

Parks and Recreation: Mockumentary or Essential Health Partner?



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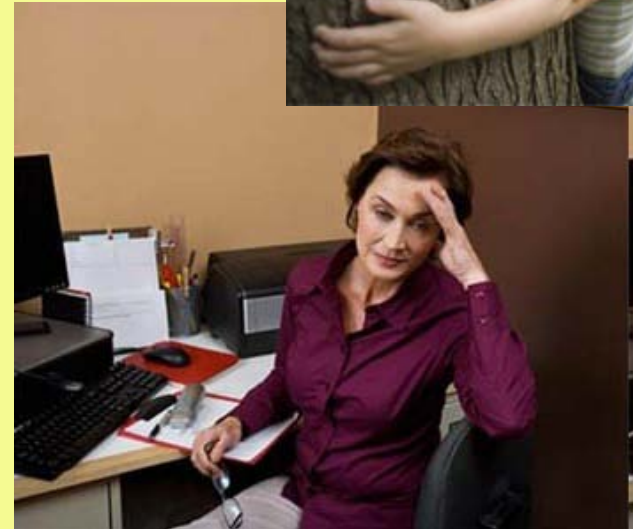
Public Parks and Active Living: A Review of the Evidence



- Highlight findings from a Research Synthesis conducted for *Active Living Research*
 - http://www.activelivingresearch.org/files/Synthesis_Mowen_Feb2010.pdf
- Discuss challenges/opportunities for enhancing physical activity and health through parks

What got us here?

- Increased obesity and stress, coupled with decreased physical activity and contact with nature.
- Many stakeholders perceive that park and recreation services (PRS) are key in addressing these concerns.
- Why is that? What is our unique contributions that separate us from other opportunities?



The Health Potential of Today's Park and Recreation Services (PRS) is Considerable

- PRS are typically free and open access - available to a wide cross-section of the population
- PRS can provide unique features that inspire intrinsically enjoyable activity as well as “stealth” activity
- PRS can provide a forum for social interaction and nature connection, which can reduce stress and enhance overall well-being

Our Capacity and Reach

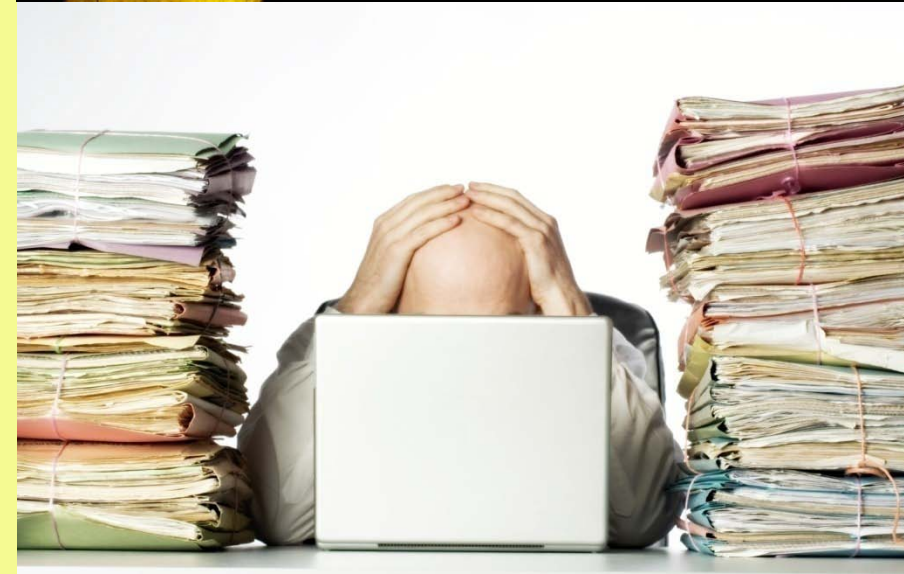
- **Park and recreation services have enormous capacity to address the nation's physical inactivity crisis...**
 - Over 9,000 local public park and recreation departments with more than 108,000 public park facilities and 65,000 indoor facilities.
 - The total are covered by urban parkland in the U.S. exceeds 1 million acres.
 - Over the past decade or so, PRS have “returned” to health as a key rationale for their existence.

But what do we really know about the connection between PRS and Health?

- A need for scientific evidence to inform decision-making related to health improvement (moving beyond faith)
- Public health's interest in the built environment grew in the late 1990's and early 2000's
 - (Howard Frumkin's landmark article – *Beyond Toxicity: Human Health and the Natural Environment*)
- Institutionalized support for research that documents the health contributions of PRS

Evidence and Research Overload!

- The rapid growth of studies linking parks to physical activity and health has been remarkable
- Much of the research provides evidence of the “obvious” and some relationships are tenuous (weak)
- However, the evidence generally illustrates positive contributions of parks in shaping health.



What Do We Know?

Boiling Down the Data

- Results from a Research Synthesis conducted for *Active Living Research - RWJF*
- This Synthesis will be updated in two years to keep current with the expanding evidence
- Other Syntheses are being completed as well... e.g., *Economics of Parks and Greenspace, Disparities*



Active Living Research

Building the evidence to prevent childhood obesity and support active communities



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

1. PRS Visitation and Use Levels

“The majority of Americans visit their local parks and have participated in at least one outdoor recreation activity on an annual basis”

- Three out of four adults have visited a local park and nine out of ten have participated in at least one outdoor activity
 - Some of these national studies are dated
 - A majority of participants are occasional users (10 days or less)
- Mixed evidence concerning the activity levels within parks; self reports suggest active use, objective measures suggest sedentary use.

2. The Proximal Principle...

“Increased park proximity is associated with higher levels of park use and physical activity across a variety of populations, particularly youth”

- The strongest evidence is between park proximity and use, physical activity... (8 out of 13 articles showed positive associations)
- Perceived and objective access is related to recommended levels of activity and regular walking among youth
- Park proximity also related to more frequent use of multiple recreation settings among youth

3. Park Capacity and Size

“Having more parks and more park area (e.g., acreage) within a community is associated with higher physical activity levels”

- More recreational facilities and green space were related to higher levels of walking in Portland, OR
- A six city study of adolescent females found that each additional park within a ½ mile resulted in 17 more minutes of non-school, MVPA over a 6 day period.
- Total park area within a community was a predictor of youth physical activity, but individual park size was not a factor in predicting park-based activity levels.

4. Social and Environmental Justice Concerns

“Lower-income and racial/ethnic populations have limited access to parks and recreational facilities. These disparities partially explain lower physical activity levels”

- “Deprivation Amplification” Hypothesis – Resources are distributed inequitably and this results in poorer health status (lower self-reported physical activity levels for youth).
- One study found that youth with seven recreation facilities were 26% more likely to report being active than youth living in neighborhoods without any recreation facilities.

5. Activity-Promoting Park Features

“Within parks, people tend to be more physically active on trails, at playgrounds, and at sports facilities”

- Park spaces with soccer fields, tennis, basketball, volleyball courts, and playgrounds associated with higher MVPA overall park energy expenditures (EE).
- Parks with paved trails were 26 times more likely to be used for physical activity than parks without paved trails.
- Park activity areas with restrooms and drinking fountains had higher number of park users and greater total EE.

6. Aesthetics, Condition, and Safety

“Perceived park aesthetics, condition, and safety may be associated with park visitation and physical activity levels within park”

- Jury is still out concerning the precise role of these characteristics on park use and physical activity levels.
- Fear of crime can be a barrier to park use, but one study found that, while parks were perceived to be safer after renovations, these perceptions were unrelated to visitation levels.
- The condition of basketball courts positively related to use and activity levels, but condition of green spaces was negatively related to use (and unrelated to physical activity levels).

7. Organized Park Programs and Supervision

“Organized park programs and supervision may increase use of parks and playgrounds and may increase physical activity, particularly among youth”

- LA Parks study found that parks with a greater number of supervised facilities had higher observed visitation levels.
- But, another study in Tampa Bay and Chicago found that visitors in unstructured recreation were more likely to engage in MVPA than visitors in structured recreation.

8. Park Renovations and Physical Activity Levels

“Park renovations can increase use of certain types of facilities (playgrounds, skateparks) and increase vigorous activity among children.”

- Very few rigorous evaluations of park renovations upon subsequent use and physical activity levels
- Renovated playgrounds associated with higher use among adults and children; and higher levels of recess MVPA, particularly for younger children.
- Another study of system-wide park improvements found that, with the exception of skateparks, visitation and use frequency decreased after the improvements were made.

Gaps in Our “Knowledge”

- On-going (quasi-experimental) studies that incorporate objective measures of physical activity in their design.
- Studies examining the impact of funding (amount and structure) on availability of facilities, park visitation, and physical activity
- Studies integrating physical health, mental health, and physical activity indicators into park participation, access, promotions, etc.



Gaps in Our “Knowledge” (cont.)

- National and State Level Surveillance of Park Use and PBPA linked to changes in park capacity, programs, & policies
- Examining the role of specific park features, design, and conditions on use and physical activity levels.
- Studies administrative policies, such as program supervision, budget cuts, staffing levels, promotions on visitation



Current Challenges Facing PRS...

- Funding – Budget Allocations, Funding Raids
- Maintaining and Modernizing Infrastructure
- Expanding the Reach of our Services
- Sustaining a Skilled Workforce
- Positioning (i.e., Branding) and Credibility

“To Conclude...”



Conclusion:

- Generally positive associations between a variety of park characteristics and health; particularly with respect to park proximity/availability and physical activity
 - A large number of nearby parks promote active living
- Early evidence suggests that park conditions, maintenance, policies, programs may influence park use and PA. More evidence should be forthcoming over the next few years, **but we can still play a role in shaping that research.**
- Efficacy of park investments are unclear with respect to health improvement, future research should address these knowledge gaps.



Thank You!!



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Feel Free to Drop Me a Line!

