

Society of Behavioral Medicine Position Statement on supporting robust, well-designed, safe, and accessible **community parks**

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The Society of Behavioral Medicine encourages legislation and other policies, such as the Community Parks Revitalization Act, that support robust, well-designed, safe, and accessible community parks.

Rationale

Community parks beautify the American landscape and enrich our outdoor experience. Serving urban, suburban, and rural residents alike, parks invite people to take a break, stroll, jog, canoe, bike, skate, paddle boat, picnic, play sports, or jump on a teeter-totter. By engaging people in outdoor activities, parks deepen our appreciation for nature and nurture a physicality integral to mental and physical health. Similar to libraries and other civic institutions, local parks are free, open to all, and represent an egalitarian ideal in which Americans take great pride.

Considerable research shows that people of all ages and across all races and ethnicities are more active when they can access parks 1-2. One researcher looking at physical activity levels among young female adolescents, found that the greater the number of parks within a half-mile radius of the girls' homes, the greater the physical activity level: 17 additional minutes of physical activity per park 3. Park use also facilitates a healthy weight status 4. Looking at increases in body mass index (a measure of fatness) among children ages 9 to 18, one investigator discovered that children with increased access to parkland had smaller body mass index increases 4.

The Problem

While community parks foster healthy behaviors, funding for them has decreased. Nationally, park infrastructures are deteriorating. This pattern is particularly troubling in light of the obesity epidemic. The prevalence of obesity has nearly doubled in children and tripled in adolescents in the past few decades 5, and physical inactivity is a likely cause 6-8. Less than 50% of children, 8% of adolescents, and 5% of adults meet physical activity recommendations 9.

Parks that Help

Not all parks are alike and certain features facilitate use and physical activity.



Physical Features

Parks and playgrounds that offer multiple uses, such as walking trails, sports fields, and basketball courts, attract more visitors, and are more likely to be used for physical activity ¹⁰⁻¹¹ than those that offer few features. One study found that parks with paved trails were 26 times more likely to be used for physical activity than parks without paved trails ¹⁰. Plus, people who visit the multiple use parks engage in higher levels of moderate to vigorous physical activity ¹²⁻¹³. When parks are renovated, by updating or replacing play equipment, adding such features as playing fields, nighttime lighting, and landscape improvements such as ponds and flowers, more community members use them ¹⁴⁻¹⁵. After a New Orleans community opened a schoolyard outside of school hours and made it safe by providing supervision before and after school, 84% more children were found to be active in the intervention neighborhood ¹⁶. They also found that children were more likely to play on the courts and play equipment, such as slides, climbers and swings, than in open grassy areas ¹⁷. One researcher, looking at 20 school yards, located in a large city in Ohio, some of which had been renovated and some of which had not, learned that more children and adults used the renovated yards. Among boys, those playing in the renovated parks engaged in more vigorous physical activity ¹⁸.

Programming

Parks that offer recreational programs attract more park users. Among 30 southern California parks studied, those that provided organized activities were used more often than those that did not ¹⁹. Typically, parks in low-income neighborhoods provide more programming, such as before- and after-school activities, than parks in higher income neighborhoods ²⁰. However, fees associated with such activities, can minimize participation ²¹⁻²².

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Location

At both a local and national level, it appears that in many urban areas with higher poverty rates, there are shorter distances and better access to parks. However, they are often less utilized due to the perceptions of being unsafe or not well-equipped²³. Thus, the benefit of access are offset by these characteristics of the social environment²⁴. In contrast, in rural areas, poorer communities have less access to parks²⁵. From a policy perspective, these findings suggest that the focus in urban areas should be park amenities and safety, while in high poverty rural communities there is a need to provide more parks in order to promote physical activities that can impact the high rates of obesity.

Recommendations

- * Increase federal funding for community parks
- * If possible, have community parks offer multiple uses and landscape and design features that are inviting
- * Through lighting, supervision and other means ensure that parks and playgrounds are safe and supervised
- * Ensure that parks offer free programming to increase usage
- * Address park amenities and safety in urban areas and park access in rural communities

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