space
Tree canopy
Open grass
Sleep duration
Longitudinal study
Australia
45 and Up Study

A B S T R A C T

Introduction: To investigate association between urban green space and prevalent and incident cases of insufficient sleep (≤6 h sleep per day).

Methods: This longitudinal study examined the odds of prevalent and incident insufficient sleep in relation to indicators of total green space, tree canopy, open grass and other low-lying vegetation in the Sax Institute’s 45 and Up Study (baseline 2006-2009; follow-up 2012-2015). Association between green space within 1.6 km road distances and insufficient sleep among 38,982 participants living in Sydney, Wollongong or Newcastle were analysed using multilevel logistic regressions adjusted for confounding.

Results: Participants with more total green space had lower odds of prevalent insufficient sleep (e.g. 30% compared with 0-4% total green space odds ratio (OR) 0.68, 95% credible interval (95%CI) 0.53, 0.85). The odds of prevalent insufficient sleep were lower among participants with more tree canopy (e.g. 30% compared with 0-9% tree canopy OR 0.78, 95%CI 0.69, 0.88). The odds of incident sufficient sleep were also lower with more tree canopy (e.g. 30% compared with 0-9% tree canopy OR 0.87, 95%CI 0.75, 0.99). There were no statistically significant associations between prevalent or incident insufficient sleep with open grass or other low-lying vegetation, nor incident sufficient sleep with total green space.

Conclusions: Prioritising restoration and protection of urban tree canopy may help to promote population-wide prevention of insufficient sleep in middle-to-oldest aged adults.

Introduction

Insufficient sleep typically defined in the scientific literature as less than 6 h per day is a major public health problem affecting non-trivial percentages of the population (e.g. approximately 12% in Australia according to Adams et al., 2017). Insufficient sleep is associated with elevated risks of workplace injuries (Uehli et al., 2014), road traffic accidents (Connor et al., 2001), noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) (Cappuccio et al., 2010a, 2011), weight gain (Cappuccio et al., 2008; Patel & Hu, 2008) and premature mortality (Cappuccio et al., 2010b). Some of these consequences may be mediated by the effects of insufficient sleep on the immune system (Lange, Dimitrov, & Born, 2010) and glucose metabolism (Spiegel et al., 2009). Person-level characteristics like older age, lower educational attainment, lower income and unemployment are associated with insufficient sleep (Magee, Iverson, & Caputi, 2009), with the negative role of shift work a major concern in particular (Kecklund & Axelsson, 2016). Studies have also reported associations between sleep duration and the characteristics of neighbourhoods, including air pollution, light, and noise (Hale et al., 2019, pp. 77–84; Muzet, 2007; Sygna et al., 2014). In the search for scalable public health interventions for prevention of insufficient sleep, interest in and research into potential environmental determinants of sleep duration is rising (Hunter & Hayden, 2018; Johnson, Billings, & Hale, 2018).

One modifiable environmental exposure that holds potential for prevention of insufficient sleep is green space. Green space, which...
includes street trees, gardens, grass reserves, woodlands, forests and parks (Frumkin et al., 2017), may influence sleep duration through three domain pathways: (i) mitigation; (ii) restoration; and (iii) instoration (Markeyvych et al., 2017). On mitigation, studies report proximity to green space may help with abatement of air pollution (Abhijith et al., 2017) and noise annoyance (Dzhambov & Dimitrova, 2015). Evidence from sleep research suggests proximity to green space may help improve air quality and provide quieter environments that are likely to be an important, though not a sufficient, condition for optimal sleep duration (Halperin, 2014; Zanobetti et al., 2010). On restoration, many field experiments and epidemiological studies across several decades have reported contact with green space can lead to reduction of stress, restoration of cognitive capacities and protection of mental health (Hartig et al., 2014). Sleep studies point to the likely bi-directional relationship between insufficient sleep and mental ill-health (Alvaro, Roberts, & Harris, 2013). Finally, green spaces may help to build capacities (instoration) by providing preferential settings that motivate engagement in different types of outdoor physical recreation (Kredlowl et al., 2015) and by supplying spaces in which communities come together to foster greater cohesion (Jennings & Bankole, 2019) and reduce the prevalence of loneliness (e.g. Maas et al., 2009). Numerous studies suggest greater physical activity can support healthier sleep duration (Kredlowl et al., 2015). Some research has reported loneliness may lower sleep quality, potentially via a stress pathway (McHugh & Lawlor, 2013), though this association may also be bi-directional (Simon & Walker, 2018).

While these inter-connected pathways linking green space provision and sleep duration are plausible, there has been surprisingly little quantitative research so far. Some cross-sectional studies have assessed for potential effects of green space on the odds of insufficient sleep (Astell-Burt, Feng, & Kolt, 2013; Chum, O’Campo, & Matheson, 2015; Grigsby-Tousaint et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2018b). Three of these studies (Astell-Burt et al., 2013; Grigsby-Tousaint et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2018b) reported supportive evidence whereas the fourth found no convincing evidence of association (Chum et al., 2015). No longitudinal studies have been conducted. Among the three cross-sectional studies reporting affirmative findings, one found support specifically for benefits from tree canopy (Johnson et al., 2018b). Consideration of different types of green space provision for prevention of insufficient sleep is under-researched. Yet this is a highly policy-relevant issue, as urban and landscape planners seek evidence on which types of green space offer the strongest overall health gains and health economists aim to determine which types of green space are the most cost-effective to invest in for prevention of NCDs.

Accordingly, the purpose of our study was to advance the emerging scientific evidence linking green space and sleep duration in two important ways. First, we investigated the potential benefits of total green space provision on the odds of prevalent and incident cases of insufficient sleep. Second, we explored which types of green space may be key to these associations (if any).

**Method**

Four samples of participants were extracted from the Sax Institute’s 45 and Up Study (45 and Up Study Collaborators, 2008) with intent to analyse odds of prevalent and incident insufficient sleep in January 2019. Participants (n = 267,153) in the 45 and Up Study lived in New South Wales (NSW) and had been sampled randomly from the Department of Human Services (formerly Medicare Australia) enrolment database, which provides near complete coverage of the population, and filled in postal surveys at baseline (2006–2009) and follow-up (2012–2015). The baseline response rate was approximately 18%, which is low but relative risks from the 45 and Up Study have been shown to be comparable to those drawn from a representative population health survey (Mealing et al., 2010). Participants provided consent for follow-up, of which 147,000 responded. Participants aged 80 were oversampled. The sample was restricted to people living in the cities of Sydney, Wollongong or Newcastle at baseline (n = 110,223). This was further restricted to 38,982 participants that completed the follow-up survey and remained in the same local communities over time, as defined by Statistical Area 2s units containing 10,000 residents on average each.

Sleep was measured at baseline and follow-up with the question: “About how many hours in each 24 h day do you usually spend sleeping (including at night and naps)” Insufficient sleep was defined as <6 h sleep. The reference group was 6–10 h sleep using complete-outcome baseline sample of 38,982 participants. Participants who reported >10 h sleep were omitted from the sample, as correlations have been found previously between long sleeps and poor health, which may be attributable to reverse causation (Stamatakis & Punjabi, 2007). Among participants with non-affirmative baseline responses, a second binary outcome was derived based upon incidence of insufficient sleeps at follow-up in a complete-outcome sample of 31,961 participants, respectively.

Each of the two samples were linked to data on percentage green space availability within a 1.6 km (1 mile) network distance buffer around the centroid of each Mesh Block of residence. The Mesh Block is the smallest geographical scale available in Australia at typically 30 to 60 dwellings each. The 1.6 km network distance buffer was selected based upon published guidance (National Prevention Council, 2014). Four green space indicators were derived: (i) total green space; (ii) tree canopy; (iii) open grass without tree canopy; (iv) other low-lying vegetation. Green space data was sourced from Pitney Bowes Ltd in the form of a raster layer (‘Geovision’) in 2016. This data consisted of a 2-m raster surface classified into descriptive classes captured using machine learning and image classification processes across satellite imagery (8-band multispectral imagery captured by DigitalGlobe’s WorldView 3 satellite). Tree canopy included street trees and trees in parks (both deciduous and evergreen). Open grass included herbaceous areas. Open grass and low-lying vegetation were likely under-estimated in areas where they were beneath tree canopy. All four green space indicators were formatted as intervals in order to examine for potentially policy-relevant threshold effects. For total green space and open grass, these intervals were: 0–4%; 5–9%; 10–19%; 20–29%; 30%. For tree canopy and other low-lying vegetation, the intervals were slightly different due to small numbers (tree canopy 0–9%; 10–19%; 20–29%; 30%, low-lying vegetation 0–1%; 2–4%; 5%). These categories were based around existing green space standards, for example, the allocation of 10% of subdividable land to some form of green open space in Perth, Western Australia.

Multilevel logistic regressions estimated with Markov Chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) method (Browne, 2005; Raszbash et al., 2000) took into account clustering of participants within areas. Initial regressions assessed prevalence and incidence of insufficient sleep in relation to each green space indicator, adjusting for age and gender, followed by adjustment for social and economic markers of confounding associated with sleep duration and may also structure access to green space: annual household income; economic status (e.g. employed, retired); educational qualification; and couple status. Each of these markers of potential confounding were self-reported within the 45 and Up Study questionnaire. Weights were not used to address over-sampling of people aged 85 and older.

**Results**

The prevalence of insufficient sleep at baseline was 18.0% (Table 1). Incidence of insufficient sleep was 13.2%. Comparing participants with 30% to those with 0–4% total green space, prevalent and incident insufficient sleep were down by 7.4% and 1.6%, respectively. For participants with 30% tree canopy compared with 0–9% tree canopy, prevalent and incident insufficient sleep were 7.50% and 3.76% lower, respectively. Prevalent and incident insufficient sleep were 2.7% and
Table 1
Descriptive statistics of the study sample.

|                          | Total N (baseline) | % insufficient sleep prevalence | Total N (follow-up) | % insufficient sleep incidence |
|--------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| Total green space       | 38982              | 18.0                            | 31961               | 13.2                         |
| 0–4%                    | 631                | 23.3                            | 484                 | 14.1                         |
| 5–9%                    | 9250               | 18.7                            | 7599                | 13.3                         |
| 10–19%                  | 10400              | 18.7                            | 8455                | 13.8                         |
| 20–29%                  | 10491              | 18.0                            | 8602                | 13.1                         |
| 30%                     | 8110               | 15.9                            | 6821                | 12.5                         |
| Chi-square (p-value)    | 43.2 <0.001        | 6.6                             | 0.161               |                              |
| Tree canopy             |                    |                                 |                     |                              |
| 0–9%                    | 4051               | 22.8                            | 3131                | 15.4                         |
| 10–19%                  | 15086              | 19.3                            | 12172               | 14.0                         |
| 20–29%                  | 9827               | 16.8                            | 8172                | 12.9                         |
| 30%                     | 10015              | 15.3                            | 8486                | 11.6                         |
| Chi-square (p-value)    | 139.7 <0.001       | 37.9                            | <0.001              |                              |
| Low-lying vegetation    |                    |                                 |                     |                              |
| 0–4%                    | 25051              | 17.8                            | 20583               | 13.0                         |
| 5–9%                    | 12639              | 18.4                            | 10317               | 13.5                         |
| 10%                     | 1292               | 17.9                            | 1061                | 14.8                         |
| Chi-square (p-value)    | 1.7 0.438          | 3.8                             | 0.1                 |                              |
| Age group               |                    |                                 |                     |                              |
| 45–54y                  | 13695              | 16.4                            | 11370               | 14.0                         |
| 55–64y                  | 14301              | 17.7                            | 11769               | 12.6                         |
| 65–74y                  | 7105               | 18.8                            | 5770                | 13.0                         |
| 75y                     | 3881               | 21.4                            | 3052                | 13.7                         |
| Chi-square (p-value)    | 43.2 <0.001        | 10.3                            | 0.016               |                              |
| Gender                  |                    |                                 |                     |                              |
| Male                    | 18008              | 18.2                            | 14732               | 12.4                         |
| Female                  | 20974              | 17.9                            | 17229               | 13.9                         |
| Chi-square (p-value)    | 0.7 0.389          | 16.2                            | <0.001              |                              |
| Annual household income ($) |                  |                                 |                     |                              |
| 0–20k                   | 4095               | 24.6                            | 3086                | 16.1                         |
| 21–30k                  | 2458               | 20.0                            | 1967                | 13.2                         |
| 31–40k                  | 2505               | 17.3                            | 2072                | 14.5                         |
| 41–50k                  | 2663               | 18.0                            | 2183                | 14.7                         |
| 51–70k                  | 4540               | 18.4                            | 3706                | 12.6                         |
| >70k                    | 15693              | 15.3                            | 13295               | 11.4                         |
| Not determined          | 7027               | 19.6                            | 5652                | 15.3                         |
| Chi-square (p-value)    | 220.4 <0.001       | 92.5                            | <0.001              |                              |
| Education               |                    |                                 |                     |                              |
| None                    | 2238               | 27.5                            | 1622                | 18.6                         |
| School                  | 6394               | 20.8                            | 5067                | 15.8                         |
| High School             | 3684               | 18.3                            | 3010                | 14.2                         |
| Trade                   | 3271               | 20.5                            | 2602                | 14.4                         |
| Certificate or Diploma  | 8694               | 17.1                            | 7206                | 12.6                         |
| University              | 14363              | 15.1                            | 12189               | 11.3                         |
| Missing                 | 338                | 21.6                            | 265                 | 15.5                         |
| Chi-square (p-value)    | 271.2 <0.001       | 119.3                           | <0.001              |                              |

Table 1 (continued)
Nonsignificant economic and household characteristics.

| Economic status         | Total N (baseline) | % insufficient sleep prevalence | Total N (follow-up) | % insufficient sleep prevalence |
|-------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|
| Employed                | 23410              | 17.8                            | 19242               | 12.9                           |
| Retired                 | 12467              | 17.8                            | 10245               | 13.1                           |
| Unemployed              | 510                | 24.9                            | 383                 | 18.5                           |
| Unpaid work             | 541                | 16.1                            | 454                 | 14.1                           |
| Disabled                | 385                | 30.1                            | 269                 | 21.2                           |
| Homemaker               | 1232               | 16.6                            | 1028                | 15.4                           |
| Other                   | 437                | 22.2                            | 340                 | 17.4                           |
| Chi-square (p-value)    | 64.0 <0.001        | 36.2                            | <0.001              |                              |

3.1% higher among participants with 30% open grass compared with 0–4% open grass nearby, respectively. There was no pattern of prevalent or incident insufficient sleep discernible with respect to low-lying vegetation, so this exposure was not analysed any further.

Fully-adjusted odds ratios for each outcome in relation to total green space, tree canopy and open grass exposures are illustrated in Fig. 1. Participants in total green space intervals higher than 0–4% had lower odds of prevalent short sleep (Fig. 1A). For example, the odds ratio (OR) for participants with 5–9% total green space was 0.76 (95% credible interval (95%CI) 0.61, 0.95). Although the odds of incident insufficient sleep appeared to be lower at higher intervals of total green space, these associations were not statistically significant (e.g. 30% compared with 0–4% OR 0.90, 95%CI 0.67, 1.16).

The odds of prevalent insufficient sleep were lower among participants with tree canopy levels at every interval above 0–9% (e.g. 30% OR 0.78, 95%CI 0.69, 0.88, Fig. 1B). The odds of incident insufficient sleep were also lower with more tree canopy, albeit only statistically significantly at the 30% level (OR 0.87, 95%CI 0.75, 0.99). In contrast to the descriptive analyses, there was no statistically significant evidence of association between prevalent or incident insufficient sleep and the open grass exposure after adjusting for demographic and socioeconomic markers of confounding (Fig. 1C).

Discussion
Our study has enhanced this new area of research in two ways. Lower prevalent insufficient sleep among people with higher total green space available was confirmed. But when examining the data longitudinally, the correlation between total green space and incident insufficient sleep was not convincing. Lower odds of insufficient sleep were more consistently observed among people living near more tree canopy in both the cross-sectional and longitudinal tests. Neither open grass nor other low-lying vegetation were statistically significantly associated with prevalent or incident insufficient sleeps. This suggests urban greening strategies that prioritise increasing the availability of, and reducing inequalities in tree canopy coverage may help to support population-wide improvements in sleep. Some merits of our study include longitudinal lagged-effects design of the best green space data available and a large residentially stable sample to prevent bias from reverse causation through health-selective migration. Assessment of incident insufficient sleep in this study provided a more robust test of association with green space provision than had previously been achieved, with earlier work relying upon data of cross-sectional design (Astell-Burt et al., 2013; Chum et al., 2015).
A) Total Green Space (ref: 0-4%)

B) Tree Canopy (ref: 0-9%)

C) Open grass (ref: 0-4%)

Fig. 1. Odds of prevalent and incident short sleep durations in association with total (A) urban green space, (B) tree canopy, and (C) open grass: multilevel logistic regressions adjusted for confounding and estimated using Markov Chain Monte Carlo method. (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article.)

Grigsby-Toussaint et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2018b). This longitudinal design combined with the ability to differentiate between different types of green space afforded the identification of tree canopy, rather than any green space, as being associated with lower odds of incident insufficient sleep.

Limitations include self-report sleep duration data and restriction to an 45-y population. Our results cannot be generalised to people aged 44-y. However, the prevalence of insufficient sleep increases with age according to a recent nationally representative survey (Adams et al., 2017), which helps to explain why the prevalence of insufficient sleep in our study (18%) was above the national average for adults 18-y (12%). Potential underestimation in green space land-use, due to loss of provision in some areas over time could not be measured with the data available. Existing evidence suggests 35% of council areas in Australia have experienced some form of tree canopy loss while only 4% increased tree canopy coverage (Amati et al., 2017). The potential impacts on sleep duration of a change in local tree canopy cover and land-use over time is an important avenue for future research. It is also important to note that our data were limited in respect of open grass cover and other low-lying vegetation being under-estimated in areas where it was located underneath tree canopy.

The identification of tree canopy, rather than any green space per se, as potentially important for promoting healthier sleep duration may point towards mitigation and restoration as possible pathways, perhaps via exposure to increased biodiversity (Fuller et al., 2007), natural soundscapes (Ammerstedt et al., 2013), amelioration of heat islands (Ng et al., 2012), less psychological distress (Astell-Burt & Feng, 2019) and satisfying human preferences for natural settings with more complex vegetation (Harris et al., 2018). The lack of association between sleep and open grass after adjusting for confounding factors may suggest that pathways involving physical activity are less important in this particular case. However, the association between physical activity and open grass may be contingent upon whether those areas are in private ownership (i.e. back gardens) or are publicly accessible (e.g. parks and some sports ovals). Furthermore, research that examines potential pathways using relevant statistical models capable of discerning between serial and parallel mediation would be a prudent next step, as would replication studies and estimates of cost-effectiveness of potential investments in tree canopy. In conclusion, this is the first longitudinal study internationally to link residential green space and sleep duration, with the evidence pointing towards restoration and conservation of urban tree canopy specifically as a scalable public health intervention for prevention of insufficient sleep.

Ethical statements

The University of New South Wales HREC approved the 45 and Up Study and ethics approval for the analyses in this paper was awarded by the University of Wollongong HREC.

Acknowledgements

This study was supported by a National Health and Medical Research Council Boosting Dementia Research Leader Fellowship 1140317 (Dr Astell-Burt) and National Health and Medical Research Council Career Development Fellowship 1148792 (Dr Feng). Drs Astell-Burt and Feng are also supported by grant 1101065 from the National Health and Medical Research Council project and the Green Cities Fund - Hort Innovation Limited, with coinvestment from the University of Wollongong Faculty of Social Sciences, the University of Wollongong Global Challenges initiative, and the Australian Government project GC150005. The funding sources had no role in the design and conduct of the study; collection, management, analysis, and interpretation of the data; preparation, review, or approval of the manuscript; and the decision to submit the manuscript for publication. This research was completed using data collected through the 45 and Up Study (http://www.saxinstitute.org.au). The 45 and Up Study is managed by the Sax Institute in collaboration with major partner Cancer Council New South Wales (NSW) and partners the National Heart Foundation of Australia (NSW Division), NSW Ministry of Health, NSW Government Family & Community Services–Ageing, Carers, and the Disability Council NSW, and the Australian Red Cross Blood Service. We thank the many thousands of people participating in the 45 and Up Study.

References

45 and Up Study Collaborators. (2008). Cohort profile: The 45 and up study. International Journal of Epidemiology, 37(5), 941–947.

Abhiijith, K., Kumar, P., Gallagher, J., et al. (2017). Air pollution abatement performances of green infrastructure in open road and built-up street canyon environments-A review. Atmospheric Environment, 162, 71-86.
