

Paper of the Month – May, 2005

Paper: The significance of parks to physical activity and public health. A conceptual model

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Since the 1986 World Health Organization Ottawa Charter, there has been a growing recognition of the role of the environment in influencing peoples' health. Indeed, in the past few years there has been substantial progress in identifying environmental correlates of PA behaviour, but very few published interventions studies exist to support causal associations between environmental factors and PA behaviour change. Parks are common community features that are greatly used by community members. For instance, in 2001 more than half of the population of Sydney reported visiting a park in the past week, however, little is known about the actual contribution of these visits to PA levels or to health.

Bendimo-Rung and colleagues make a valuable contribution to the research concerned with park usage. First, the authors identify the numerous benefits expected from 'park visitation' based on 25 years of leisure research, including physical, psychological, social, economic and environmental benefits, which could all be considered as outcomes of health promotion intervention studies. Second the authors propose a conceptual model that can be used as a guide for research on the significance of parks to PA and public health in general.

Six park characteristics are highlighted as potential influences on visitation levels and activity within parks: features (facilities, programs, diversity), conditions (maintenance, incentives), access (availability, equity), aesthetics (design, attractiveness), safety (perceived, objective) and policies (management and budget). Apart from identifying these characteristics, the authors highlight gaps in the knowledge about the role that these play. For example, while statistics are widely available about the availability of parks, the degree of equity in the distribution of parks across different neighbourhoods, ethnic or economic groups is usually ignored.

For researchers, there are plenty of areas to study, given that public health research in this area is in its infancy. For instance, there is a need to generate and test hypotheses about the relationship between clusters of park characteristics and PA. More fundamentally, there is also the need to develop reliable and valid measure of the attributes of parks which may have behavioural and health significance.

Health promotion practitioners can use Bendimo-Rung's model of the dimensions of parks in both local level and community-wide interventions. For example, starting with assessing the environmental characteristics of parks within their jurisdiction, parks can be ranked according to the specific features outlined in the paper. The second stage would be to link level of 'park visiting', a step which the authors consider a necessary part of PA adoption, to specific environmental characteristics by level of park ranking. Areas Health Services can use such assessments to engage with local councils in relation to park modifications. Any environmental change that comes from collaboration of local sectors could then be tested for its impact.

Finally, the paper identifies potential 'partners' to collaborate with the health sector regarding the usage of parks. These include economists, urban planners, sociologists, psychologists, leisure experts and many more, which brings together a broad range of interests that could be used to sustain effective collaboration.