

Park use influences perceived health, study shows

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Penn State researchers have long understood the important connection between parks and health.

A research article published in Preventing Chronic Disease, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's peer-reviewed journal, clarified this connection across a national sample of Americans.

The article, published in January and titled "The relationship between self-rated [health](#) and use of parks and participation in [recreation](#) programs, United States, 1991 and 2015," showed that Americans who use their local parks or participated in recreation programs offered by local park and recreation agencies are more likely to report high levels of self-reported overall health status through the SF-1, a measure of self-rated health frequently used by health organizations.

"It was exciting to see a relationship with self-reported health, as this single question is strongly associated with risk of hospitalization and death and is used nationally by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to monitor the nation's health in its CountyHealthRankings.org online resource," said Dr. Christopher Sciamanna, co-author and professor of medicine and [public health services](#) at Penn State College of Medicine.

The research stems from data collected in 1991 and 2015 as part of a broader look at Americans' use and perceptions of local parks and recreation services. Both studies were commissioned by the National Recreation and Park Association, and conducted by Andrew Mowen and

Alan Graefe, professors of recreation, park and tourism management at Penn State, and Geoffrey Godbey, professor emeritus from the same department.

Researchers found that the connection between parks, recreation and health strengthened over time. Specifically, the results showed that in 1991 neither park visitation nor recreational program participation were significantly related to perceived health. However, in 2015 frequent park users and recreation program participants were more likely to report high perceived health than those who did not frequent parks or participate in recreational programs. In both time periods, those with higher levels of educational attainment reported higher levels of self-rated health.

"Based on this information, parks and recreational services should be considered a key part of America's health care system, as the connection of these services to health is becoming more evident over time," said Nicholas Pitas, lead author and doctoral candidate at Penn State. "This study supports the importance of locally offered recreation services, and argues in favor of investing in local park facilities and recreation programming."

More information: Nicholas A. D. Pitas et al. The Relationship Between Self-Rated Health and Use of Parks and Participation in Recreation Programs, United States, 1991 and 2015, *Preventing Chronic Disease* (2017). [DOI: 10.5888/pcd14.160441](https://doi.org/10.5888/pcd14.160441)

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