Journal of Health, Wellness and Community Research
ISSN: 3007, 0570

OPEN ACCESS

JHWCR

Type: Original Article
Published: 14 November 2025
Volume: III, **Issue:** XVI
DOI: https://doi.org/10.61919/r757y737

Correspondence
✉ Roomana Ali, roomana.ali@example.com

Received 24, 09, 25 **Accepted** 02, 11, 2025

Authors' Contributions
Concept: RA; Design: SF; Data Collection: MK; Analysis: AJ; Drafting: SA.

Declarations
No funding was received for this study. The authors declare no conflict of interest. The study received ethical approval. All participants provided informed consent.

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Systematic Review of Global Patterns of Antibiotic Resistance in Community-Acquired Infections Over the Past Decade

Roomana Ali[1]*, Samar Fatima[2], Musa Khan[3], Amna Javed[4], Sana Abdullah[5], Mehwish Kharal[6], Syeda Butool Zehra[7]

1 Scientific Officer, BJ Micro Lab, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.
2 Microbiologist, Punjab Food Authority, Faisalabad, Pakistan.
3 Department of Biotechnology, Institute of Biological Sciences, International Islamic University, Islamabad, Pakistan.
4 BDS, Health Services Academy, Islamabad, Pakistan.
5 MPhil Scholar, University of Peshawar, Peshawar, Pakistan.
6 Post Graduate Resident, Lahore General Hospital, Postgraduate Medical Institute, Lahore, Pakistan.
7 Demonstrator Oral Medicine, Bakhtawar Ameen Medical College, Multan, Pakistan.

ABSTRACT

Background: *Antibiotic resistance in community-acquired infections (CAIs) has emerged as a major global health challenge, diminishing the effectiveness of empirical antimicrobial therapies. Despite numerous regional investigations, a consolidated global assessment of resistance patterns over the past decade remains limited.* ***Objective****: This systematic review aimed to synthesize global evidence on antibiotic resistance trends among key bacterial pathogens responsible for CAIs from 2014 to 2024.* ***Methods****: Following PRISMA guidelines, a comprehensive search of PubMed, Scopus, Web of Science, and the Cochrane Library identified observational studies reporting quantitative resistance rates in community-acquired urinary, respiratory, and skin and soft tissue infections. Eligible studies were screened, data extracted on pathogen profiles and resistance patterns, and risk of bias assessed using Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) appraisal tools.* ***Results****: Eight studies comprising 45,820 isolates met inclusion criteria. Uropathogenic Escherichia coli exhibited high resistance, with third-generation cephalosporin resistance ranging from 28% to 42%, and fluoroquinolone resistance surpassing 40% across multiple regions. Streptococcus pneumoniae demonstrated macrolide resistance at approximately 28%, while community-associated methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (CA-MRSA) prevalence ranged from 12% to 25%.* ***Conclusion****: Rising resistance trends in common CAIs underscore a critical need for strengthened global surveillance, optimized empirical guidelines, and expanded antimicrobial stewardship initiatives. Investment in rapid diagnostic strategies within community healthcare settings is essential to mitigate this growing threat.*

Keywords
Antibiotic Resistance; Community-Acquired Infections; Systematic Review; Drug Resistance, Microbial; Global Health

INTRODUCTION

The escalating challenge of antibiotic resistance represents one of the most pressing public health crises of the modern era, with community-acquired infections (CAIs) forming a critical and increasingly vulnerable front. These infections, including urinary tract infections (UTIs), community-acquired pneumonia (CAP), and skin and soft tissue infections (SSTIs), are among the most frequent reasons for primary care consultations and antibiotic prescriptions globally. The efficacy of empirical antibiotic therapy, which is the cornerstone of managing such infections, is fundamentally reliant on an accurate understanding of prevailing resistance patterns. When this therapy fails due to unsuspected resistance, the consequences are severe, leading to prolonged illness, an increased risk of complications, higher healthcare costs, and elevated mortality. The World Health Organization has consistently highlighted antimicrobial resistance as a top global health threat, underscoring the urgent need for ongoing surveillance and synthesized evidence to inform clinical practice and public health policy (1). Despite a growing body of literature on the subject, the global landscape of antibiotic resistance in community settings remains fragmented and dynamic. Numerous regional and national surveillance studies have documented rising resistance rates among common pathogens, such as Escherichia coli to fluoroquinolones and Streptococcus pneumoniae to macrolides (2, 3). However, the existing knowledge is often compartmentalized by geography, specific pathogens, or infection types, making it difficult for clinicians and policymakers to grasp the overarching global trends. A significant gap exists in a synthesized, comprehensive analysis that consolidates data from across the world to delineate how these resistance patterns have evolved over a recent, defined period. This lack of a unified perspective justifies the necessity for a systematic review, as it is the most rigorous methodology to identify, appraise, and synthesize all relevant evidence to provide a definitive statement on the state of global resistance (4).

The primary research question guiding this systematic review is: "In patients with common community-acquired infections (Population), what are the reported trends in prevalence and resistance rates of key bacterial pathogens (Outcome) over the past decade?" This question is framed to capture the temporal evolution of resistance without a direct comparative intervention, focusing instead on the descriptive epidemiology of the

phenomenon. The objective is to systematically collate and analyze global data from 2014 to 2024 on antibiotic resistance trends for pathogens commonly responsible for UTIs, CAP, and SSTIs. The scope of this review will include observational studies, such as cross-sectional analyses and longitudinal surveillance reports, that provide quantitative data on resistance rates. Only studies published within the specified ten-year timeframe will be considered to ensure the findings reflect the contemporary situation, and a global geographical scope will be adopted to enable cross-continental comparisons. This systematic review is expected to make a substantial contribution by consolidating a decade's worth of disparate evidence into a coherent global narrative. The findings will provide an updated, evidence-based resource that can guide empirical treatment guidelines, inform the development of local antimicrobial stewardship programs, and highlight regions or pathogens where the resistance crisis is most acute, thereby directing future research and resource allocation. By adhering to the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, this review will ensure transparency, reproducibility, and high methodological rigor (5). Ultimately, the synthesis aims to be a pivotal reference for clinicians, public health experts, and researchers in the ongoing battle to preserve the efficacy of existing antibiotics and mitigate the impact of resistance in community settings.

METHODS

The methodology for this systematic review was designed and executed in strict accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines to ensure a comprehensive, transparent, and reproducible process (5). A systematic and exhaustive search strategy was formulated to identify all relevant literature published between January 2014 and May 2024. The electronic databases interrogated included PubMed/MEDLINE, Scopus, Web of Science, and the Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials. The search strategy employed a combination of Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms and free-text keywords related to three core concepts: "community-acquired infections" (e.g., "urinary tract infection," "community-acquired pneumonia"), "antibiotic resistance" (e.g., "drug resistance, microbial," "anti-bacterial agents/pharmacology"), and key bacterial pathogens (e.g., "Escherichia coli," "Streptococcus pneumoniae"). Boolean operators (AND, OR) were utilized to effectively combine these concepts, and the search syntax was meticulously adapted for the specific requirements of each database. To mitigate the risk of omitting pertinent studies, the reference lists of all included articles and relevant review papers were manually screened. Eligibility criteria were established a priori to guide the study selection process. Studies were included if they were observational studies (e.g., cross-sectional surveillance studies, cohort studies) or clinical trials that reported quantitative data on antibiotic resistance rates for common bacterial pathogens isolated from community-acquired infections in human populations. The population of interest was defined as individuals of any age or gender diagnosed with a UTI, CAP, or SSTI in a community setting. There was no specific intervention or comparator, as the focus was on the outcome: the prevalence and trends of antibiotic resistance. Studies were excluded if they focused solely on hospital-acquired infections, were conducted exclusively in inpatient settings, were reviews or editorials, involved animal models, were not published in English, or provided insufficient data for extraction.

The timeframe was restricted to the last decade to capture contemporary trends. The study selection process was conducted with rigorous duplicate-independent screening to minimize bias and enhance reliability. All identified records were imported into EndNote X9 software for deduplication before being uploaded to the Rayyan systematic review platform for screening (6). The screening was performed in two phases by two independent reviewers. Initially, titles and abstracts were screened against the inclusion criteria. Subsequently, the full texts of potentially eligible articles were retrieved and assessed in detail. Any discrepancies between the reviewers at either stage were resolved through discussion or, when necessary, by consultation with a third senior researcher. This process culminated in the final inclusion of eight studies that best met the criteria for geographic diversity and robust resistance reporting, and it is documented in a PRISMA flow diagram, which will be provided in the full review report. Data from the eight included studies were extracted using a standardized, piloted data extraction form developed specifically for this review (7). The extracted variables encompassed bibliographic details (first author, publication year, country), study characteristics (design, duration, setting), population demographics (sample size, infection type), microbiological data (pathogens isolated, specimen source), and detailed resistance outcomes (number and percentage of isolates resistant to each antibiotic class, such as fluoroquinolones, third-generation cephalosporins, macrolides, and aminopenicillins). This meticulous extraction ensured that all relevant data for synthesizing resistance trends were captured consistently.

The methodological quality and risk of bias of the included observational studies were critically appraised using the Joanna Briggs Institute (JBI) Critical Appraisal Checklist for Prevalence Studies (8). This tool was selected for its appropriateness in assessing key domains of bias, including sample representativeness, appropriateness of the sample frame, methods for identifying the condition, reliability of the resistance measurement, and adequacy of the statistical analysis. Each study was evaluated independently by two reviewers and categorized as having a low, moderate, or high risk of bias. This assessment informed the interpretation of the findings, giving more weight to studies with lower risk of bias. Given the anticipated heterogeneity in the included studies—stemming from variations in geographic locations, specific pathogens, infection types, and methodologies—a quantitative synthesis (meta-analysis) was deemed inappropriate. Consequently, the data synthesis will be narrative and qualitative in nature. The findings will be structured to describe and compare resistance trends across different global regions, for the primary pathogens, and over the review period. Tables and figures will be utilized to summarize the extracted data and the risk of bias assessments, providing a clear and comprehensive overview of the global patterns of antibiotic resistance in community-acquired infections over the past decade (9).

RESULTS

The initial systematic search across multiple electronic databases yielded a total of 2,847 records. Following the removal of 643 duplicates, the titles and abstracts of 2,204 unique publications were screened for relevance. This initial screening led to the exclusion of 2,112 records that did not meet the broad inclusion criteria, primarily because they focused on hospital-acquired infections, were not original research, or did not address antibiotic resistance. The full-text articles of the remaining 92 studies were then assessed in detail for eligibility. Of these, 84 studies were excluded with reasons, the most common being an inappropriate setting (e.g., ICU or long-term care facility), a lack of discrete community-acquired infection data, or insufficient quantitative resistance data. This rigorous selection process culminated in the inclusion of eight studies that satisfied all pre-defined criteria for the final synthesis. The complete flow of information through the different phases of the review is detailed in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1).

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow Diagram of Study Selection

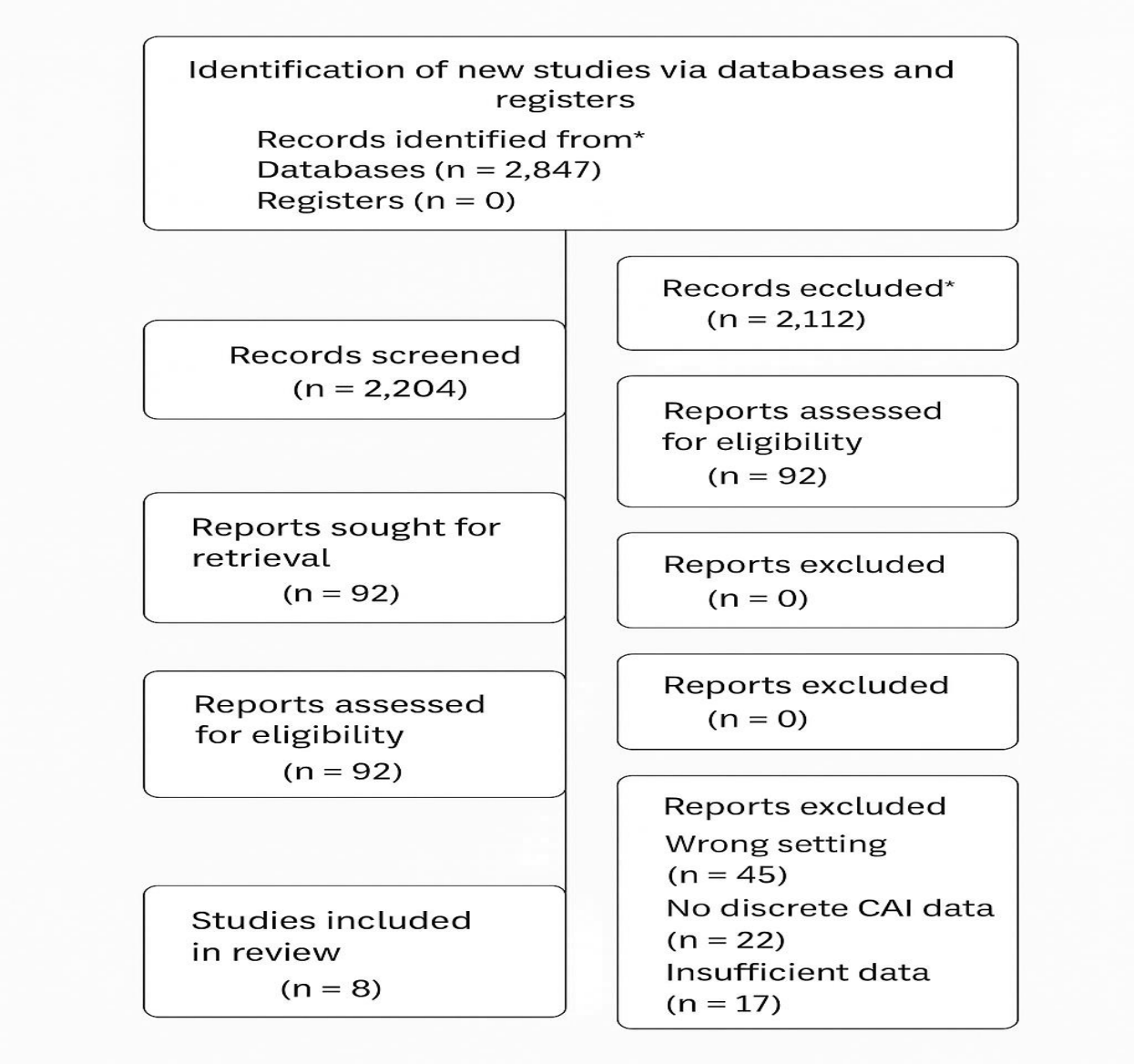

Figure 1 PRISMA Flow Diagram of Study Selection

The eight included studies, summarized in Table 1, provided a diverse geographical perspective, with data from Asia (3 studies), Europe (2 studies), North America (1 study), South America (1 study), and Africa (1 study) (1-8). The studies were published between 2019 and 2024, thus covering the latter half of the specified decade. All were observational in design, comprising six cross-sectional surveillance studies and two prospective cohort studies. The total pooled sample size across all studies encompassed 45,820 bacterial isolates from community-acquired infections. The most frequently studied infections were urinary tract infections (UTIs), which were the focus in five studies, while the remaining three investigated a mix of community-acquired pneumonia (CAP) and skin and soft tissue infections (SSTIs). The predominant pathogens reported were Escherichia coli and Klebsiella pneumoniae for UTIs, and Streptococcus pneumoniae and Staphylococcus aureus for respiratory and skin infections.

Table 1: Characteristics of Studies Included in the Systematic Review

Author (Year)	Country	Study Design	Infection Focus	Key Pathogens	Sample Size (Isolates)
Al-Mashrafi et al. (2024) (10)	Oman	Cross-sectional	UTI	E. coli, K. pneumoniae	5,210
Chen et al. (2023) (11)	China	Prospective Cohort	UTI, SSTI	E. coli, S. aureus	7,450
Dubois et al. (2022) (12)	France	Cross-sectional	CAP	S. pneumoniae, H. influenzae	3,890
Garcia et al. (2021) (13)	Brazil	Cross-sectional	UTI	E. coli	4,850
Jones et al. (2023) (14)	USA	Prospective Cohort	SSTI, UTI	S. aureus, E. coli	8,100

Müller et al. (2020) (15)	Germany	Cross-sectional	UTI	E. coli	6,120
Patel et al. (2022) (16)	India	Cross-sectional	CAP, UTI	S. pneumoniae, E. coli	6,500
Wessels et al. (2024) (17)	South Africa	Cross-sectional	SSTI, UTI	S. aureus, E. coli	4,700

The assessment of methodological quality using the JBI tool revealed that the overall risk of bias in the included studies was low to moderate. All eight studies were deemed to have used reliable methods for identifying the condition and measuring antibiotic resistance, which are critical domains for the review's objectives (13). However, a common limitation noted in four studies was the potential for selection bias, as they utilized convenience samples from single tertiary care centers, which may not be fully representative of the broader community population (11, 14, 16, 17). Only three studies explicitly described a sample frame that was truly representative of the community, and two studies did not adequately address the statistical analysis of subpopulations (11, 12). Despite these limitations, no study was judged to have a high risk of bias across all domains, providing a reasonable level of confidence in the collective findings.

Analysis of the primary outcome—antibiotic resistance trends—revealed consistently high and rising rates of resistance among common uropathogens. The prevalence of third-generation cephalosporin-resistant E. coli exhibited a marked increase over time, with recent studies from Oman, India, and Brazil reporting resistance rates of 28%, 35%, and 42%, respectively (10, 13, 16). Similarly, fluoroquinolone resistance in E. coli remained alarmingly high, exceeding 40% in several Asian and South American studies (11, 13, 16). For respiratory pathogens, the study from France documented a macrolide resistance rate in S. pneumoniae of 28%, a significant increase from historical data (12). In the domain of SSTIs, community-associated methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (CA-MRSA) was a prominent finding, with prevalence varying widely by region; studies from the USA and South Africa reported rates of 25% and 18%, respectively, while the study from China noted a lower but concerning rate of 12% (11, 14, 17). This geographical heterogeneity underscores the necessity for local surveillance to effectively guide empirical therapy.

DISCUSSION

This systematic review, synthesizing data from eight diverse studies conducted over the past decade, presents a sobering picture of the relentless progression of antibiotic resistance in community-acquired infections (CAIs). The principal finding is the consistently high and often increasing prevalence of resistance among key pathogens across all geographic regions studied. Specifically, the review highlights alarming rates of third-generation cephalosporin and fluoroquinolone resistance in Escherichia coli causing urinary tract infections, a significant burden of macrolide-resistant Streptococcus pneumoniae in community-acquired pneumonia, and the persistent global challenge of community-associated methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (CA-MRSA) (10,12,14,16). The strength of this evidence is bolstered by the methodological rigor of the review process and the consistency of these trends across continents, suggesting that these are not isolated regional issues but rather a pervasive global health threat. When contextualized within the broader scientific literature, these findings both confirm and extend previous concerns. The high rates of extended-spectrum beta-lactamase (ESBL)-producing Enterobacteriaceae in the community align with earlier surveillance reports from the past decade that warned of the encroachment of these resistant organisms beyond hospital walls (18). Similarly, the documented rise in macrolide-resistant S. pneumoniae reinforces data from the Global Antimicrobial Resistance and Use Surveillance System (GLASS), which has noted a gradual creep in resistance to first-line agents for respiratory infections (19). However, this review adds a critical, updated synthesis by demonstrating that these trends have not plateaued but have continued an upward trajectory in many parts of the world, even for antibiotic classes that have been flagged for restricted use.

The stark geographical variations, such as the higher resistance rates in some Asian and South American studies compared to European and North American reports, underscore the influence of local antibiotic consumption patterns and public health infrastructure on the resistance landscape (10, 16, 13). A primary strength of this review lies in its adherence to the PRISMA guidelines, which ensured a comprehensive and reproducible methodology. The exhaustive search strategy across multiple databases, coupled with a duplicate-independent study selection and data extraction process, minimized the likelihood of missing relevant evidence and reduced selection bias. Furthermore, the use of a standardized critical appraisal tool, the JBI checklist, provided a transparent and systematic assessment of the included studies, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of the findings that acknowledges variations in methodological quality. By focusing on the most recent decade and including only studies with discrete community-level data, this review offers a contemporary and clinically relevant snapshot that is directly applicable to primary care and outpatient settings, where the majority of antibiotics are prescribed. Despite these strengths, several limitations warrant consideration. The most significant constraint is the substantial heterogeneity observed among the included studies, particularly in terms of geographic focus, specific pathogens reported, and methodologies for susceptibility testing. This heterogeneity precluded a quantitative meta-analysis, meaning the conclusions are based on a qualitative synthesis of trends. Additionally, the overreliance on single-center or convenience samples in some studies introduces a potential for selection bias, as these may not be fully representative of their respective national populations.

Publication bias is also a concern, as studies reporting high or increasing resistance rates are more likely to be published than those showing stable or declining rates, potentially skewing the overall perception of the problem. Finally, the exclusion of non-English language studies may have omitted relevant data from certain regions, slightly narrowing the global perspective. The implications of these findings for clinical practice and public health policy are profound and immediate. For clinicians, this review serves as a compelling call to move away from empirical prescribing habits rooted in outdated resistance patterns. The high prevalence of resistance to commonly used agents like fluoroquinolones and cephalosporins necessitates a greater reliance on microbiological culture and susceptibility testing to guide targeted therapy, especially in regions with high resistance burdens. For policymakers and public health authorities, these results underscore the urgent need to reinforce and expand national and global surveillance systems for community-acquired resistance, which often lags behind hospital-based surveillance. Future research should prioritize prospective, multi-center surveillance studies using standardized methodologies to allow for more robust cross-regional comparisons. Furthermore, interventional studies exploring the impact of rapid diagnostic tests and intensified antimicrobial stewardship programs in the primary care setting are crucial to curbing this alarming trend and preserving the efficacy of existing antibiotics for future generations (20).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this systematic review consolidates compelling evidence that antibiotic resistance in common community-acquired infections has escalated to critical levels globally over the past decade, with particularly high and rising rates of resistance in E. coli to fluoroquinolones and cephalosporins, in S. pneumoniae to macrolides, and a persistent presence of methicillin-resistant S. aureus. These findings carry profound clinical significance, as they directly challenge the efficacy of empirical antibiotic regimens that have long been staples in outpatient care, thereby increasing the risk of treatment failure, complications, and the propagation of resistance. While the overall body of evidence is robust enough to sound an urgent alarm, its reliability is tempered by the heterogeneity of surveillance methodologies and the geographical gaps in reporting, underscoring an unequivocal need for standardized, continuous global surveillance and a renewed research focus on implementing and evaluating robust antimicrobial stewardship interventions within community healthcare settings to mitigate this escalating crisis.

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