

POLICY BRIEF | July 2011



Disparities in Park Space by Race and Income

INTRODUCTION

Parks offer a gateway to active living — a traffic-free space for children and adults to run, bike, engage with friends and have fun. Parks also play a critical role in the battle against obesity. In the United States, two-thirds of adults and nearly one-third of children are overweight or obese,¹ yet nearly half of Americans fail to exercise at the level recommended by the U.S. Surgeon General — an hour a day for children and 30 minutes most days for adults.²

Research suggests park access influences physical activity.

Researchers have found that people who live within a half-mile of a park report exercising five or more times per week more often than those who lived further away.³ It makes sense. Those who live close to a park have a place to integrate physical activity into their daily routine. And active living is part of good health.⁴

A new study has found that, in the Los Angeles region, there are significant disparities in access to parks. This policy brief highlights how this unequal distribution of park resources affects low-income neighborhoods and communities of color, which have far fewer parks and recreational facilities than more affluent, White communities. Parks in lower-income neighborhoods are also more likely to be poorly maintained and offer fewer services.⁵

Park size and population density are factors that influence the number of park acres per person. Low-density White neighborhoods contain parks with larger green spaces, increasing the amount of park acres available. They also offer better facilities for recreation.⁶

Methods Summary

The Los Angeles region has more than 1,800 parks⁷ covering 5.5 million acres. Beaches, golf courses and other recreational facilities designed for public use are included in this total.

Study scientists used a “park service area” (PSA) approach to geographically assign every resident in the Los Angeles region to his or her closest park.

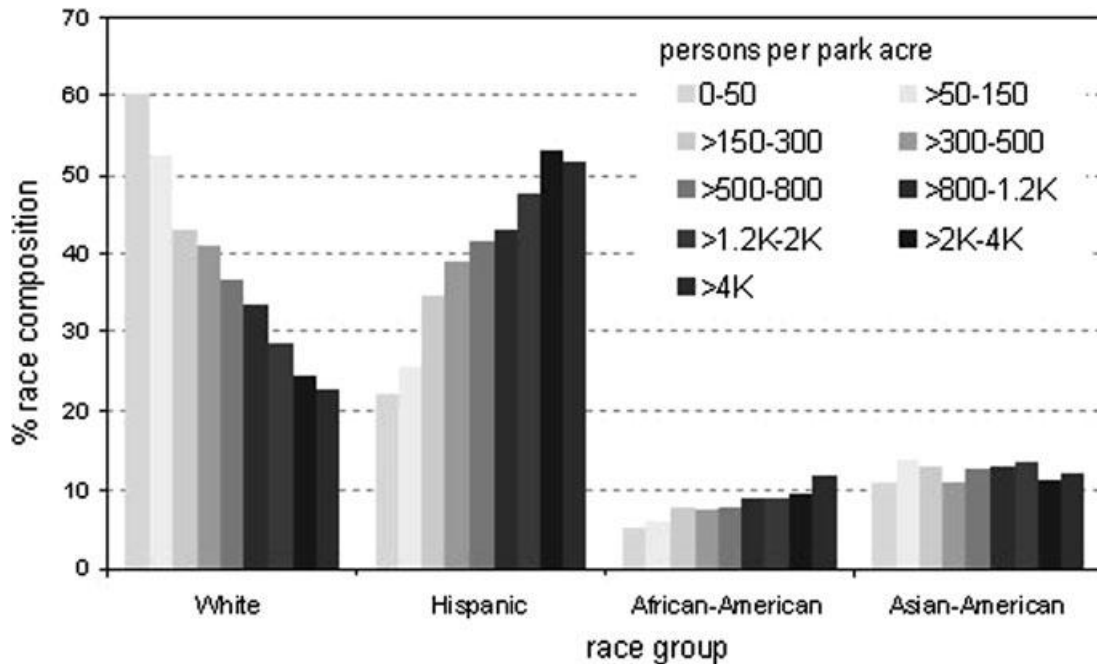
By quantifying the number of residents potentially served by each park, they were able to estimate the number of park acres per person for communities across the metro region.

The research team conducted field audits at up to 15 percent of the parks along with a comprehensive web audit.

Key Research Findings

- Latinos are more likely to live in areas that offer fewer park acres per person. African-Americans are more likely to be in those areas as well, though to a lesser degree.⁸
- The number of park acres per person is associated with lower income and higher density of children in the area.⁹
- Parks rated “excellent” by auditors were predominantly in PSAs that offered more park acres per person, while those rated “poor” were in PSAs that offered fewer park acres per person.¹⁰
- To demonstrate how planners could use new GIS decision-making tools to ensure that new parks alleviate inequities, researchers simulated the impact of two new parks in the Los Angeles region — one in an area that offered fewer park acres per person and another that had more park acres per person. The addition of a park in the area that offered less park space per person more than double the impact of the new park in the other area.¹¹
- The simulation showed that acquiring and transforming small parcels of land in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color may offer more benefits than enhancing or adding parcels of parkland in other areas of the Los Angeles region.¹²

Fig. 1 Proportion of race groups across different park access classes



What Can Policy-makers Do?

Park equity is a high-profile goal for all levels of government, community organizations and advocacy groups. This policy brief suggests strategies to support this objective, such as:

- Adapting land-use and planning policies to promote parks and active living;
- Promoting funding opportunities for park-poor communities;
- Supporting parks, trails, recreation facilities and programs in disadvantaged neighborhoods; and
- Establishing collaborations between public sector organizations and the academic community to translate promising new research into practice.

Mounting evidence suggests that disparities exist in park access in the Los Angeles region. Policymakers should pursue practical solutions to this problem using, for example, the PSA approach to help redress critical disparities in low-income neighborhoods and communities of color. This approach has already been used by Los Angeles municipalities and community groups to evaluate and recommend park and open space development opportunities. Contact Active Living Research (www.activelivingresearch.org) to explore how these methods may be used to address park disparities in your region.

Acknowledgements

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Sources

¹<http://www.surgeongeneral.gov/library/obesityvision/obesityvision2010.pdf>

²<http://www.fitness.gov/execsum/execsum.htm>

³Cohen DA, McKenzie TL, Sehgal A, Williamson S, Golinelli D, Lurie N. "Contribution of public parks to physical activity." *American Journal of Public Health*, 2007 Mar; 97(3):509–514.

⁴Increasing Active Living, A Guide for Policy-Makers, Fall 2007, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

⁵⁻¹²Chona S, Wolch J, Wilson J. "Got green? Addressing environmental justice in park provision." *GeoJournal*, 2010; 75(3):229-248.