



A TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND SPECIAL REPORT

Parks and the pandemic

THE
TRUST
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LAND



Table of contents

Introduction	2
Parks and health.....	3
Parks and usage	5
Parks and policy	7
Parks and investment	9
Parks and the future.....	11

Introduction

The global pandemic has underscored that close-to-home parks are crucial to a community's quality of life. During this crisis, people have turned to their parks like never before – for fresh air, exercise, meditation, a sense of peace. Research shows that parkland is, indeed, a potent force for our well-being: numerous scientific studies show the benefits of nature for both physical and mental health.

But with the twin crises of a pandemic and an economy in free fall, our parks and public land now face extraordinary pressures. Given the sharp drop in all forms of tax revenue, cities have already begun targeting park systems for budget cuts.

This is shortsighted. At The Trust for Public Land, we know from nearly 50 years of experience that parks and green spaces are essential infrastructure – every bit as critical as, say, roads and utilities. As we emerge from the pandemic in the months and years ahead, we must nurture Americans' newfound appreciation for the outdoors into new investment that provides this vital benefit for everyone.

Currently, 100 million Americans – almost one in three people – do not have a park within a 10-minute walk of home. By using data to target where investment in parks, trails, and open spaces will bring the greatest return and by transforming schoolyards to double as parks when schools are closed, we can ensure that everyone has access to the healthful, life-affirming benefits of nature close-to-home.

As COVID-19 strains communities, access to the outdoors matters now more than ever. This report considers the challenges and changes that the pandemic poses to America's parks and open spaces, including:

- **PARKS AND HEALTH**

Parks are widely recognized as critical for health and wellness, reducing anxiety, stress, and depression and improving physical health – all the more necessary during this public health emergency.

- **PARKS AND USAGE**

During this period of quarantine, parks and public land are seeing some of their highest usage in modern times, and local officials are reporting dramatic upticks in visitors. Parks are proving to be an essential part of how we cope and recover from this crisis.

- **PARKS AND POLICY**

As officials reimagine park policy in real time, equitable access is becoming a driving factor in decision-making.

- **PARKS AND INVESTMENT**

Park systems are essential infrastructure in towns and cities across the nation. Decisions made in the next few months will determine whether the outdoors become more accessible and equitable and further benefit the health of communities, or slide backward.

- **PARKS AND THE FUTURE**

The pandemic highlights that in too many communities, access to the outdoors is considered a privilege when it should be a right. With the data to pinpoint where parks are most needed, we can transform the outlook for outdoor equality across the nation.



MARIE D. DE JESUS

Park advocates say the pandemic is giving society a deeper appreciation for the power of spending time in the outdoors.

Parks and health:

DURING COVID-19, PARKS ARE KEY TO HOW WE COPE—AND HOW WE’LL RECOVER.

BY: SADIYA MUQUEETH, DRPH, MPH

The importance of parkland has never been so apparent as during the global pandemic.

The spread of the coronavirus and the resulting closures of workplaces, restaurants, and entertainment venues have made people eager to get outdoors and spend time in nature. Health experts say that is a good thing. Sunlight, fresh air, exercise, and access to green spaces all have a positive effect on our physical health and emotional well-being.

“Parks, beaches—as long as they’re not cheek to jowl, cycling, walking, this is good,” said Tom Frieden, the former director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [in a recent article in The Hill](#). “Enjoy nature. It’s good for us, and it has very low risk of spreading the virus.”

Decades of research underscores the impressive benefits of spending time outdoors. Studies reveal, for instance, that access to green space boosts academic performance and concentration, and that people who live within a short distance to parks are more likely to be physically active than those who do not. Other research shows that time spent in nature reduces blood pressure and stress levels.

A recent study in the medical journal *The Lancet* found an [inverse relationship](#) between exposure to natural vegetation—or greenness—and mortality rates. The study followed more than 23,000 people in China with a median age of 93 and varying exposure to nature. The researchers noted that greenness is associated with more physical activity, better mental health, sounder sleep, lower stress levels, improved cognition, and faster hospital recovery.

A [study published](#) last year in the journal *Frontiers in Psychology* found that time in nature led to a reduction in stress hormones. Researchers took saliva samples from three dozen city residents who were asked to have contact with nature—through a park visit, say—three times a week for at least ten minutes. “The efficiency of a nature pill per time

expended was greatest between 20 and 30 minutes,” the authors said.

Additionally, a [landmark study](#) in the journal *Science*, published in 1984, tracked the recoveries of patients following gallbladder surgery in a suburban Pennsylvania hospital. Researchers found that the patients assigned to rooms with a view of nature recovered more quickly and experienced less pain than the patients whose windows looked onto a brick building.

Kathleen Wolf, a research social scientist at the University of Washington’s College of the Environment, said that research on the relationship between mental health and nature stretched back four decades. “It’s not that it’s new,” she said of the research, “but we are starting to speak with more conviction about those benefits.”

In this period of stress overload, many are turning to the power of nature to restore a sense of calm. “The demand on our attention now is unprecedented,” she said. “When we deplete the ability to focus on a task and to pay attention, we get irritable and become more impulsive and perhaps even more aggressive to others.”

Wolf said that encounters with nature offer sensory experiences—the movement of clouds, a light breeze, the sound of birdsong—that “command our attention, but not in a way that is tiring.” Those experiences, she added, “help us to restore that capacity to direct our attention.” And it doesn’t have to involve a trip to a national park or jaw-dropping scenery. “Stepping outside to a small park or maybe just seeing a single tree,” she said, “can promote this recovery.”

With the spread of COVID-19 [disproportionately affecting America’s poor and working class](#), experts also note that lower-income neighborhoods often lack access to quality green spaces, thereby depriving residents of the healthful benefits of spending time in nature.

“The COVID-19 response, while clearly necessary, created a huge burden of cabin fever, loneliness, anxiety, stress, and personal loss,” says Howard Frumkin, professor emeritus of Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences at the University of Washington School of Public Health. “The data are clear: parks and greenspace soothe and console us, relax and restore us, reduce our anxiety, depression, and stress. In this and in future pandemics, we’ll want to combine physical distancing and other infection-control measures with universal access to parks and greenspace, to help everyone get through hard times as safely as possible.”

At the same time, because the infection is easily transmitted through close contact with sufferers and the surfaces they touch, it is critical to take precautions when visiting a local park – or even when going for a walk in your neighborhood. Guidelines vary by state, and some states now require residents to wear masks or face coverings in public. It continues to be our collective responsibility to pay close attention to health and safety guidelines from local government, health officials, or parks departments.

Nationally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has [a number of recommendations](#) about safely visiting parks. First and foremost, the agency emphasizes that you should stay home if you are feeling sick or were recently exposed to the novel coronavirus. If you do venture out, choose a destination close to home since “traveling long distances to visit a park may contribute to the spread of COVID-19.”

In addition, the CDC urges Americans to avoid crowded parks and playgrounds and to forgo organized sports. Many towns and cities have already closed playgrounds, athletic fields, and basketball courts within larger parks to reduce the likelihood of close contact. Access to nature centers and restrooms varies by state and municipality. But health experts caution park goers to wash hands frequently with warm soap and water for at least 20 seconds, especially after going to the bathroom, encountering high-touch surfaces such as railings and doors, and before eating.

Whether strolling on a beach or hiking along a woodland trail, practice social distancing by staying at least six feet away from others and, if possible, bring along your own container of hand sanitizer.

With summer around the corner and water sports beckoning, the CDC reassures the public that there is no evidence that COVID-19 can be transmitted to people through the water, and it is likely that the chemicals used in swimming pools would wipe out the virus.

Still, federal health authorities are discouraging visits to spas, hot tubs, water parks, and playgrounds with spray features for the simple reason that it is difficult to practice social distancing at those venues. The CDC guidelines add that at these sites “it can be challenging to keep surfaces clean and disinfected.”

Despite these warnings and caveats, the CDC and other health experts agree that outdoor activity and time spent in nature can improve health and help shake off the malaise associated with the stay-at-home advisories that have sprung up around the country. Those advisories include exceptions for shopping trips to grocery stores and pharmacies, as well as outings for walks and other forms of exercise, whether jogging or bicycling.

“Staying physically active is one of the best ways to keep your mind and body healthy,” the CDC affirms on its web page about visiting parks. “In many areas, people can visit parks, trails, and open spaces as a way to relieve stress, get some fresh air and vitamin D, stay active, and safely connect with others.”

-Sadiya Muqueeth, DrPH, MPH, is director of community health at The Trust for Public Land.



Experts say that spending time outdoors is critical for health and wellness, and all the more necessary during this public health emergency.

Parks and usage:

WHEN LIFE WENT ON HOLD, AMERICA FLOCKED TO PARKS

BY: LINDA HWANG

As COVID-19 effectively eliminates the places Americans can go and the things they can do, many are beating a path to their neighborhood park.

“We’ve seen a major uptick in the use of our parks since the coronavirus outbreak,” said J. Nicholas Williams, director of Oakland Parks, Recreation and Youth Development Department. “Parks are the most valuable resource in the city at this point.”

As movie theaters, restaurants, bars, and stores have closed across the country, parks have emerged as the one safe space for scratching the itch to get out of the house. Fortunately, most stay-at-home advisories carve out exceptions for forays into nature – whether for a walk, a run, or a bike ride. And the vast majority of states and cities have kept parks open, even while shutting certain amenities like playgrounds, nature centers, and tennis courts.

The result, in many places, is a surge in park visitation. People are eager to escape the claustrophobia of home, and state and city parks officials have noted increases from Pennsylvania to Ohio to Texas. In Dallas, where parks employees monitor usage on more than a dozen popular trails, visitation rose from 30 percent to 75 percent during the month of March. On the White Rock Creek Trail, for instance, there were 5,838 visitors during the first week of March. By the last week of the month, that number climbed to 13,883.

Like other cities, Dallas saw a gradual closure of its playgrounds, recreation centers, basketball courts, golf courses – even the city’s arboretum and zoo. That put pressure on passive areas like lawns and trails. “It was a progressive letdown,” said Calvert Collins-Bratton, president of the Dallas Park and Recreation Board. “Instead of one fell swoop – closing everything at once – we wanted to ease people into it and slowly shut things down.”

At Presque Isle State Park in Erie, Pennsylvania, the number of visitors soared 165 percent during the third

week of March, compared to the same week last year. And even though Metroparks Toledo eliminated a third of the parking spots in the system’s busiest park to allow for social distancing, park visitation was up six percent over last year during the five-week period from mid-March to April. Similarly, visitation climbed between 18 percent and 27 percent at some less-frequented parks after officials urged residents to give them a try.

From the Pacific Northwest to the mid-Atlantic states, inclement weather and stay-at-home advisories have surely had an effect on park use. But people have nonetheless streamed into green spaces. In San Francisco, closure of nonessential businesses, as well as that of individual park amenities, has led to growing numbers of park goers in places like the 1,017-acre Golden Gate Park, which was



The new normal on Venice Beach

ISTOCK USER IAN WINSLOW

supposed to celebrate its 150th anniversary in early April with 150,000 fans. (The event was canceled due to the pandemic.)

“We have definitely noticed that while most of our city is quiet and there’s very little traffic on the streets, our parks remain very busy – as busy as before, if not busier,” said Phil Ginsburg, general manager of the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department.

In Colorado, some of the state’s most popular destinations – like Red Rock Canyon Open Space in Colorado Springs – were starting to become overwhelmed. So staff members at the Trails and Open Space Coalition, a nonprofit group, launched a campaign called “[Get Out – Spread Out](#)” to publicize parks and trails that are less well known, posting detailed maps and videos on its website. Among the nearly 90 destinations featured for walks, hikes, and bike rides were the Cottonwood Creek Trail Loop and Piñon Valley Park.

In addition to looking for an antidote to cabin fever, some people are making a beeline to parks and open spaces in search of a daily dose of vitamin D, which doctors say can boost the immune system. Sunlight aids in the synthesis of the vitamin, which also reduces the risk of illness, says [Healthbeat](#), an online publication of Harvard Medical School.

On top of that is the simple fact of spring. “What is very obvious, at all hours of the day, is people’s need to be outside, to get a little exercise and connect with nature,” said Ginsburg. “In the park world, we know that just 20 minutes a day outside actually reduces stress and strengthens your immune system. So I do see myself as an advocate for the collateral physical and mental health benefits that parks offer to our community right now.”

-Linda Hwang is director of research and innovation at The Trust for Public Land.



Aerial view of people sunbathing in New York City’s Central Park, prior to the pandemic. COVID-19 has forced officials to make difficult and creative decisions to balance public health with public demand for parks and open space.

Parks and policy:

AS PARK OFFICIALS REIMAGINE POLICY IN REAL TIME, EQUITABLE ACCESS MUST DRIVE DECISION-MAKING

BY: BENITA HUSSAIN

Since the start of the pandemic, Ryan Woods's phone has not stopped ringing.

"The biggest challenge is everyone is calling us and asking whether they will be able to hold their golf tournament this year, their baseball league, their special event," said Woods, commissioner of Boston Parks and Recreation, sounding understandably weary. "We just don't know. We are taking it one day at a time."

In the last few months, the novel coronavirus has shuttered many of the places people gather: restaurants, theaters, churches, stadiums, schools, and workplaces. And as more and more people have turned to public land for respite to cope with the "new normal," parks have posed a challenge for city and state officials.

In Boston and around the country, officials have had to think creatively to balance providing access to the outdoors with managing public safety. Most of the 100 largest cities – including Boston – have closed features that put people in the closest contact while generally keeping passive recreation areas open. That has meant cordoning off playgrounds, golf courses, and basketball courts, and closing parking areas at some of the most crowded parks. All athletic permits were canceled through June 1 and the annual order for portable toilets was scrapped.

"We don't want to close parks," said Woods, whose park system is within a 10-minute walk of 100 percent of residents, according to The Trust for Public Land's 2020 ParkScore® Index. "What we've seen in articles in the *Boston Globe* is the importance of having parks open, giving people that place to go, that release."

Across the country, the pandemic has led parks departments to consider a range of policy changes that they never thought they'd face. At the state and local levels, parks have,

for the most part, remained open, while many amenities within parks are off-limits. On the national level, the U.S. National Park Service has shuttered some of the most popular national parks, such as Yellowstone and Yosemite, while leaving others open.

A survey of the hundred most populated American cities showed that by the end of April, only two cities – Newark, New Jersey, and Washington, D.C. – still had a majority of their parks and trails closed due to the pandemic. Another ten, including Arlington, Virginia, and El Paso, Texas, still had partial closures, most keeping trails open while closing playgrounds and park areas.

Furthermore, parks departments nationwide are reporting that with so few other public spaces open, beaches, lawns, and trails are full to bursting. This has required some cities to devise new solutions to overcrowding as the weather warms.

On the popular Katy Trail in Dallas, for example, use of that trail had mushroomed in March, with 22,834 visitors recorded at a single entrance during the first week of the month and 34,366 during the last week. This prompted officials to institute a voluntary system in late March in which people whose last names start with the letters A through L use the trail on Thursdays and Saturdays, while those whose names begin with M through Z visit on Fridays and Sundays. (Everyone is welcome Monday through Wednesday, which tend to be less busy.)

Other places, like Marshlands Conservancy, a county wildlife sanctuary in Westchester County, New York, are posting one-way signs on trails that form a loop to lessen the likelihood that people will cross paths.

Education campaigns have also ramped up. San Francisco posted 1,500 signs reminding people to socially distance. In Oakland, California, officials wanted to keep soccer

fields open to give people more elbow room. But to discourage games, they placed physical barriers in the middle of the fields.

States and cities have ranged widely on whether or not they encourage or discourage the use of parking lots. Some cities have closed parking lots at packed parks while keeping the parks open. That has raised questions of fairness since people who do not live within walking distance are effectively cut off.

In New York, Governor Andrew M. Cuomo has encouraged residents to visit state parks, even waiving all parking and entrance fees during the crisis. At the same time, the state has reduced parking capacity at many of its most popular parks outside New York City and closed several heavily used trails in Hudson Highlands State Park.

“It’s a tricky balance,” acknowledged Phil Ginsburg, general manager of the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, which, like Boston, has limited or closed park areas next to some waterfronts and sports fields. “There were certain destination spaces that were too crowded. We are saying that ‘if you need to be in a car, it’s too far.’ To be clear, there are some equity considerations that we need to grapple with. But one of San Francisco’s strengths is its park access. One hundred percent of us live within a 10-minute walk of a park.”

In an acknowledgment of the pressure on parks right now, more cities are turning to the novel solution of the “open streets” movement, relieving crowding on sidewalks by closing hundreds of miles of city streets to car traffic and inviting residents to use their thoroughfares for recreation.

At the beginning of May, more than two dozen cities had converted streets to pedestrian use, representing 421 miles of roadway. In Oakland, California, officials in April pledged to make 74 miles of streets, or 10 percent of the total, available. Under the Oakland Slow Streets Program, the streets are open only to emergency vehicles and local traffic that must use the streets to reach their destination.

“It’s going well,” said J. Nicholas Williams, director of the Oakland Parks, Recreation and Youth Development Department. “It was difficult to message early on because we didn’t close all the streets and it created some social distancing issues. We opened the streets to create more safe

passageways. It wasn’t to create open space for a certain neighborhood to go outside and play, but to take a walk.”

Now, as some states begin to reopen, parks administrators are again having to shift gears. Reducing the spread of the virus continues to be their top priority, and so they are weighing which amenities to reinstate first.

In Texas, where restaurants, malls, theaters, and museums reopened at 25 percent capacity on May 1, parks officials in Dallas convened a task force to make recommendations on how to bring park amenities back online.

Even before those recommendations, John D. Jenkins, director of Dallas Park and Recreation, decided it was safe to reopen golf courses, tennis courts, and tennis centers, as well as resume outdoor exercise classes. But each reintroduction comes with caveats and compromises. For outdoor classes, participants must keep a distance of 12 feet between the instructor and each other.

“It’s the new normal, at least for the next six months,” Jenkins observed.

He predicted that playgrounds would likely be out of commission for some time. “That’s a tough one,” he said. “That will probably be the last amenity we reopen.”

-Benita Hussain is director of the 10 Minute Walk campaign at The Trust for Public Land.



Around the country, playgrounds have been closed due to COVID-19 and officials say they will be some of the last amenities to reopen.

Parks and investment:

PARKS ARE ESSENTIAL INFRASTRUCTURE.
WE CAN'T SHORTCHANGE THEM.

BY: CHARLIE MCCABE

The pandemic sweeping the globe has yielded not only the worst public health crisis in modern times but also an economic meltdown. In the United States, the impact on state and local budgets is only starting to come into focus, and what it portends for parks in particular is still uncertain.

Park professionals and finance experts say that much depends on how quickly a vaccine and treatments are developed as well as whether park amenities can safely reopen with social distancing and other precautions to stop the virus's spread.

The consensus, however, is that the picture for parks will be bleak indeed. A survey by the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) in mid-April of some 300 park commissioners found that about half have already been asked to cut their budgets for the current fiscal year – by anywhere from 10 to 20 percent.

“What’s happening in many states and cities is that tax revenue is just drying up,” said Kevin Roth, NRPA’s vice president of research, evaluation, and technology. “There are a lot of hiring freezes already and we’re starting to see layoffs of part-time and seasonal staff.”

Park systems are facing a triple threat: Municipal budgets are severely stressed. Permit fees from athletic programs and special events, which make up a third of many parks budgets, are disappearing. And parks departments are incurring new expenses because of the coronavirus, like personal protective equipment for staff.

A look back to the Great Recession of the late 2000s offers a cautionary tale for parks departments. Generally, parks budgets were cut first (and deepest) and were among the last to recover, as city officials prioritized public safety, transportation, and education.

Parks benefited from robust budgets in the years before the fiscal crisis, but spending then fell precipitously after the crisis hit. From 2003 to 2008, for instance, park and recreation spending grew 14.7 percent, according to an article in NRPA’s *Parks & Recreation* magazine entitled “[The Great Recession’s Profound Impact on Parks and Recreation](#).” But from 2009 to 2013, spending dropped 21.2 percent.

By 2013, parks and recreation represented 1.9 percent of all local government expenditures, down from 2.2 percent in 2000, NRPA noted. By contrast, only libraries and corrections received a smaller percentage of local government expenditures.

In the spring of 2017, the NRPA commissioned a survey of 810 city managers and mayors in all 50 states to assess their views on parks and budgeting. Conducted by researchers at Pennsylvania State University, the survey found that local officials viewed parks and recreation spending as “discretionary” and “a luxury.”

“They openly acknowledged that parks and recreation budgets are one of their targets when they need to balance budgets during bad times,” Roth said. “Obviously we think that’s not right. We see a lot of examples, especially in the last two months, where parks are *the* recreation opportunity – a chance for someone to get outside and be physically active and get vitamin D.”

Roth added that a third of park agencies are now also offering emergency services by converting recreation centers to shelters, delivering meals, and providing day care to children of first responders and health care workers. “The contributions park departments are making are really essential,” he said, “and their budgets should be maintained, if not actually growing, in this environment.”

The stimulus packages that sprinkled federal money across the country during the Great Recession also do not bode well for parks departments. The stimulus of 2009, for example, focused on a number of areas, with park- and conservation-related spending making up a fraction of the federal infusion: about \$2 billion of a total fund amount of \$787 billion.

And almost all of that money went to federal projects, not state and local. For infrastructure spending related to job creation, shovel-ready projects took center stage. Total infrastructure spending was \$105.3 billion, of which \$48.1 billion went to transportation; \$21.5 billion to energy infrastructure; and \$18 billion to water, sewage, environment, and public lands.

Of the \$18 billion in the last category, the lion's share of funding for parks and conservation benefited federal agencies: \$750 million to the National Park Service; \$650 million to the Forest Service; \$329 million to the Bureau of Land Management; and \$280 million to national wildlife refuges and fish hatcheries.

There is some hope for parks, however. Hundreds of millions of dollars could flow to towns and cities from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which Congress permanently reauthorized last year. The federal program finances conservation programs from royalties that oil and gas companies must pay in exchange for drilling in federal waters.

And in April, the Senate introduced the Coronavirus Community Relief Act, which would provide \$250 billion to stabilize cities and towns with populations under 500,000 that are suffering economically from the pandemic. The money is intended to help municipalities make up for lost revenue and recover financially and could keep more parks open for communities to enjoy.

But given that local parks officials could have to fend for themselves, advocates are urging that park staffing be spared. With virtually all programs canceled this spring, there will be pent-up demand for classes and team sports, they argue. And parks and trails have taken a beating in recent weeks as throngs of people have fled the confines of home for the great outdoors.

Andrew J. Mowen, a professor in the Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management at Pennsylvania State University, said he hoped that maintenance and upkeep would not slip. "We need our parks safe, clean, and enjoyable to use," he said. "You don't visit a place for its restrooms, but not having clean bathrooms can keep you away."

Around the country, examples abound of parks departments already having to take a knife to budgets. In Texas, John D. Jenkins, director of the Dallas Park and Recreation Department, was recently asked to pare his current fiscal-year budget by 13 percent. "It's painful, but I think this department has strategically looked at ways to make sure that if we have to cut, we protect our core services," he said. "For the parks department, that's a \$12 million reduction out of a \$99 million budget. We are definitely trying to avoid layoffs."

While some parks officials are lobbying for a laser focus on maintenance, Phil Ginsburg, who heads the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, believes infrastructure spending has a role to play in any economic recovery. "I'm hoping that our policy makers and elected officials understand that the smartest thing we can do is invest in capital projects," he said. "By hiring construction workers, you stimulate the economy."

No one knows, of course, whether the economy will limp along for years or roar back to life once the pandemic is brought under control. Even if things rebound quickly, parks professionals say the effect on parks could be long-lasting. "What has happened to the U.S. and global economy in the last six or seven weeks is unprecedented in modern history, even compared to the Great Depression," Roth said.

Such forecasts have prompted some park experts to call for an all-hands-on-deck approach, with an expansion of public-private partnerships to ensure that parks do not falter. "To the extent that government and business and nonprofits can provide professionals and staffing to take care of our parks – to maintain them, to run programs – that's really where our need is," Mowen said. "That's where I think our emphasis should be."

-Charlie McCabe is a city park researcher at The Trust for Public Land.

Parks and the future:

NOW IS THE MOMENT TO TRANSFORM OUTDOOR EQUITY ACROSS THE NATION

BY: **NETTE COMPTON**

The global pandemic that has upended all of our lives has also exposed the many inequities in American society, hitting hardest in working-class communities and disproportionately affecting people of color. Just as there is unequal access to nutritious food, to health care, and even to diagnostic tests, so too is there unequal access to parks and green spaces. For the many people restricted by stay-at-home advisories, parks are providing a lifeline – but not everyone is able to grab hold.

From Charlotte, North Carolina, to San Francisco, local parks are so packed that some governments have had to close parking areas to discourage overcrowding, favoring those who can walk to those parks. Other cities have closed streets to vehicle traffic, augmenting parks by creating many miles of “open space” for cooped-up residents.

All of which underlines something that many of us know at a visceral level and that decades of research supports: parks, and nature in general, have the power to improve physical and mental health, nurture children, and bring communities together. Time spent in nature, even without exercise, can lower blood pressure, sharpen concentration, and boost mood. But as with access to food and health care, COVID-19 has also exposed fissures dividing communities with vibrant green spaces from those without.

Across the nation, more than 100 million people – including 28 million children – do not have a park within a 10-minute walk of home. In America’s 100 largest cities, 11.2 million people lack easy access. Making sure that everyone in those cities has close-to-home parks would entail adding 8,300 new parks to the 23,000 that now exist. But [our analysis reveals](#) that 1,500 parks strategically placed in dense cities like Los Angeles, Houston, and Miami could solve the issue of park equity for more than 5 million of the 11.2 million people without access.

At the same time, we also need to ensure that the parks we

add provide the most benefit to the surrounding community. By building parks with community input, we create spaces that serve all residents’ wishes and make all feel welcome.

Park advocates and environmental justice activists say the pandemic – as awful and tragic as it is – could give society a deeper appreciation for the critical role that parks play and usher in a future that ensures that all communities have a fair share of green space.

Rue Mapp, founder and chief executive officer of Outdoor Afro, a national organization based in Oakland, looks to history for evidence of how seismic and painful events can accelerate positive change.

“In the same way there was a permanent shift in how we felt about intimacy after the AIDS crisis and air travel after 9/11, I’m hoping that after this pandemic, the priority to have a connection to nature in our communities will emerge like never before,” Mapp said. “We’ve had a lot of park closures, but I’ve never seen as many people in my neighborhood walking – not just the dog walking – but whole families out walking together. This is an opportunity for us to rethink public lands and to get people out of the mind-set that nature is somewhere that you have to drive to.”

Mapp and others caution that to the extent the pandemic eventually leads to a spate of new parks (whether due to federal stimulus money, recognition of their importance, or both), attention must be paid to other challenges in cities, namely affordable housing. Mapp pointed out that new parks, along with other factors, can sometimes contribute to gentrification, as happened in her former neighborhood in north Oakland in the 2000s.

“How can we plan cities better so that people of all economic backgrounds can have access to public land without being displaced?” she asked. “Access to parks and the housing crisis have to be part of the same conversation.”



In New York City and around the country, parks have remained quite busy during the pandemic.

In New York, the nation's epicenter of the coronavirus outbreak, parks are proving a balm to essential workers looking for respite, to people mourning loved ones, and to families exhausted from weeks of confinement. Residents have mostly followed the rules of social distancing, and Mayor Bill de Blasio at the end of April committed to opening 100 miles of streets across the five boroughs to meet the demand for open space.

The Trust for Public Land analyzed potential locations for Open Streets in New York City, based on a lack of park access, closures of playgrounds and pools, and population density. The research revealed that most of the Open Streets should go in Central Brooklyn, Queens, and the Eastern Bronx, including neighborhoods like Morris Park and Parkchester in the Bronx; Elmhurst and Corona in Queens; and Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn.

Majora Carter, a former park activist who founded Sustainable South Bronx, said the hunger to be outside and immersed in nature in the midst of the pandemic was palpable. "People are coming out," she said, referring to parks like Hunts Point Riverside Park, which she helped create 15 years ago. "People are just hanging out, sitting by the water, and enjoying the time."

Carter, however, worries about the budget pressures already gripping major cities like New York and what they will mean for parks, especially if maintenance spending is targeted.

Maintenance, she insisted, more than new infrastructure projects, should remain robust during an economic crisis.

"An unmaintained park, especially in a low-status area, is even worse than no park at all," she said. "If parks are attracting the wrong kind of activity, it will set us back many years. But if a park is well maintained, people will appreciate them."

For academics like Kathleen Wolf, who studies the benefits of nature for human health, the pandemic could have a lasting effect on both personal behavior and public policy. She believes people will recognize the value of nature for their well-being long after schools, workplaces, and businesses reopen.

But Wolf, a research social scientist at the University of Washington's College of the Environment, also imagines a new call to action in the pandemic's wake.

"I hope people realize the incredible importance of having adequate green space in our communities," she said. "There are so many places where green space is seen as, 'Oh, isn't that pretty?' But it's profoundly important to our quality of life, and we need to intentionally work to assure that we have it, and have it in an equitable way."

-Nette Compton is associate vice president and director of strategy at The Trust for Public Land.



THE
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The Trust for Public Land creates parks and protects land for people, ensuring healthy, livable communities for generations to come.

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