

# Parks: Community Places that Provide Social Support and a Sense of Community

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## Key Words

Parks, Social Support, Community, Neighbors

## Background

Attractive, proximate parks have been publically provided for urbanites in the United States since the 1850s, when Central Park was developed to provide city dwellers an escape from busy, overloaded, unnatural city life.<sup>1</sup> During the rise of the Industrial era, parks were also seen as an opportunity to allow people to get out of the factories to socialize with other community members and to engage in physical activity. In today's information age, plagued with sprawl, information overload, auto-dependency, and technology dependency, urban parks and the community level benefits they provide remain important.

The mere presence of natural elements, such as trees, increases the likelihood of creating places that encourage social interactions.<sup>2</sup> Parks are venues for social interaction. More than 70% of participants in a study of California park users indicated they interact with others when at the park.<sup>3</sup> Female users of a New York park described the park as "friendly," "neighborly," "neighborhoody," and "a feel of a

community."<sup>4</sup> The New York park users discussed their enjoyment in encountering and "interacting with others whom they ordinarily might not."<sup>4</sup> The users explained the value and meaning of familiarity derived from:

- "Chance meetings with friends and acquaintances in the park"<sup>4</sup>
- "Becoming better acquainted with others whom they saw in the park regularly"<sup>4</sup>
- "Developing a sense of familiarity and friendliness with strangers who none the less remained anonymous"<sup>4</sup>

"Some described very brief, casual encounters, such as a quick smile and 'hello' when they passed other joggers whom they saw regularly, which were enough to foster a sense of familiarity, if not intimacy."<sup>4</sup>

They also discussed how the park felt like "a small community" and how they valued the diversity of people they encountered and interacted with.<sup>4</sup> Parks can serve as "green magnets" or as an asset that pulls people from different backgrounds and even proximate neighborhoods together.<sup>5</sup>

Park users in Singapore felt proximity was important in that "the neighborhood park provides a convenient place for social contact and interaction".<sup>6</sup> It was evident from interviews with these users that parks can facilitate social opportunities and foster relationships by providing a gathering place for groups such as teens and socially isolated mothers to meet other people. Discussions about park uses clearly indicated that parks promoted social interactions with neighbors and friends.<sup>6</sup>

Active-friendly environments also contribute to creating a sense of community by fostering interactions with neighbors. Auto-dependent communities not only negatively impact physical activity patterns, but also negatively impact community interactions. "The residential patterns that have mushroomed across the country in the last half century have reduced the sense of community leading to social isolation, to 'disconnect and fragmentation.'<sup>7</sup> People cannot interact with each other from their cars."<sup>7</sup>



An investigation of the impact community environments have on social capital found that respondents living in auto-dependent communities experienced lower degrees of social capital than those living in mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods.<sup>8</sup> “Respondents living in walkable neighborhoods were more likely to know their neighbors, participate politically, trust others, and be socially engaged.”<sup>8</sup> These findings relate to the ideas that environments can facilitate “casual” interactions at community places such as parks and walkable spaces. Thus, active-friendly communities promote social interactions that develop social capital.

Trails are also credited for fostering social interactions and a sense of community.<sup>9</sup> These interactions are often in the form of a wave or smile. When trails provide an environment that promotes social interactions, they create a sense of familiarity and contribute to the quality of life perceived by community members.<sup>9</sup>

Jane Jacobs indicated over 50 years ago that parks can serve as places that foster social interaction. Many communities are seeing this today.<sup>10</sup> Some residents of the City of Henderson attribute the increases in sociability their town is experiencing to recent developments in their park system. One community member explained, “sociability between neighbors is reappearing in cities like Henderson because they have a developing park and trail system...It is a very welcome trend after so many people practiced social isolation.”<sup>11</sup>

As communities densify and diversify, it is important that community parks are placed and designed to provide opportunities for social interaction and cohesion. These interactions can often serve as the basis for maintaining community culture, interaction, and pride.

### Relevant Extension Resources

- Parkland and Open Space Planning: Urban and Municipal Park Planning Programs ([agrilife.org/urbanparks](http://agrilife.org/urbanparks))
- Parkland Dedication Ordinances in Texas: A missed Opportunity. Texas AgriLife Bookstore Publication

E-233. <https://agrilifebookstore.org/>

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