

Key to better health care may be a walk in the park

February 9 2011

The payoff for investing in public parks and recreation sites may be healthier, more physically fit residents and a less strained healthcare system, according to Penn State researchers.

Investments in parks and recreational services have a dramatic effect on health and fitness, say Geof Godbey, professor emeritus of leisure studies, and Andrew Mowen, associate professor of recreation and parks management.

"There is a strong relationship between how much money is spent to provide such services and the amount of physical activity that people take part in," said Godbey. "You get what you pay for."

In one study cited in the report prepared by the researchers for the National Recreation and Park Association, spending an extra \$10 per person on park and recreational facilities provided more [vigorous exercise](#) for girls and better strength-building for both sexes.

"As the study points out, for just an additional \$10, that money provides a significant increase in the amount of exercise you can get," said Godbey. "What would a health club provide for that same \$10?"

The number of parks and playgrounds in a community can also raise the fitness level of residents. For example, one study found that there was an increase of 17 more minutes of physical activity for each park within a half mile of a home.

In addition, studies have shown that the closer parks and recreational sites are to where people live, the more people use them and the more physically active they are.

Access to public parks promotes increased [physical activity](#) for nearly all age groups. About 85 percent of middle-aged and older participants surveyed in a five-city study said they visited a local park within the last year. The same survey indicated that 40 percent of those people go to the park more than once a week, a sign that park use was embedded into their lifestyle.

"Park use becomes more deeply ingrained in users and quickly becomes part of their lives," said Godbey. "People are being active and having fun for the sake of having fun, not as a health outcome, which, to them, is just an added benefit."

Godbey said that losing access to parks might cause unhealthy behavior.

"The physical benefits of park and recreation access are sort of obvious, but we have to look at the reverse," said Godbey. "If people aren't going to parks, what would they be doing with that time? Would they be sitting around at home, drinking a few beers, eating cheese puffs, and watching reruns on television?"

Since government officials often cut park and recreation spending first, Mowen said that park and recreational professionals could use the evidence presented in this report to educate officials and residents on the relatively inexpensive health benefits provided by parks.

"Most people, especially elected officials, consider park and recreational services as an amenity or as discretionary spending," said Mowen.

"These studies argue that park and recreational facilities are part of the health care system, or should be."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: Key to better health care may be a walk in the park (2011, February 9) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2011-02-key-health.html>

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