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October 2005

## Policy Brief

# Healthy Parks, Healthy Communities

Addressing Health Disparities and Park Inequities through Public Financing of Parks, Playgrounds, and Other Physical Activity Settings



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### Addressing Health Disparities and Park Inequities through Public Financing of Parks, Playgrounds, and Other Physical Activity Settings

By Elva Yañez and Wendy Muzzy  
October 2005

#### *Introduction*

Today public health specialists and conservationists have a unique opportunity to collaboratively address the concurrent and related social justice issues of health disparities and park inequities experienced by low-income communities of color. This opportunity exists because there is a growing concern over epidemic levels of obesity and associated diseases such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease, as well as a better understanding of the important role that physical activity plays, along with better nutrition, in tackling these problems.

Living far from safe and well-equipped parks and public open spaces is more than an inconvenience, it is a contributing factor to this serious public health threat facing the nation. More and more Americans live in cities and suburbs but lack sufficient recreation areas. Unsafe, ill-maintained, and inequitably distributed park space denies the residents of these communities important opportunities to engage in physical activity, both as part of a daily routine and for recreation.

Parks advocates and conservationists have long touted the power of parks and open space to improve physical and psychological health while providing environmental, economic, and quality of life benefits. While more research is needed to fully understand the extent to which the availability, type, size, and quality of parks and open space contribute to physical activity levels, there is growing evidence in the public health arena linking park access to increased physical activity. For example, several recent studies

have demonstrated links between access to public open space and higher levels of walking; the amount of time children spend in play spaces near their homes and their level of physical activity; and an association between the availability of neighborhood trails and engaging in recommended levels of physical activity.<sup>1, 2, 3</sup>

Increasing access to parks and other recreation areas is consistent with the public health sector's emphasis on community-level policies and its goal of eliminating barriers in the built environment that influence physical activity, obesity, and chronic disease. Federal, state and local public health agencies and experts are adding their voices to the calls of parks and conservation advocates for creating and improving parks, playgrounds, community gardens and other venues for physical activity.

Among the various strategies required to effectively address this need, the commitment of public dollars is fundamental. State and federal funding for these facilities is woefully insufficient, and in many cases is diminishing as resources are spent down and budgets are cut to deal with record deficits. Yet, voters around the country have repeatedly called for new or improved parks by approving ballot measures that raise their own taxes to pay for them.<sup>4</sup>

This policy brief examines park inequities and health disparities in low-income communities of color, and makes the case for simultaneously addressing these inter-related issues. This brief also describes public financing of parks and open space as a proven strategy that—appropriately modified for relevance to public health considerations and to directly engage these communities—holds significant promise as a tool to increase venues for physical activity and reduce the risk of health problems related to obesity and physical inactivity.

#### *Physical Inactivity, Obesity, and Related Health Disparities*

According to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), there has been a dramatic increase

nationwide in overweight and obesity among adults and children in the last thirty years, reaching epidemic proportions. According to DHHS data, nearly two-thirds (64%) of American adults, and 16% of children are obese or overweight. Diseases related to sedentary behavior and poor nutrition are a serious health risk. These conditions increase the risk of heart disease, diabetes, and some forms of cancer, leading to high medical costs and lost productivity that the U.S. Surgeon General has estimated at \$117 billion in 2000.

Obesity and overweight disparities among people of color are particularly troubling. The obesity rate in 2000 was highest among African Americans (31%), followed by Latinos (24%), Whites (16%), and Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders (6%)<sup>5</sup>. Among youth, other data show that nationally, the highest rates of overweight are seen among Latino males ages 6-11 (17.4%) and African American females ages 6-11 (16.4%) and ages 12-17 (15.7%). Latino boys and girls and African American girls experience higher rates of overweight than White boys and girls at most ages.<sup>6,7</sup>

### ***Park Access and Physical Activity Levels***

Access to, and availability of, public facilities for physical activity play a critical role in the prevention and treatment of obesity and overweight. A 1996 report by the U.S. Surgeon General found that people who engage in regular physical activity benefit from reduced risk of premature death and disease, improved physical strength and functioning, and weight loss and improved redistribution of fat.<sup>8</sup>

While more study is needed to fully articulate the relationship between parks and physical activity levels, emerging evidence supports the creation and/or enhancement of parks and playgrounds as an intervention to increase physical activity and improve health. Several recent studies have found that people who live close to parks engage in higher levels of physical activity than those who do not. In a study published by the CDC, creation of or enhanced access to places for physical activity led to a 25.6% increase in

the percentage of people exercising on three or more days per week.<sup>9</sup>

The Rand Corporation's national study of physical activity in adolescent girls looked at the association between physical activity levels and proximity to parks and schools. The findings indicate that adolescent girls who live close to parks engage in more physical activity than their counterparts who do not.<sup>10</sup> In another Rand study, researchers found that Los Angeles residents who live close to parks exercise more and visit parks more frequently compared to residents who live further away from parks.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, residents of many U.S. cities lack adequate access to parks and open space near their homes. In 2000, 80% of Americans lived in metropolitan areas, up from 48% in 1940.<sup>12</sup> The park space in many of these metropolitan areas is grossly inadequate. In Atlanta, for example, parkland covers only 3.8% of the city's area.<sup>13</sup> Atlanta has no public green space larger than one-third of a square mile. The city has only 7.8 acres of park space for every 1,000 residents, compared with a 19.1-acre average for other medium-low population density cities.<sup>14</sup> And while it may not be park size itself that is the key, certainly providing public spaces where physical activity is possible and encouraged is important. The story is much the same in Los Angeles, San Jose, New Orleans and Dallas. Even in cities that have substantial park space overall, the residents of many neighborhoods lack access to nearby parks. In New York City, for example, nearly half of the city's 59 community board districts have less than 1.5 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents.<sup>15</sup> In addition to the number and location of parks, safety, maintenance, facilities and culturally relevant design can significantly influence the frequency and level of physical activity of park users.

### ***Park Inequities in Low-Income Communities of Color***

According to the International City/County Management Association, recent research demonstrates a significant association between race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status and access to physical activity settings including parks, bike trails, and public pools

A 2004 study by the Health Research and Policy Centers at the University of Chicago finds that communities with lower incomes, higher poverty rates, and higher proportions of racial/ethnic minorities—those most at risk to be sedentary and overweight—also have the fewest opportunities for community-level physical activity.

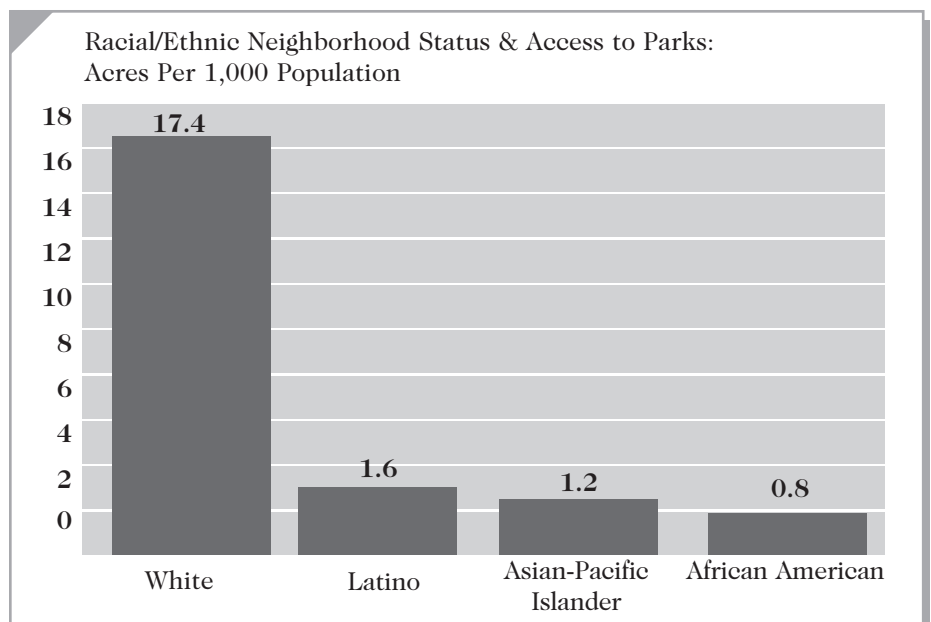
among others.<sup>16</sup> A 2004 study by the Health Research and Policy Centers at the University of Chicago finds that communities with lower incomes, higher poverty rates, and higher proportions of racial/ethnic minorities—those most at risk to be sedentary and overweight—also have the fewest opportunities for community-level physical activity.<sup>17</sup>

A recent analysis of California Health Interview Survey data by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research found that one in four California teens (25.3%) self-reported having no access to a safe park, playground or open space. Approximately, 30% of teens from lower-income families as well as 29.3% of Latino and 30.2% of African American teens reported no access to a safe park, compared with less than 20% of teens from affluent families and 22% of White teens.

Marginalized by their socio-economic status, discrimination, and institutional bias, people of color and

immigrants have historically been relegated to live in blighted, industrialized neighborhoods with few commercial or public amenities, including parks. The City of Los Angeles offers one example of how severe the park inequity issue can be. More than 2.6 million people in Los Angeles do not live within walking distance (¼ mile) of a park facility, and existing park space is disproportionately distributed across neighborhoods. Data show that residents in predominantly low-income and concentrated poverty areas as well as Latino, African-American and Asian American/Pacific Islander neighborhoods are less likely to enjoy access to parks, playgrounds and other exercise facilities than those living in predominantly White neighborhoods.<sup>18</sup> Inadequate levels of physical activity that result from park inequities in Los Angeles are reflected in recent fitness reports among California schoolchildren. For instance, in the Los Angeles Unified School District nearly one-third of the 605 schools reported that less than 10 percent of students met basic fitness levels, and 40 schools did not have a single physically fit student.<sup>19</sup>

The Trust for Public Land has found similar disparities in several cities around the



Source: Wolch, Jennifer [et al]. *Parks and Park Funding in Los Angeles: An Equity Mapping Analysis*. *Urban Geography*, 2005, 26, 1

country including Charlotte, NC; Houston, TX; Indianapolis, IN; Jacksonville, FL; and Nashville, TN where less than 40% of residents have access to public parks or open space. <sup>20</sup>

This inequitable distribution of safe and accessible park space negatively impacts the residents of these communities and society as a whole. The economic costs, mentioned above, are staggering. Lacking places for recreation at home or in neighborhoods, or other alternatives for regular physical activity that come from a safe and well-maintained neighborhood where people can walk to destinations, communities of color and low-income individuals are significantly less likely than Whites and the affluent to engage in the regular physical activity that is crucial to preventing obesity and overweight. Among White adults in the U.S., 33% engage in regular physical activity, compared to only 23.7% of African American adults and 22.% of Latino adults. <sup>21</sup> And adults with incomes below the poverty level are three times as likely as high-income individuals not to be physically active. <sup>22</sup>

Park conditions and inequitable access to parks and recreation are major concerns to communities of color and low-income individuals. A June 2002 survey by the Public Policy Institute of California found that Latinos (72%) are more likely than Whites (60%) to believe that low-income and minority neighborhoods are not getting their fair share of well-maintained parks and recreational facilities compared to other neighborhoods.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, a November 2003 public opinion poll by the Field Research Corporation about the problem of childhood obesity in California found that, compared to Whites (32%), African Americans (51%) and Latinos (49%) are more likely to rate their neighborhood as being fair, poor or very poor in providing opportunities for children to be physically active. The aforementioned UCLA study found that those adolescents who reported no access to a safe park, playground, or open space were significantly more likely not to engage in any physical activity (10.3%) compared to teens with access to such settings (6.4%).

Taking these equity issues into account, it is not surprising that recent public opinion

polls further show that people of color and low-income individuals are among the biggest supporters of land conservation efforts. A national poll conducted by the Trust for Public Land and The Nature Conservancy in 2004 found particularly strong support for conservation among Latino voters, with 77 % willing to support new conservation funding measures, compared with 65% of all voters. In 2002 Californians passed Proposition 40,

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which included \$2.6 billion for parks, clean water, and clean air and is the largest resource bond in U.S. history. Statewide exit polls showed support from 77% of African American, 74% of Latino, 60% of Asian, American/Pacific Islander, and 56% of White voters. Seventy five percent (75%) of voters making under \$20,000 per year and 61% with a high school diploma or less supported the proposition. <sup>24</sup>

### *Public Financing of Parks and Open Space*

There are numerous challenges involved in creating parks and open space for public use in the urban environments that are home to many low-income people of color. Obstacles include limited availability and high cost of property, the cost of park and open space maintenance, and the difficulty of dealing with contaminated land, or brownfields, that requires significant clean up. Formalized and highly structured ideas of what constitutes a

park also work against creative use of the open spaces that do exist, such as wide residential streets that could accommodate an urban forest to create linear parks, the use of small vacant lots to create walkable outdoor meeting places or small playing fields, and the use of alleyways. Additionally, competing issues tend to position parks, playgrounds and community gardens as lower, non-essential priorities. The significant time and resources required to overcome these and other obstacles underscore the need for increased public demand, political prioritization and adequate public funding for parks and recreation.

The promotion of public funding measures for open space, parks and historic preservation is a strategy—also known as conservation finance—that has been effectively used by parks advocates and conservation organizations. Successful implementation of this strategy has been achieved by municipal governments—primarily in suburban middle-class and affluent communities in the United States since the 1960's. To gauge the relevance of conservation finance as a mechanism to increase revenue for parks and other physical activity settings in low-income communities of color, it is important to have a general understanding of how such public facilities are funded, including incentives and barriers to this policy option.

Local and state governments are knowledgeable about public finance, since this mechanism provides the resources to create and maintain vital infrastructure and

services. The finance options available to local governments for parks and open space are diverse and continually expanding. Local public financing of parks and open space often takes the form of “pay-as-you-go” measures, long-term borrowing or a combination of the two. Specific mechanisms for local park financing include, but are not limited to, property taxes, special assessment districts, sales and use taxes, impact fees, general obligation and revenue bonds, income taxes, user fees, and real estate transfer taxes.<sup>25</sup>

Experience garnered from hundreds of conservation finance campaigns indicates that successful measures share a number of key characteristics, including strong support and leadership from elected officials, the backing of a broad-based coalition, and a strategic and adequately funded campaign. Data gathered from the past ten years demonstrate that, even in tough economic times and regardless of political orientation, American voters are willing to pay for open space and parks because they consider them essential public assets, intrinsically tied to the quality of life and economic vitality of their communities. According to the Trust for Public Land's LandVote database—which tracks state and local conservation finance measures—since 1996, voters around the country have approved 77% of 1,404 conservation finance measures, creating some \$27 billion for preserving important lands and creating park space. The Trust for Public Land has supported 274 of these measures, leading to more than \$18 billion.

## ACCESS, DESIGN, AND CONTEXT

Decades of conservation work in urban environments, along with GIS modeling technology, enables the Trust for Public Land to identify neighborhoods most in need of parks and recreation areas. But finding the right location for parks is just the beginning. A growing body of research on park usage shows that factors such as safety (actual and perceived), maintenance, types of landscaping, amenities and facilities all influence the type and frequency of activity. Park design and programming play important roles in attracting people to parks and encouraging physical activity within them, as does the form of the surrounding neighborhood. Public input is essential to determine the type of park design, activities and programming that are culturally relevant and age appropriate for the surrounding community. Safety officials, public health agencies, and parks and planning departments need to work together in partnership with residents and community-based organizations to make the best use of new and existing public open spaces and promote their use to improve public health.

An examination of the 263 county ballot measures in the LandVote database that have been put before voters since 1996 reveals that by and large these measures are considered in counties where the majority of the population is White, more affluent and better educated. While more than twice as many of these measures have been on the ballot in communities with above average incomes (189) than those with below average incomes (74), the rate of approval in the more affluent communities is slightly lower at 76% compared to 79% in less affluent communities. These data demonstrate that socioeconomic factors have little effect on the rate of approval for county finance measures.

Significant barriers exist which contribute to lower levels of public finance activity for parks and open space in urban jurisdictions with large populations of low-income communities of color. As previously mentioned, there are competing concerns such as education, crime and jobs as well as limited activity by mainstream conservation organizations in urban environments. Opposition by taxpayer associations and high voter approval thresholds for public finance measures pose additional barriers to conservation finance measures in some states. However, these barriers have been successfully overcome with the right mix of strategy, resources, and community support.

### ***Recommendations***

Researchers, government agencies, and advocacy groups are increasingly pointing to improved opportunities for safe and well-managed physical activity as an important means to help reduce the persistent health disparities in low-income communities of color. To effectively expand public financing for parks, playgrounds, community gardens, and other informal recreation spaces as a viable intervention for obesity prevention, it is necessary to build upon the existing high levels of support for parks and open space in low-income communities of color, and to enhance organizational capacity and infrastructure around these issues. Also required is adequate investment of resources in these communities and the development

of partnerships between organizations representing underserved communities, mainstream conservationists and park advocates. This strategic approach will encourage low-income communities of color to take on important leadership roles in public finance campaigns and to adapt traditional conservation methodologies to rectify park inequities and prevent obesity-related health disparities.

Specific recommendations to ensure the creation, safety and adequate maintenance of neighborhood parks, community gardens and other physical activity facilities and services in low-income communities of color include:

- ▶ **Encourage and support research and public education** on the importance of parks and recreation facilities to improving public health in low-income communities of color.
- ▶ **Invest resources** in low-income communities of color, including the provision of relevant technical assistance and training, for sustainable organizational infrastructures and effective civic participation, policy advocacy and stewardship.
- ▶ **Engage communities by building upon their strengths** and successes in other arenas such as labor, education, and civil rights.
- ▶ **Create new tools, models, and processes** that will inform relevant policy advocacy work in low-income communities of color on public finance issues.
- ▶ **Facilitate collaboration** between land conservationists, public health specialists, planners, and community-based organizations on mutually relevant policy matters.
- ▶ **Support active leadership from elected officials**, business owners and community stakeholders for relevant public finance initiatives in low-income communities of color.
- ▶ **Create public finance ballot measures** (state and local) to fund parks, playgrounds, community gardens, and other physical activity settings.

Park inequities and health disparities disproportionately affect people in low-income communities of color. The Trust for

Public Land proposes to address these inter-related issues simultaneously by increasing access to parks and other recreation areas, consistent with the public health sector's emphasis on community-level policies and its goal of eliminating barriers in the built environment that influence physical activity, obesity, and chronic disease. Public financing of parks and open space is a proven strategy that increases venues for physical activity. The next steps to applying this solution lie in engaging these communities and building local policy knowledge and advocacy capacity for developing and adopting conservation finance measures. ■

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#### Acknowledgments

For reviewing this policy brief, the Trust for Public Land would like to thank Manal Aboelata, MPH, Program Manager, Prevention Institute; Susan Babey, PhD, UCLA Center for Health Policy Research; Robert Garcia, Executive Director, Center for Law in the Public Interest; Eloisa Gonzales, MD, Director, Los Angeles County Department of Health Services; Leslie Mikkelsen, MPH, Managing Director, Prevention Institute; Stephanie Pincetl, Visiting Professor, UCLA Institute of the Environment; James Rojas, MS, Chair, Latino Urban Forum; Sarah E. Samuels, DrPH, President, Samuels & Associates; Sarah Stone-Francisco, MPH, Research Associate, Samuels & Associates; Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, PhD, Chair, Urban Planning, School of Public Policy and Social Research, University of California, Los Angeles; and Jennifer Wolch, PhD, Professor of Geography and Director, Center for Sustainable Cities, University of Southern California. Also, the authors would like to thank Ernest Cook, Peter Harnik, Larry Kaplan, Amy Mullen, Marybeth Vergara, and Teresa Villegas of the Trust for Public Land for their assistance.

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