



INCREASING LOCAL PARK USE REQUIRES INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENT AND SUSTAINABLE PROGRAMMING

Research Brief • September 2019

THE ISSUE

- Neighborhood parks offer affordable opportunities for individuals to engage in physical activity.
- In many low-income communities, residents face health disparities as a result of physical inactivity.
- Yet, studies have found parks to be underutilized compared to the physical activity needs of the community^{1,2}
- **Organized programming at the park** and park safety are correlated with park usage³⁻⁶

BACKGROUND

Why Parks?

The local park system is a largely untapped resource in the effort to increase physical activity and combat health inequities in low-income communities across California.¹ The Active Parks, Healthy People Pilot Program was implemented in three California counties to explore whether **offering a six-week structured physical activity opportunity in community parks would enhance park utilization and increase program participants' physical activity levels.**

Physical Activity Classes

For six weeks, Los Angeles and Fresno county health departments and their community partners offered physical activity opportunities such as yoga classes and walking clubs twice per week at a community park. Stanislaus county focused on community engagement to inform their program development.

Our Research

The evaluation included participant surveys, park observations and stakeholder group interviews with health department staff and their respective community-based partners in each county.

Findings

Participants rated the classes highly. Although some increases in physical activity among park users and program participants were observed, the number of participants was too small to arrive at definitive conclusions. Challenges recruiting participants led us to focus on barriers to park program participation. Lack of childcare and park safety were the top barriers cited by participants. Health department staff and their partners report that a two-pronged approach that includes both improvement to park infrastructure and safety and support for long-term, community-tailored park programming is needed to address barriers to park use and create physical activity opportunities that best fit community need.

WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT

Access to well-maintained parks that offer a variety of amenities and have established, sustainable programming efforts is key to promoting park use.

With over 14,000 parks, California has an opportunity to increase access and use of this public infrastructure to support health equity across the state.

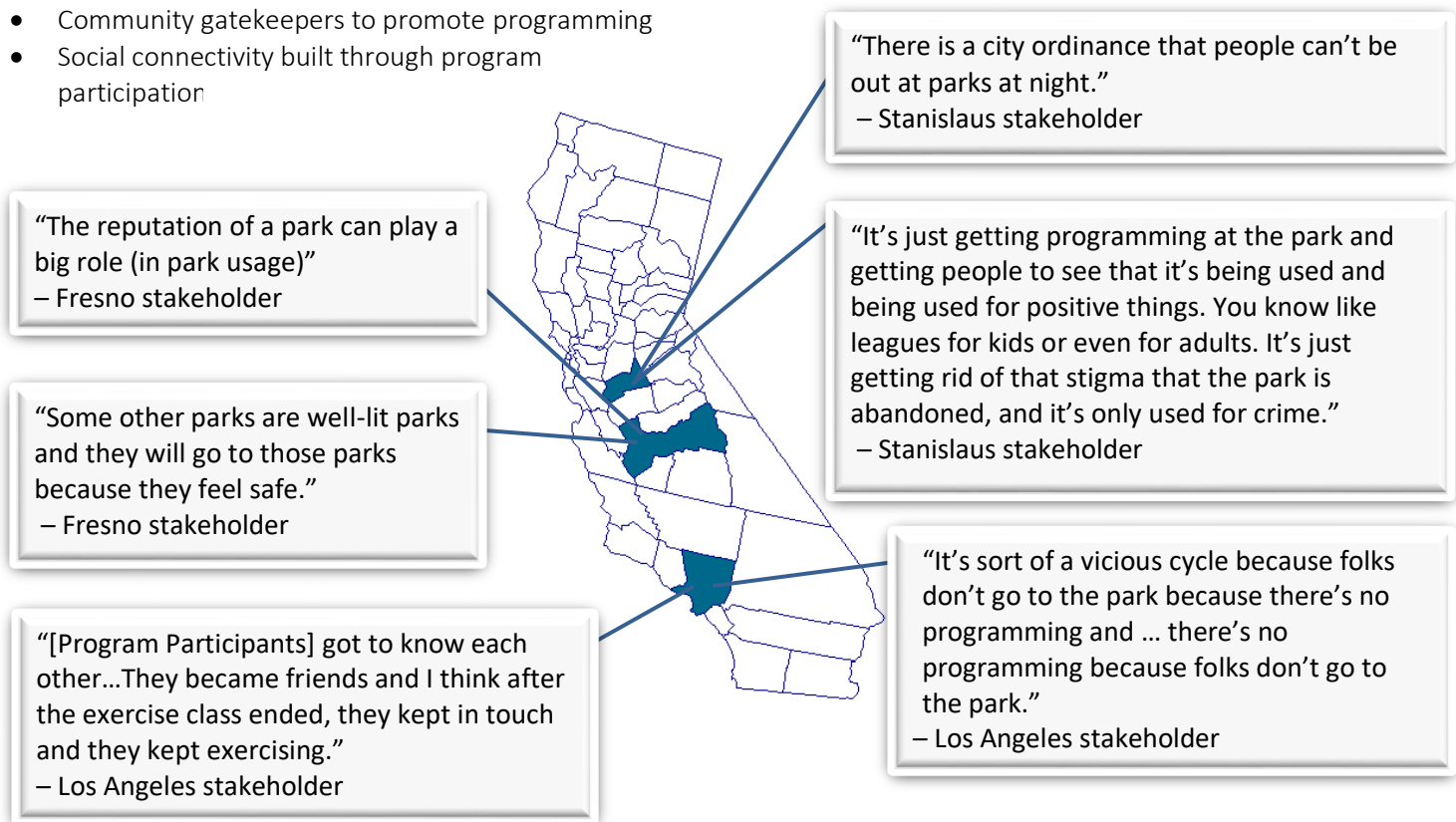


Facilitators of Park Use and Program Engagement

- Park amenities such as access to walking trails, play equipment, lighting and clear signage
- Presence of sustained park programming
- Programs designed based on community input and fit well with the physical space and available amenities of the park
- Community gatekeepers to promote programming
- Social connectivity built through program participation

Barriers to Park Use and Program Engagement

- Restrictive use policies of community parks
- Lack of park amenities and sustainable programming
- Park reputation as unsafe



IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The study findings suggest that to promote park use the following may be necessary:

- 1) Investment in sustainable park programming
 - Program design should involve:
 - i. Robust needs assessment involving a community engagement process and community organizers
 - ii. Key partners such as local park and recreation departments
 - iii. Addressing the community's largest barriers to park program participation
- 2) Community investment in partnerships and funding to support policy, systems and environmental change
 - Improve physical infrastructure at parks including clear signage, lighting, play equipment and facilities maintenance
 - Support for policy change to promote park use such as easing restrictions on park use after dark

References: 1. Boone-Heinonen, J., et al. (2010). "Built and socioeconomic environments: patterning and associations with physical activity in U.S. adolescents." *Int J Behav Nutr Phys Act* 7: 45. 2. Cohen, D. A., et al. (2010). "Parks and physical activity: why are some parks used more than others?" *Prev Med* 50 Suppl 1: S9-12. 3. Babey, S. H., et al. (2005). "Access to safe parks helps increase physical activity among teenagers." *Policy Brief UCLA Cent Health Policy Res*(Pb2005-10): 1-6. 4. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (1999). "Neighborhood safety and the prevalence of physical inactivity--selected states, 1996." *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 48(7): 143-146. 5. Molnar, B. E., et al. (2004). "Unsafe to play? Neighborhood disorder and lack of safety predict reduced physical activity among urban children and adolescents." *Am J Health Promot* 18(5): 378-386. 6. Gomez, J. E., et al. (2004). "Violent crime and outdoor physical activity among inner-city youth." *Prev Med* 39(5): 876-881. 7. Photo: California Agriculture journal, January - March 2013, Volume 67, Issue 1. Article: Communitywide strategies key to preventing childhood obesity