



Park Access and Inclusion

Frequently Asked Questions



How do parks affect public health?

Parks can play a major role in public health. Most notably, parks have been shown to increase our physical health and well-being as they provide a safe opportunity to engage in outdoor physical activity. In addition, access to parks has been shown to improve mental health by increasing opportunities for social interactions, as they act as a gathering space for the community. Finally, parks have been shown to decrease stress exposure and crime rates.¹

What are the characteristics of a high-quality park?

The Urban Land Institute (ULI) highlights five characteristics of high-quality parks:²

1. High-quality parks are in excellent physical condition. Parks and the facilities and amenities within them should be cared for and maintained on a regular basis in order to keep user experience high.

2. High-quality parks are accessible to all potential users. Parks, the pathways and facilities within them, and the pathways to travel to them should be accessible and safe for all ages, abilities, and users.

3. High-quality parks provide positive experiences for park users. Parks should include a diverse set of amenities and facilities so that all users are able to enjoy the park. Additionally, trees and other cooling features that will decrease the heat index and provide a comfortable environment should be included.

4. High-quality parks are relevant to the communities they serve. During park development or redevelopment, the surrounding community and community-based organizations should be engaged in order to ensure the park will be utilized to its maximum potential by the people it is meant to serve.

5. High-quality parks are flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances. Park design should allow for future development and change based on a community's evolving needs and wants, as well as adapting to the changing world, such as climate change, pandemics, and more.

¹ Sefcik, J.S., Kondo, M.C., Klusaritz, H., Sarantschin, E., Solomon, S., Roepke, A., South, E.C., Jacoby, S.F., (2019). Perceptions of nature and access to green space in four urban neighborhoods. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(13). Retrieved from: <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/16/13/2313>

² Urban Land Institute. (2021). Five Characteristics of High-Quality Parks. Retrieved from: <https://knowledge.uli.org/en/reports/research-reports/2021/five-characteristics-of-high-quality-parks>

What factors affect access and inclusion in parks?

Access and inclusion is a vital component in ensuring that parks are beneficial to all users. Factors to consider are listed below. Creating Healthy Communities programs could consider projects relating to any of these factors to increase park access and inclusion.^{3,4}

- » **Parks should be located relative to communities in need.** For maximum access, especially for people without a vehicle, communities should have a local park that is within walking distance. A common goal for many cities is to ensure that all people have a park within a ten-minute walk of their home.⁴ In less populated and rural areas, parks might not be within walking distance; in these cases it may be appropriate to focus on the availability of parks and amenities near community destinations such as schools.⁵
- » **Cyclist and pedestrian pathways to and within parks are essential for inclusive park access.** Sidewalks, paths, and bike lanes should include safe crossings, lighting, proper signage, curb ramps, and other amenities for people with disabilities. They should also be built in a comprehensive network, with minimal gaps, in order to serve the whole community.
- » **The types of amenities and programming is a key component to increasing inclusion within parks.** Amenities such as restrooms, benches, and shaded areas are essential to creating a comfortable atmosphere. In addition, a diverse range of programming, such as fitness classes or sports leagues for different age groups and people with disabilities, allows for all users to enjoy and interact with the park.
- » **Parks should be free to access.** This ensures all users, no matter their socioeconomic status, are able to enjoy and benefit from them.
- » **Instructional and wayfinding signage should be prominently displayed in numerous locations to meet the needs of all users.** Consider the languages spoken and literacy levels when designing signage to best serve the community.
- » **A diverse set of contractors should be engaged to provide maintenance, operations, construction, public art, and more.** Diverse contractors help ensure that multiple perspectives and experiences are represented.
- » **Parks should be maintained on a regular basis throughout the year in order for users to access and benefit the park year round.** Maintenance might include snow removal, trash collection, lawn and tree maintenance, equipment repairs, and more.
- » **A variety of physical spaces and programs that reflect the cultures of the surrounding neighborhoods help promote a feeling belonging.** A sense of cultural connection ensures the community feels welcome and represented.
- » **History, policies, and power greatly shapes decision-making within communities.** Communities of color and low-income communities often have less access to parks.⁶ Ensuring that parks are available in communities that have had a history of underinvestment is essential in expanding park equity, access, and inclusion.⁷
- » **Perceptions of safety should be taken into account when developing or redeveloping parks.** Engaging the community to understand their perceptions around safety will increase access, inclusion, and representation. Lighting, visibility, maintenance, and other design factors can all contribute to a greater sense of safety.



Personal interactions



Accessible programming



Shaded area



Path lighting and benches

3 Urban Land Institute. (2021). Five Characteristics of High-Quality Parks. Retrieved from: <https://knowledge.uli.org/en/reports/research-reports/2021/five-characteristics-of-high-quality-parks>

4 U.S. Access Board. (2013). (Proposed) Public Rights-of-Way Accessibility Guidelines. Retrieved from: <https://www.access-board.gov/prowag/>

5 Active Living Research (2015). Promoting Active Living in Rural Communities. Retrieved from: https://activelivingresearch.org/sites/activelivingresearch.org/files/ALR_Brief_RuralCommunities_Sept2015.pdf

6 Rigolon, A. (2016). A complex landscape of inequity in access to urban parks: A literature review. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 153, 160-169.

7 Prevention Institute. (N.D.). What is Park Equity? Retrieved from: <https://preventioninstitute.org/people-parks-power/what-is-park-equity>



How can members of the public be involved in decision-making processes for parks?

The people who will use a park should be involved early and often during the decision-making process; all stages should include community engagement, participation, and leadership. This could include identifying the community's needs, identifying evaluation factors, the design process, and deciding whether to prioritize a new park development or improve existing parks.

For example:

- » **Location selection:** Seek input on new park locations.
- » **Assessment:** Conduct an onsite community health inclusion index (CHII) assessment with diverse community members (see below).
- » **Design charrette:** Interactively develop a park design.
- » **Participatory budgeting:** Community members propose, develop, and vote on a design using a real budget, with the selected project actually built.¹
- » **Community build:** Community volunteers help build the park.
- » **Public art:** Work with the public to design and install art that reflects their interests and tastes.
- » **Evaluation:** Collaboratively determine what success looks like.

How can park performance be measured?

When planning a park strategy, park conditions should be measured before and after the project is completed to identify needs and measure performance.

A CHII assessment is a great place to start to understand the accessibility of a park or potential park site.² The assessment should be performed at the beginning of the project and after implementation. It is critical that people with disabilities are included when conducting the assessment to gain the valuable perspective of their lived experiences.

Metrics for measuring performance can be grouped under the five characteristics of high-quality parks mentioned on page 1, and might include some of the following:

1 Participatory Budgeting Project. (N.D.). Background. <https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/>

2 National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability. (2022). Community Health Inclusion Index. Retrieved from: <https://www.nchpad.org/1273/6358/Community~Health~Inclusion~Index>

3 Urban Land Institute. (2021). Five Characteristics of High-Quality Parks. Retrieved from: <https://knowledge.uli.org/en/reports/research-reports/2021/five-characteristics-of-high-quality-parks>

4 Trust for Public Land. (N.D.). ParkServe. Retrieved from: <https://www.tpl.org/parkserve>

Physical condition

- » **Community participation in upkeep** can be measured through community member volunteer opportunities, providing a better understanding of whether the community wishes to assist with park upkeep.
- » **Maintenance frequency and quality** can be measured through community input, inspection programs, and data procedures.³

Accessibility

- » **Availability and usage of accessible equipment** can indicate who will use and benefit from the park.
- » **Number of people within a ten-minute walk of a park** can indicate how well a community is served by parks. ParkServe, a database provided by the Trust for Public Land, provides measures for some communities, or a geospatial analysis could be performed. It is important to further disaggregate this information by race, income, and other factors to understand how equitable this access is.⁴

Positive Experience

- » **Perceptions of safety, beauty, and other features** can be measured through community input and engagement. Engagement can decide what next steps should be taken if the perceptions are negative.

Relevance

- » **Reach of community engagement** can be measured by collecting demographic information from participants. This can help inform whether outreach needs to be altered or expanded in order to ensure that the direct community surrounding the park is being reached.
- » **Demographics of park users** can be gathered through counts and surveys, and can help with understanding who is using the park and whether there needs to be changes to outreach, promotion, etc.

Adaptability

- » **Increased visits to parks (before and after counts)** can be measured through manual counts or pedestrian counting systems. This measurement can provide understanding relating to whether the park meets the communities wants and needs, and if the community enjoys the park.



Project Highlights

Sandusky County (Kiwanis Play Park, Fremont)

The Kiwanis Club of Fremont, along with a committee including the City of Fremont, the Sandusky County Board of Developmental Disabilities, and other community stakeholders built an accessible and inclusive playground which was completed in 2021.

To ensure that the park would perform well and would be an asset to the community, the team conducted a CHII assessment as a pre-project performance evaluation. The assessment showed that the park was somewhat accessible as it is on one level, there is parking available, there are two access points, and the restrooms are accessible via a wide pathway.⁵ Barriers to access included the lack of sidewalks throughout the park, no designated accessible parking spaces, and the thick mulch throughout the existing playground area.

Over 150 volunteers helped build the updated playground, which includes inclusive play structures such as a no-transfer swing, safety surfacing, play fire station and market cafe, and sensory and visual stimulation features such as stationary musical equipment. Future phases are planned to include the addition of connecting pathways to both play areas, and an entry point facing the new structures.



Kiwanis Play Park in Fremont with accessible play structures

Summit County (Kerr Park, Akron)

Summit County Think Tank Coalition, a neighborhood team, along with KaBOOM!, a non-profit organization, worked to develop a community playground named Kerr Park through the Akron Parks Challenge. The Akron Parks Challenge allows neighborhoods and organizations to pitch their park project and how they will engage their community in the park design process. Challenge recipients receive funds to develop their park.⁶

The community's vision for the playground was developed through online surveys, as well as a design meeting, with input received from both children and adults within the community. Children had an opportunity to draw their ideal park, and their ideas led to real design elements such as a zip line and lots of swings.

Community volunteers from local organizations and businesses helped build the playground, which consists of a rubber surface, play structures, and landscape updates. It will eventually include a gathering space with seating and a walking path.⁷



Kerr Park community build in Akron

5 Bogard, Laura. (2022). *Fremont Kiwanis Play Park!* PowerPoint.

6 Akron Parks Collaborative. (N.D.) *Akron Parks Challenge*. Retrieved from: <https://www.akronparks.org/akron-parks-challenge.html>

7 Becka, Megan. (2021). *City of Akron unveils new Kerr Park playground designed with input from kids, community*. Retrived from: <https://www.cleveland.com/akron/2021/10/city-of-akron-unveils-new-kerr-park-playground-designed-with-input-from-kids-community.html>



Cuyahoga County (Euclid Basketball Court)

The City of Euclid's Ward 3 is a strong and engaged community that has higher rates of obesity and chronic disease relative to the rest of the county. While some parks are available locally, the community has expressed a need for increased amenities for youth. The Creating Healthy Communities (CHC) program worked with a coalition of residents and government departments to gather input on implementing a basketball court in a lower income neighborhood. The goals of the project are to improve access to basketball courts, a relevant public amenity for youth in the neighborhood, and to strengthen the "Bluestone Court Coalition" to organize a youth mentoring and violence prevention program and event series at the basketball courts.

The project team selected the Bluestone Elementary School as the location for the court due to its high visibility and accessible location in the neighborhood. The coalition conducted a door-knocking campaign to build input and gather support. Land was donated by Euclid City Schools and the installation funding was provided by the Community Development Supplemental Grant.⁸



Grand opening of the Euclid Basketball Court at Bluestone Elementary

Perry County (New Lexington Bike Park)

Public health outcomes within the City of New Lexington, located in Perry County, are negatively affected by a lack of physical activity, partly due to the low availability of and access to public spaces for recreation. In order to increase public health within the city, a new bike park was developed by the CHC program and partners. The bike park includes a mural, road safety and sign education, programming amenities, and is designed to be a space where people of all ages can learn about bicycles and how to use them.

The community assisted with designing and developing the site, building a greater sense of ownership and belonging. The county engineer prepped the area by leveling the site; a local artist and high school students created the mural; gravel was provided by Tunnel Hills Partners; and pavement was provided at a discounted rate through the Shelley Company. Overall the park received donations of more than \$59,000.¹⁴



New Lexington Bike Park

⁸ Ohio Department of Health. (2020). *Success Stories 2020*. Retrieved from <https://odh.ohio.gov/know-our-programs/health-promotion/resources/2020-success-stories>

Where can I find out more?

- » 10 Minute Walk. <https://10minutewalk.org/#About>
- » National Center on Health, Physical Activity and Disability. *Community Health Inclusion Index*. <https://www.nchpad.org/1273/6358/Community~Health~Inclusion~Index>
- » National Recreation and Park Association. Parks for Inclusion Resources. <https://www.nrpa.org/our-work/partnerships/initiatives/parks-for-inclusion/parks-for-inclusion-resources/>
- » Participatory Budgeting Project. <https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/>
- » Prevention Institute. People, Parks and Power. <https://preventioninstitute.org/projects/people-parks-and-power>
- » Trust for Public Land. Parkserve. <https://www.tpl.org/parkserve>
- » Urban Land Institute. Five Characteristics of High-Quality Parks. <https://knowledge.uli.org/en/reports/research-reports/2021/five-characteristics-of-high-quality-parks>

