

# THE TRUST *for* PUBLIC LAND

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## Park Safety and Physical Activity



PHOTO: Jack Gorton

Over 60% of the United States population is overweight or obese, and over 13% of children aged 6 to 19 years are overweight.<sup>1</sup> Overweight adolescents face a 70% chance of becoming overweight adults, and this chance increases to 80% if one or more parent is overweight or obese.<sup>2</sup> Being overweight or obese increases risks of health problems such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and some cancers. In-

creased caloric intake combined with the lack of physical activity is a key contributor to soaring obesity rates. Sixty percent of Americans do not engage in the Surgeon General's recommended level of physical activity while 25% are not active at all.<sup>3</sup>

African American, Latino, Native American, and Pacific Islander populations are at higher risk of overweight and obesity when compared to non-Latino Whites. High obesity rates are also associated with individuals, especially women, who have lower levels of education and income. In fact, people with lower income and lower educational levels are also less likely to get recommended levels of leisure time physical activity.<sup>4</sup>

One way to help increase levels of physical activity, especially in urban and low-income communities, is to make improvements on a local neighborhood level. When neighborhoods have ample sidewalks and well-connected streets, nearby businesses such

as grocery stores, adequate public transportation, and reduced crime levels, community members have increased opportunities and incentives to be more physically active.<sup>5</sup>

The Trust for Public Land's Healthy Parks, Healthy Communities (HPHC) program promotes increased public funding for parks and open space as a means to reverse park inequities and health disparities in low-income communities of color.

Through our interactions with community members, HPHC recognizes the established link between safe, crime-free, and well-maintained parks with increased utilization. In order to promote increased physical activity in urban parks, perceived and actual safety concerns must be addressed.

### *Community Benefits of Parks*

Easy access to healthy foods such as neighborhood grocery stores that sell fresh fruits and vegetables, and access to nearby venues for exercise, sports, and other physical activities can promote healthy lifestyles. Safe neighborhood parks provide diverse opportunities for low or no-cost physical activity for children and adults. Furthermore, the entire community can benefit from parks that are crime-free, well-maintained, and have adequate programming.

♣ As essential public infrastructure, parks can have a powerful and positive influence on community life and public safety.



*The Trust for Public Land  
conserves land for people to enjoy  
as parks, gardens, and other natural places,  
ensuring livable communities  
for generations to come.*

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*“Adolescents who participate in forms of physical activity are less likely to have low self-esteem, and are at less risk for engaging in risky behaviors such as substance abuse, truancy and violence compared to their sedentary counterparts.”*



PHOTO: Avery Wham

♣ Efforts that engage residents to create new or improve existing parks have been shown to build the social capital of a neighborhood, increase trust and cooperation among neighbors, and cultivate a sense of community ownership.<sup>6</sup>

♣ The increased social capital resulting from park-related civic engagement confers additional benefits to a community including fewer violent crimes, enhanced quality of life, as well as improved health and social indicators.<sup>7</sup>

### *Park Safety and Physical Activity*

Safety concerns, both perceived and actual, often pose a significant barrier to physical activity.<sup>8</sup> Studies by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that persons who perceived their neighborhood to be unsafe were more likely to be physically inactive, and that neighborhood safety was one of five key areas identified by parents as barriers to their children's participation in physical activity.<sup>9,10</sup> Other studies have found:

♣ Strong correlations between access to safe and nearby parks with increased likelihood of physical activity.<sup>11,12</sup>

♣ Safety-related barriers to physical activity are particularly challenging in distressed neighborhoods where residents, most often low-income people of color, often limit their time in public spaces to reduce their risk of experiencing violent crime.<sup>13</sup>

♣ A UCLA study found that low-income, Latino and African American teens have less access to safe parks, playgrounds and open space than other adolescents; teens with less access to safe parks were significantly more likely not to engage in any physical activity (10%) compared to teens with access to such settings (6%).<sup>14</sup>

♣ Safe parks are vital physical activity venues for teenagers, especially those

who live in apartment buildings. The prevalence of regular physical activity for this group increased from 56.1% to 65.6% with access to safe parks.<sup>15</sup>

### *Increasing Park Safety*

There are many elements of park safety such as crime and substance abuse that are beyond the control of park users and park officials. However, there are other safety elements such as lighting, programming and basic amenities that can be easily remedied by viable long-term solutions such as developing adequate and consistent public funding mechanisms, and short-term solutions such as the creation of park and community partnerships to develop supervised activities, which target diverse park users. Other examples and potential strategies to improve park and neighborhood safety include:

♣ Socio ecological models suggest that environmental barriers such as safety, traffic and availability of facilities, can be modified to facilitate various forms of physical activity such as walking and biking.<sup>17</sup>

♣ In inner city Chicago, police crime reports show fewer violent crimes and property crimes for apartment buildings with trees and grass outside. Residents of “greener” neighborhoods also report stronger social ties. Neighborhood greening seems to grow stronger, safer neighborhoods.<sup>18</sup>

♣ Adequate planning and design of the built environment contributes significantly to the creation of safe public spaces and crime prevention.<sup>19</sup>

♣ One widely accepted crime prevention strategy involves natural surveillance or having many “eyes on the street.” The conspicuous presence of people in outdoor public spaces—including parks—encourages natural surveillance and discourages individuals from engaging in criminal activity.

♣ Well-equipped and maintained parks that are adequately supervised increase the likelihood of heavy utilization. A heavily utilized park enhances the perception of safety and, in turn, ameliorates a significant barrier to physical activity.

### *Park Safety and Youth Violence Prevention*

Easy access to opportunities for structured and supervised play has been shown to decrease youth participation in risky and unhealthy behaviors.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, ample access to natural green areas for passive and active recreation can hold restorative qualities, which can help to decrease mental fatigue and increase coping skills.<sup>21</sup> Research has found that:

♣ The risk factors for juvenile crime and youth violence include chaotic neighborhoods with few or poorly maintained resources for positive recreational activities.<sup>22</sup>

♣ Adolescents who participate in forms of physical activity are less likely to have low self-esteem, and are at less risk for engaging in risky behaviors such as substance abuse, truancy and violence compared to their sedentary counterparts.<sup>23</sup>

♣ Organized, after-school activities at neighborhood parks, playground and recreation centers ensure the safety of young people by providing constructive alternatives to high-risk behavior.

### *Conclusion*

As our urban areas experience exponential growth in population numbers and in diversity, increasing the availability of parks and community gardens can support opportunities for healthy lifestyles. Access to safe and well-maintained parks can encourage neighborhood utilization, create livable neighborhoods, and help to facilitate increased rates of physical activity. Structural improvements such as ensuring adequate lighting, regular police patrols, and increased park services will always be necessary to improve the safety of

neighborhood parks.<sup>24</sup>

However, funding streams may not always be available to consistently support these improvements. The Healthy Parks, Healthy Communities program will continue to work with all park stakeholders to research and develop possible public financing mechanism. An example of public finance measures that have proven successful is Los Angeles County's Proposition A, Safe Neighborhood Parks Act, which voters passed by a 65% margin (1,439,591 votes). The Safe Neighborhood Parks Act provided \$319,000,000 over a period of 20-years for various improvements such as increasing the safety to neighborhood and regional parks and recreation areas for children and families, graffiti removal, and gang prevention. More recently in 2000, voters in the City of St. Louis successfully passed Proposition C, the Clean Water, Safe Parks and Community Trails initiative by a 68% margin (61,431 votes). By proposing to increase sales tax, Proposition C will raise \$72,000,000 to increase park safety, provide community trails, improve, restore and expand parks, provide disabled and expanded public access to recreational areas, and more.

Healthy Parks, Healthy Communities also proposes that there are community level solutions to improve park access and park safety for urban communities. In addition to building more urban parks, efforts need to be implemented to provide basic park amenities, ensure the safety and comfort of park users, and educate communities about the benefits of park utilization.<sup>25</sup> By developing partnerships between park officials and residents in the vicinity of neighborhood parks, community level awareness can be raised on the shared responsibility for safe parks. Thoughtful programming at parks with feedback from park users and local community organizations whose primary goals are to promote healthy lifestyles can be one of several effective methods to increase a sense of community ownership and participation by children, adults and families. The facilitation of culturally and linguistically appropriate park activities can implement needed stewardship,

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increase utilization, and bring positive presence to urban parks, while increased utilization of parks can improve the physical and mental wellbeing of communities.

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### ENDNOTES

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