

PUBLIC PARK USE & LOW INCOME NEIGHBOURHOODS

PUBLIC PARKS: AVAILABILITY, TYPES & QUALITY

Research suggests that public parks are available in low-income neighbourhoods in most areasⁱ, although some studies have indicated there are a slightly higher number of public resources available for physical activity found in higher-income neighbourhoods^{ii iii}.

Research has shown that both the type and quality of public parks are just as important as the number of parks available to residents.^{iv} Public parks in low-income neighbourhoods tend to suit individuals of all ages, such as parks with playgrounds and parks with trails, while public parks in high-income neighbourhoods tend to have more specific physical activity resources, such as tennis courts featured in parks^v. Differences in the quality of parks were identified, with reported complaints and dissatisfactions most often associated with parks in the low-income neighbourhood.^{vi} It should be noted that studies which focused on the number or availability of public parks failed to consider type or quality of these facilities.

FACTORS THAT ENCOURAGE & DISCOURAGE PARK USAGE

Discourage:

- Low walkability
- Lack of physical activity features (i.e. basketball courts) and amenities (i.e. lighting)
- Frequent reports on incivilities (i.e. litter, broken glass, alcohol use, graffiti/tagging, lack of grass and

overgrown grass, vandalism, traffic noise, unattended dog, dog refuse)^{vii viii}.

Encourage:

- Safety in neighbourhoods
- Lack of incivilities
- High street connectivity
- High walkability
- Visual appeal in both parks and neighbourhoods

According to a Canadian study conducted in 2008, park features such as paved trail, unpaved trail, path, open space, wooded area, meadow, water area, playground, ball diamond, soccer pitch, tennis court, basketball court, and pool are more likely to be used for physical activity than amenities such as drinking fountain, picnic area, restroom, table, bench, trash can, shelter or bike rack.

Of all the park facilities, trails have the most influence on usage as parks with a paved trail, unpaved trail, or wooded area were more than 7 times as likely to be used for physical activity as were parks without these facilities^{ix}.

In addition, the public's perceived benefits of park usage also have an impact on usage of local parks^x. A 2008 study gathered the perspectives of citizens across Ontario to investigate their individual, families and community's park usage and perceived benefits. Relaxation and peace, place for kids to go to, exercise/fitness, green/open spaces, and a place to improve health were among the associated benefits perceived by the participants.

PROXIMITY TO PARKS

According to a Canada-wide study^{xi}, 86% of the Canadians reported living within walking distance to a public park or playground while 77% of them reported they have used the facilities. In Ontario, findings are similar. 85% of Ontarians reported living within walking distance to a public park, playground and open space and 75% of those Ontarians (8 in every 10 household) use public parks. In the survey, they have personally indicated they have used the parks either frequently or in rare occasion^{xii}. It is important to note that researchers of the study did not define 'walking distances' and the distribution of those who use the parks frequently and occasionally.

Interestingly, a Canadian study has revealed that children living within 1 km of a park playground were almost five times more likely to have healthy weight than children without public playgrounds.^{xiii}

CONCLUSIONS

Several studies have shown there is no clear relationship between income and the location of facilities^{xiv xv xvi xvii}. However, given what is known about the reported condition of public parks in low income neighbourhoods, it can be suggested that merely building parks in these areas may be insufficient^{xviii xix}. It is critical to provide ongoing support for maintenance and civic improvements. There is a great need for policy makers and political leaders to collaborate with communities and advocacy groups to improve both quality and quantity of public parks before addressing issues of park usage and physical activity.

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Research Methods: Literature review

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^{xvi} Macintyre et al. 2010

^{xvii} Moore et al., 2008

^{xviii} Lee et al., 2005

^{xix} Pearce & Maddison, 2011