



# Beyond Recreation

## A Broader View of Urban Parks

THE URBAN INSTITUTE

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## The Public Value of Urban Parks

Chris Walker

Parks have long been recognized as major contributors to the physical and aesthetic quality of urban neighborhoods. But a new, broader view of parks has recently been emerging. This new view goes well beyond the traditional value of parks as places of recreation and visual assets to communities, and focuses on how policymakers, practitioners, and the public can begin to think about parks as valuable contributors to larger urban policy objectives, such as job opportunities, youth development, public health, and community building.

This first in a series of policy briefs reviews the traditional value of parks and explains how parks are claiming new attention for their broader potential. It goes on to discuss how parks are building new partnerships to strengthen their communities in these broader ways—but that, to do so, they need reliable information about community needs and the effects of actions intended to meet those needs. The brief concludes with a discussion of how public support for parks increases as they expand their role, creating a self-reinforcing process.

The examples cited and the policy implications in these briefs derive largely from material gathered by researchers at the Urban Institute in the course of an evaluation of The Wallace Foundation's Urban Parks Initiative, a wide-ranging effort to determine how to improve the quality of urban parks, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, and to broaden urban leaders' understanding of the importance of parks to the health and vitality of cities.

### The Traditional View

The traditional view of parks and recreation departments—that they provide open spaces

and operate recreational facilities and programs—is still widely embraced by community members.<sup>1</sup> Parks are valued even by those who do not use them. For example, one study found that three-quarters of the respondents who said that they did not themselves use parks nonetheless reported receiving benefits from them, with many of those benefits tied to opportunities for children (Godbey, Graefe, and James 1992).

Parks' value to neighborhood quality is further confirmed by studies that find a statistically significant link between property values and proximity to green space, including neighborhood parks and urban forested areas.<sup>2</sup> One study found that the value of properties near Pennypack Park in Philadelphia increased from about \$1,000 per acre at 2,500 feet from the park to \$11,500 per acre at 40 feet from the park (Hammer, Coughlin, and Horn 1974). Another found that the price of residential property—based on data from three neighborhoods in Boulder, Colorado—decreased by \$4.20 for every foot farther away from the greenbelt (Correll, Lillydahl, and Singell 1978).

This connection between urban parks and neighborhood quality is receiving renewed attention from community developers as they strive to make their neighborhoods more attractive to low-income and, increasingly, middle-income residents. A recent survey for Community Development Corporations (CDCs)—which were once focused largely on housing and commercial development activities—reveals that about 20 percent of CDCs now invest in open-space programs, and that this activity area is undergoing the most rapid expansion. This finding should be no surprise. CDCs respond to their communities, and the communities' priority is often more green space (see box).

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**The “new view” of urban parks calls attention to the broader contributions they can make to the vitality of communities and their residents.**

Slavic Village, a Cleveland CDC that once focused exclusively on “bricks-and-mortar” projects, found that community members living around its Mill Creek Housing Development were adamant that they wanted public access to Mill Creek, as well as public green space, incorporated into the private housing development project. In response, the Slavic Village CDC created two committees, one focused on the housing development itself, the other on the park space—with 35 acres of the 100-acre property dedicated to park space.

### The New View: Recognizing Broader Potential

The “new view” of urban parks calls attention to the broader contributions they can make to the vitality of communities and their residents. These contributions include

- helping youth choose rewarding paths to adulthood by providing programs and opportunities to build physical, intellectual, emotional, and social strength;
- helping new entrants to the workforce find productive jobs by offering decent, entry-level employment opportunities in the community;
- helping community residents improve their health by providing a place to enjoy fresh air and exercise; and
- helping citizens join together to make their communities better, by encouraging them to participate in park planning and management.

### Youth Development

Parks can provide wonderful opportunities for children of all ages to build the skills and strengths they need to lead full and rewarding lives. The latest thinking about youth development makes a powerful case that children and adolescents are best served by a constellation of community-based activities that helps them build essential skills, knowledge, and aptitudes. The assets children and youth need for healthy development fall into four major domains: physical, intellectual, emotional, and social. And parks can offer programs that are not only fun, but also help kids acquire assets in one or more of these domains.

For example, the Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance, the nonprofit support arm of the Chicago Park District’s Garfield Park Conservatory, has established an innovative community-oriented program—the Empowering Youth Initiative. The core of this initiative is a Student Advisory Board, a group of 15 fourth through seventh graders that convenes every year to design a permanent horticultural display. The students work as real

gardeners, exercising their brainpower and creativity in a team environment as they develop models, determine a budget, and collectively decide on the year’s winning design.

The programming of the North Meadow Recreation Center in New York City’s Central Park provides another example. This center coordinates with local schools and community groups to teach basic anatomy and wellness principles and provide interactive fitness activities. The staff uses various approaches to build self-esteem among the students who take the Center’s courses. Instructors teach such skills as basketball refereeing and wall climbing—a sport for which teamwork and mutual support is a must for safety.<sup>3</sup>

### Work Experience

Youth have long found summer employment in parks as camp counselors and lifeguards. For many young people, these jobs introduce the world of work, close to home and in a relatively protected setting. But parks can also offer longer-term jobs for community residents, as well as valuable training opportunities that equip both young people and adults to enter the workforce with marketable skills and experience.

For example, the Garfield Park Alliance offers a two-year docent program that helps prepare teens on the city’s West Side for life after high school. Following a core training program that emphasizes leadership development, personal and social skills-building, and job readiness, participants move on to work as docents in the Garfield Park Conservatory, explaining exhibits to park visitors. The Alliance also worked with the Mayor’s Office of Workforce Development to employ youth apprentices as artists in creating a tile mosaic at the nearby elevated rail station.

Parks also can help adults acquire work experience, as demonstrated by agencies that have provided “supported” employment opportunities to those in transition from welfare to work.

Prospect Park's welfare-to-work program provides an excellent example. In this program (and similar ones throughout New York City), work crews consisting of recent welfare recipients perform routine maintenance. Parks are a particularly fruitful area for such efforts because the work is low skill, continuously needed, and organized so that a single park employee can supervise a relatively large work crew.

### Health

Park use is certainly a good (and generally free) way to engage in healthy exercise. Park programs can be particularly useful in promoting healthful exercise among youth and the elderly. A study in Cleveland confirms the promise of parks in promoting health for Americans age 50 and older (Payne et al. 1998). Older park users (bikers, joggers, walkers) were found significantly healthier than nonpark users and reported feeling "renewed" after using the park, with greater frequency of use linked to better health. These active users also reported fewer physician visits.

Hearts N' Parks—a community-based program supported by the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute and the National Recreation and Park Association—is a good example of an innovative health-focused program. It has two pilot sites, in North Carolina and Arlington County, Virginia. The Virginia program, launched in 2000, focuses on children, youth, and seniors at summer camps, parks and recreation centers, and after-school programs. A survey of participants found that young people knew more about eating habits that promote good health, and that adults actually had healthier eating habits.

### Social Capital

In addition to their tangible contributions to youth development, employment opportunities, and public health, parks help build and strengthen ties among community residents by bringing people together, including those who are otherwise divided by race or class, and by helping them work together on common projects. These ties—often labeled "social capital"—represent subtle but important assets for a community. They provide avenues through which information, values, and social expectations flow, and they empower people to tackle communitywide problems, embark on collective actions, and advocate effectively for their community.

The promise of social capital as a vital ingredient in neighborhood health rests on a solid scientific foundation. Recent research demonstrates, for example, that a neighborhood's collective efficacy—people's connections with one another and their capacity to work together to achieve shared goals—can reduce crime and disorder, even in very poor communities (Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls 1997). Research also points to the unique role that parks in particular can play in building the relationships that constitute social capital. For example, research on low-income housing developments has found that park-like public spaces encourage residents to leave the isolation of their apartments, socialize with one another, and form lasting ties (Coley, Kuo, and Sullivan 1997; Kuo, Coley, and Brunson 1998). Moreover, the higher levels of social capital that develop in these settings contribute both to individual health and well-being and to the security and livability of the development as a whole (Kweon, Sullivan, and Wiley 1998).

Prospect Park in Brooklyn—through its Community Advisory Committee—provides an excellent example of how parks can help people work together to achieve common goals. The Community Advisory Committee has about 90 members, representing a wide range of organizations and interests from the neighborhoods that surround the park. The Committee meets monthly and consists of four working groups—operations, advocacy, education, and special events/membership. Twelve local officials also attend these meetings. In addition to the Committee's numerous accomplishments in educational outreach, business support, and advocacy for new public funding, it has strengthened the park's ties to the many ethnic and racial groups throughout Brooklyn. The park's hosting of the weekend festival *Boricua*, for example, prompted representatives from the Puerto Rican community to organize a community group to plan and raise funds for future weekend festivals.

### Building Partnerships Can Help Parks Strengthen Their Communities

As parks managers devote more attention to their multiple and diverse community roles, they are forming partnerships with other public agencies and with nonprofit organizations. These partnerships are generating much excitement and interest. First, they are successfully

combining the assets of the public and non-profit sectors in novel ways to create new and refurbished parks, greenways, trails and other community assets—often in the face of municipal budget constraints. Second, after nearly three decades of steady decline in public expenditures to build and maintain public infrastructure, changing public attitudes are encouraging many cities to support renewed investments. As parks managers work to assemble the resources they need to expand and improve their programs and facilities, they can often count on the support of their new partners, especially from the expanding community-based nonprofit sector.

In good partnerships, one party's assets offset the other's liabilities. Thus, in addition to their other virtues, such collaborations have value in their own right, helping to strengthen the local "civic infrastructure." Public partners tend to contribute predictable funding, organizational infrastructure, and institutional legitimacy, which offset common liabilities facing nonprofit organizations—highly variable funding, lack of follow-through, and shallow support. Nonprofit partners bring flexible funding, organizational adaptability, community credibility, and broad constituencies. These offset common liabilities of public agencies—earmarked funding streams, bureaucratic inertia, public indifference, and narrow constituencies.

The partnerships included in the Wallace Urban Parks Initiative included parks foundations, "friends-of" organizations, and several groups focused on broader urban initiatives. These diverse projects featured efforts not only to improve major urban parks, create new urban greenways, and construct or reconstruct neighborhood parks, but also to introduce new community arts, recreational, scientific, and cultural programs.

Portland's array of nonprofit, corporate, institutional, and public partners is increasingly typical of state-of-the-art urban parks systems. The Portland Parks and Recreation Department shares facilities and programs with several school districts; collaborates with regional parks, water, and environmental agencies on land acquisition, watershed education, and resource protection; solicits donations of equipment and other products from corporations, and earns product-placement and advertising fees; has partnered with "friends" groups on park maintenance, renovation, or programming; has worked extensively with youth-serving organizations, such as the YMCA, Portland Public Housing Authority, and

local Boys and Girls Clubs, on programs supported in part by the Portland Parks Youth Trust Fund; and works on a variety of activities with individual volunteers, who represent the hourly equivalent of nearly 200 full-time staff.

## Getting the Information Parks Need to Broaden Their Community Role

When parks managers broaden their objectives, seeking to ensure that the parks they manage serve their communities the best way possible, they need rigorous information about the characteristics and needs of park users (and potential users) and about the effectiveness of their efforts to meet those needs. Most parks managers already take advantage of public meetings and formal hearings to gain input from the community. But collecting information through systematic surveys of park users can do more. Such information can include data on

- *who* uses a park compared with those who live in the surrounding community, which can show whether some groups are being missed;
- *how* people use a park, which can identify whether specific facilities are being over-, under-, or misused—thus helping guide park investments and management;
- *why* community members do (or do not) use a park, which can guide outreach efforts or initiatives to improve or change services; and
- *what* features visitors value, which can help resolve conflicts among groups about park priorities.<sup>4</sup>

The value of a well-designed survey is highlighted by the experience of the Garfield Park Conservatory Alliance, which wanted to find out whether improvements made in cooperation with the Chicago Parks District were drawing more frequent visits by people living both inside and outside the immediate neighborhoods. Garfield managers already knew they could attract large numbers of visitors for seasonal flower shows and other special events, but wanted to see whether they were attracting more visitors on "typical" days and times. The findings provided strong evidence that the Conservatory's strategy was paying off (figure 1). The estimated number of casual visitors more than doubled—from 15,000 to 40,000 between the two survey years, with big increases in both neighborhood and non-neighborhood visitors.



## Building Support for an Expanded Role

The many activities parks have become involved in, and the partnerships these have engendered, have deepened parks agencies' ties to multiple constituencies. These ties can be useful as parks managers seek funding and other resources for maintaining and improving the quality and diversity of their services. But at the same time, parks managers face the challenge of "concentrated costs and diffuse benefits." The costs of building, maintaining, or upgrading parks are readily calculated and conspicuous. But the benefits parks provide are spread over many areas, making them hard to quantify and easy to overlook. How, for example, can parks get full credit for their contributions to crime reduction? Do taxpayers recognize that these are distinct from—and *in addition to*—the crime-reduction contributions of police department arrests and incarceration?

To address this challenge effectively, parks managers need to engage in new and more aggressive forms of "case-making." This requires assembling the multiple and diverse community-building contributions of urban parks reviewed here and communicating their importance clearly and effectively. But this undertaking is complex, precisely because the credit for any wider benefits—safer streets, increased property value, increased public

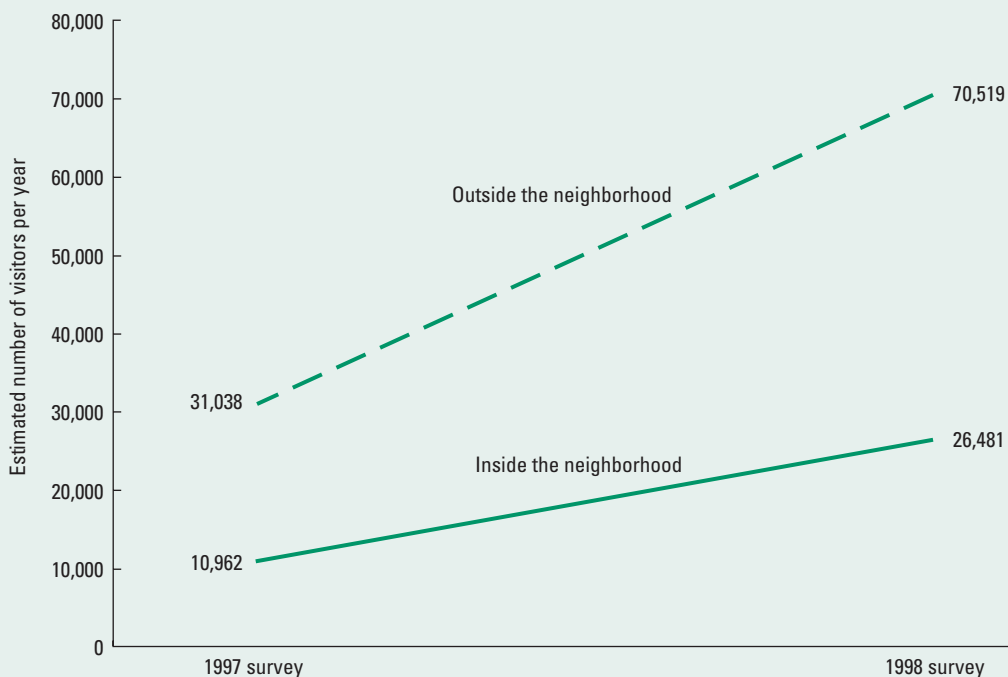
health—are inevitably due in part to other factors as well. Thus, parks' justifiable claims for due credit need to be firmly grounded in evidence; and parks need to be generous in acknowledging the share of the credit due to the nonparks actors in the story.

Here is how Charles Jordan, Director of the Portland, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department, puts the issue:

We—the urban park and recreation professionals—are responsible for meeting the challenges our communities are facing and for communicating and demonstrating that parks and recreation are part of the solution. . . . We have all the tools—parks, people, and programs—we need to make an extraordinary and compelling case in terms of education, economic development, health, and juvenile delinquency. . . . Yet we haven't presented the evidence in a unified way nor do we have a coherent strategy to win this case. . . . Once we have the evidence together . . . we won't have to look for [partners] . . . they will find us. Our potential allies will see that their potential will never be realized until we—the urban parks advocates—are part of the solution.<sup>5</sup>

When parks and recreation professionals become true partners in community building, others in the community are more likely to help make the case for additional private and public funding for parks. The Louisville Olmstead

**FIGURE 1.** Do Garfield Park Conservatory Visitors Come from Inside or Outside the Neighborhood?



Parks Conservancy is an excellent example of the power of nonprofit advocates. Working in partnership with the City of Louisville and Metro Parks, the Conservancy provides planning and funding for park improvements through donations from corporations, individuals, and foundations. In its first 10 years, the Conservancy raised close to \$10 million in private donations, which leveraged an additional \$4.5 million in city investment for park projects.<sup>6</sup>

Prominent nonprofit partners are helping parks fulfill their new and broader community development role. The City Parks Alliance, an organization comprising city parks leaders from across the country, belongs to this wave of the future. An outgrowth of the Wallace Urban Parks Initiative, the Alliance was formed in response to a broad-based movement of city park advocates who recognized the critical role parks play in the revitalization of our cities.

Another extremely encouraging sign that the broader view of urban parks is gaining currency is the cooperation between national community development organizations and the Trust for Public Land (a nonprofit organization that helps communities across the country fund and carry out land conservation) to bring increased attention to urban parks as assets in neighborhood revitalization. In New York City, the Trust for Public Land has worked with the Enterprise Foundation and the Council on the Environment of New York City in South Bronx, Central Brooklyn, and Upper Manhattan to create community gardens and parks as part of housing renovation projects carried out by community-based organizations.

In Chicago, Mayor Richard Daley has demonstrated a particularly strong appreciation of the value of parks in helping build communities in multiple ways. In his 2003 inaugural and state of the city speech, he touted his achievements in working with the city council to make neighborhoods places where people want to live and work, make streets safer, give children the educational opportunities they deserve, and provide incentives for new businesses and housing across the city. He concluded by noting that all these achievements had been “partly because of our excellent system of parks . . . and the team at the Chicago Park District for all they’ve done to upgrade our park system and expand its programs, especially neighborhood programs for teenagers and young adults.”

## Conclusion

The new and broader view of parks presented here has emerged through innovative pro-

grams and partnerships under way in a growing number of cities. This new view capitalizes on the tremendous value parks generate by providing open space and recreational opportunities. But it goes further—it recognizes parks as vital contributors to the achievement of wider urban policy objectives, including job opportunities, youth development, public health, and community building—all of which help strengthen the neighborhoods in which parks are located. For parks managers, this view reinforces the critical importance of gathering reliable information to help make wise resource choices based on what communities and their residents most want from parks and decide how best to deliver on those needs.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Ulrich and Addoms (1981).
2. See Correll, Lillydahl, and Singell (1978); Hammer, Coughlin, and Horn (1974); Kitchen and Hendon (1967); Phillips (2000); Tyrväinen and Miettinen (2000); Weicher and Zerbst (1973).
3. For more information on how parks can provide innovative youth development opportunities, see “Urban Parks as Partners in Youth Development,” the third brief in the parks series.
4. For more information on how parks managers can find answers to these kinds of questions, see “Understanding Park Usership,” the second brief in the parks series.
5. From “Ask the Expert,” an online interview with Charles Jordon at [http://pps.org/upo/askexpert/one-qa?qa\\_id=55&qa\\_id=55](http://pps.org/upo/askexpert/one-qa?qa_id=55&qa_id=55).
6. See <http://www.olmsteadparks.org/about.htm>.

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## The Wallace Foundation's Urban Parks Initiative

The Wallace Foundation's **Urban Parks Initiative** was designed to improve the quantity and quality of urban parks for public use, particularly in low-income neighborhoods, and to broaden urban leaders' understanding of the importance of parks to the health and vitality of cities.

From 1990 through the initiative's conclusion in 2003, Wallace supported 19 public/private partnerships in 17 cities for creating new parks in underserved neighborhoods, reforesting urban areas, restoring landscape, and bringing new activities to both neighborhood and metropolitan parks. Wallace's initiative helped secure 350 acres of new parkland and 50 miles of greenway trails, restored 300 acres of existing parkland, and leveraged more than \$150 million in public/private commitments. The Foundation also supported national and regional forums to share lessons on park development and their contribution to community revitalization.

The Wallace Foundation commissioned the Urban Institute to evaluate the effectiveness of funded activities in parks in 11 cities. The Institute collected information on how parks improvement efforts may have induced changes in the numbers or types of people who used the parks. Researchers also examined the partnerships parks agencies formed with nonprofit organizations to undertake these improvements, as well as the ways in which they engaged citizens in their efforts.

## Parks Publications

This brief is one of three short studies focused on a new and broader view of the roles parks can play in urban communities: "The Public Value of Urban Parks" and "Understanding Park Usership," by Chris Walker; and "Urban Parks as Partners in Youth Development," by Margery Austin Turner.

Other publications stemming from the Urban Institute's evaluation of the Wallace Urban Parks Initiative include *Partnerships for Parks: Lessons from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Urban Parks Program*, by Chris Walker; *Public Use of Urban Parks: A Methods Manual for Park Managers and Community Leaders*, by William Kornblum, Chris Hayes, and Ryan Allen; and *Communities for Parks: A Framework for Building Engagement*, by Chris Walker, Maria-Rosario Jackson, and Robin Redford.

All these publications can be obtained from the Urban Institute's online bookstore, <http://www.uipress.org>, or by calling 202-261-5687.

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