

What is a Proximate and Why does it Matter for Park Planning?

Jamie Rae Walker, Ph.D.

Key Words

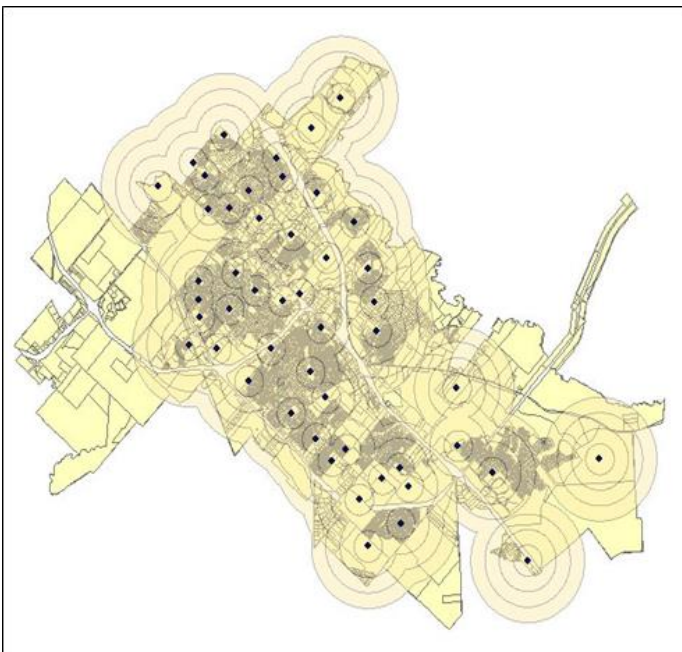
Parks, Proximate, Supportive Environment

Background

Communities with extensive, proximate, and attractive park spaces tend to be described as restorative, active, and friendly communities. Parks contribute significantly to making communities places where people desire to live.¹ Developing a better understanding of the extent to which proximity relates to park use is important not only for helping to improve service levels, but also for understanding the broader benefits related to increased park use at the community level.¹

Household proximity to parks plays a role in level of use of parks, and should be considered when acquiring land for parks. Factors influencing perceived access to parks (e.g. walkability) should also be considered when planning new parks and should be reviewed for existing parks.¹

Park planners and community leaders can benefit from



understanding the related outcomes to providing proximate parks; the definitions and operationalizations of proximity; and the limitations of these definitions and operationalizations.

A study of neighborhood parks indicated that the proximity of parks has a direct relationship to the outcomes. Respondents indicated that neighborhood parks were “convenient places to relax, enjoy nature, and socialize...”² The study data inferred that convenience of the park was key to the benefits.

Proximate parks can have many positive community impacts such as:³

- Adding value to surrounding property values,
- Improving park usage rates,
- Addressing user constraints based on access,
- Providing accessible opportunities for physical activity,
- Creating contact with nature and restorative environments,
- Mitigating water, climate, air, and pollution,
- Creating or maintaining ecological habitats,
- Encouraging community interactions, and
- Supporting local economies.

Historic studies in park use and proximity, as well as a more recent comprehensive review looking at physical activity research related to recreation and parks, indicated a wide range of operationalizations are utilized to define proximity. This includes perceived measures and objective measures such as:⁴

Perceived measures:

- “Within my neighborhood”
- Within walking distance of my home”
- “Near where I live”

Objective measures:

- Distances ranging from 400 meters to 1500 meters
- Time measures such as 20 minutes walking distance

Jane Jacobs strongly argued that many parks proximate to

dense neighborhoods have people walk by them who never use them.⁵ When measuring the impact of proximate parks in relation to use rates and related community outcomes, it is also important to consider additional factors such as:

- Competing resources⁶
- Type of park^{6,7,8,10,11}
- Park size⁹
- Surrounding density^{8,10}
- Walkability, wayfinding and gateways¹¹
- Mutli-modal access¹¹
- Type of development adjacent or near the park^{7,8,11,12}
- Safety of the park³
- Infrastructure and opportunities provided within the park^{7,8}

Yuen's study of park use concludes "the value of neighborhood places in the urban fabric lies in their convenient location, that is proximity to the home" (p. 304)². Thus, it is important to better understand "proximity" and "convenience" and the impact both have on providing valuable community places such as parks.

What Communities Can Do

- Identify or develop meaningful measures for park proximity;
- Conduct a systematic assessment of proximate parks in their community;
- Update park and comprehensive plans as well as related policies to support improving location of and access to proximate parks for all residents in their communities.

Relevant Extension Resources

For reading resources visit the AgriLife Extension Bookstore at: <https://agrilifebookstore.org/> or <http://agrilife.org/urbanparks/home/educational-resources/>

- Parkland Dedication Ordinances in Texas: A missed Opportunity. Texas AgriLife Bookstore Publication E-233
- The Role of parks as community places for social support and help build community interactions
- The role of parks as community places that provide active-friendly community environments
- The role of parks as community places that provide recreation and improved psychological health

References

1. Healthy Parks, Schools and Communities: Mapping Green Access and Equity for Southern California. Acquired at: <http://www.cityprojectca.org/map-justice>
2. Yuen, B. (1996). Use and experience of neighborhood parks in Singapore. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 28(4), 293-311; a. p. 305; b. p.306.
3. Crompton, J.L. (2008). Evolution and Implications of a Paradigm Shift in the Marketing of Leisure Services in the U.S. *Leisure Studies*, 27(2), 181-205.
4. Kaczynski, A.T., and Henderson, K.A. (2007). Environmental correlates of physical activity: a review of evidence about parks and recreation. *Leisure Sciences*, 29(4), 315 - 354.
5. Jacobs, J. (1961). *The death and life of great American cities*. London: Random House
6. Dee N. and Liebman, J.C. (1970). A statistical study of attendance of urban playgrounds. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 2(3), 145-149.
7. Bengtsson, A. (1970). *Environmental planning for children's' play*. London: Crosby Lockwood and Son Ltd.
8. Hodges, L. (1971). *An analysis of patterns of visitation to recreation centers in the city of Dallas, TX*. Ph.D. Dissertation. College Station: Texas A&M University.
9. Bangs, H.P., and Maher, S. (1970). Users of local parks. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 36 (Sept.), 330-334.
10. Cohen, D., Sehgal, A., Williamson, S., Sturm, R., McKenzie, T.L., Lara, R., and Lurie, N. (2006). *Park use and physical activity in a sample of public parks in the City of Los Angeles*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
11. Fenton, M. (2015). Healthy Communities by Design: Building Health in Every Sense of the Word. Available at: <http://www.markfenton.com>.
12. Gold, S. (1972). Nonuse of neighborhood parks. *Journal of American Planning Association*, 38(6), 369-378.