

PARKS AND RECREATION

What are Parks and Recreation?

Parks, sports fields and playgrounds provide opportunities to stay active, meet with friends and enjoy nature. Recreation facilities such as pools, skating rinks, running tracks and community centres within our neighbourhoods enable us to engage in independent or structured group activities. Often, many of these facilities are free to access, making physical activity more equitable for vulnerable populations.

How do they affect health?

Physical activity is one of the most beneficial things we can do to stay healthy over the course of our lives, and the built environment of our communities plays an important role in promoting exercise.

Among the better health outcomes increased levels of physical activity can achieve are a reduced risk of over 25 chronic conditions,¹ including coronary heart disease, stroke, breast cancer, colon cancer, Type 2 diabetes and osteoporosis. Physical activity is also good for mental health. It can improve sleep, relieve stress, anxiety and depression, and reduce reliance on drugs and alcohol.² It also supports cognitive functioning in older people and delays the onset of dementia. It has been estimated³ that physical inactivity is costing Canada \$6.8 billion every year in health-related costs due to escalating rates of chronic diseases.

Unfortunately, most people in Canada do not get the levels of physical activity required to maintain good health. National guidelines⁴ recommend adults get 150 minutes of moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity per week in bouts of at least 10 minutes in order to gain the powerful health benefits. Many people identify lack of time⁵ as a major barrier to physical activity.

Neighbourhood parks provide opportunities to incorporate more outdoor recreation and be more connected with nature, which has deep associations with our mental health and well-being. People who have more contact with urban parks⁶ are more relaxed, more efficient, less frustrated, more confident and more satisfied.

Ensuring early positive experiences is vitally important. Childhood experiences with outdoor recreation can shape a person's behaviour over the course of their life. Ensuring there are parks and other opportunities to have positive outdoor recreation experiences in early life can help ensure that people gain the physical and mental health benefits of outdoor recreation, and the benefits of social interaction, throughout their entire lives.⁷

Having pleasant green spaces in your community encourages residents to spend more time in nature, which promotes better mental health. Those with regular exposure to nature⁸ have an increased ability to cope with stress, improved productivity, reduced job-related frustration, increased self-esteem and increased life satisfaction. Having attractive greenery nearby creates a space where residents want to spend time relaxing and recovering from the stresses of city life.

Green spaces also promote better social cohesion, connectedness and a sense of belonging. People who connect with nature feel less isolated⁹ and less focused on themselves because they have the opportunity to interact with others in their community.

Who is affected?

Though greenness has many health benefits, and neighbourhoods that promote physical activity benefit Canadians, they are not equally distributed. Low-income populations in Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto are more likely to live in neighbourhoods with low levels of greenness¹⁰ while high income populations are more likely to live in neighbourhoods with high levels of greenness. However, low-income populations have the most to gain from public green spaces.

In communities without green space, like those provided by parks, low-income populations have more pronounced death rates from any cause, in particular from heart disease, compared to their higher income neighbours.¹¹ By contrast, communities with more exposure to green space don't experience as extreme disparities in mortality rates.¹² Inequalities in mental well-being are smaller among urban dwellers with good access to green areas, compared with those without easy access.¹³

PARKS AND RECREATION (CONT'D)

Green space can also help vulnerable populations more easily manage life transitions by creating space for meaningful social interactions. Social contact is known to be important for health and well-being,¹⁴ especially for older people, who go through significant life transitions, and for whom social isolation can increase their risk of death.¹⁵ Green spaces can alleviate some of the negative impacts of such transitions on personal well-being. For example, older adults who participate in group-based outdoor activities gain structure and routine, meaningful social interaction and develop a sense of achievement, pride and ownership.¹⁶

References

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