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“We actually care and we want to make the parks better”: A qualitative study of youth experiences and perceptions after conducting park audits

David G. Gallerani, MPH^{a,*}, Gina M. Besenyi, MPH; PhD^b,
Sonja A. Wilhelm Stanis, PhD^c, Andrew T. Kaczynski, PhD^{a,d}

^a Department of Health Promotion, Education and Behavior, Arnold School of Public Health, University of South Carolina, 915 Greene St, Columbia, SC 29201, United States

^b Department of Clinical and Digital Health Sciences, Augusta University, 987 St. Sebastian Way, Augusta, GA 30912, United States

^c Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism, University of Missouri, 105 Anheuser-Busch Natural Resources Building, Columbia, MO 65211, United States

^d Prevention Research Center, Arnold School of Public Health, University of South Carolina, United States

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ABSTRACT

This study explored youths' experiences and perceptions about community engagement as a result of participating in a community-based data collection project using paper and mobile technology park environmental audit tools. In July 2014, youth (ages 11–18, $n = 50$) were recruited to participate in nine focus groups after auditing two parks each using paper, electronic, or both versions of the Community Park Audit Tool in Greenville County, SC. The focus groups explored the youths' experiences participating in the project, changes as a result of participation, suggested uses of park audit data collected, and who should use the tools.

Four themes emerged related to youths' project participation experiences: two positive (fun and new experiences) and two negative (uncomfortable/unsafe and travel issues). Changes described as a result of participating in the project fell into four themes: increased awareness, motivation for further action, physical activity benefits, and no change. Additionally, youth had numerous suggestions for utilizing the data collected that were coded into six themes: maintenance & aesthetics, feature/amenity addition, online park information, park rating/review system, fundraising, and organizing community projects. Finally, six themes emerged regarding who the youth felt could use the tools: frequent park visitors, community groups/organizations, parks and recreation professionals, adults, youth, and everyone.

This study revealed a wealth of information about youth experiences conducting park audits for community health promotion. Understanding youth attitudes and preferences can help advance youth empowerment and civic engagement efforts to promote individual and community health.

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1. Introduction

Physical inactivity is a significant public health issue, caused in part by neighborhood and community environments that foster youth inactivity and sedentary behavior (Richard et al., 2011; Ogden et al., 2014; Knuth and Hallal, 2009; Ferraro et al., 2003; Sallis et al., 2006). Parks are promising venues for facilitating youth physical activity and numerous other individual and community benefits (e.g., stress reduction, psychological health, increased social capital, economic benefits, environmental preservation, obesity prevention), in part due to their widespread availability and low cost to maintain and use (Bedimo-Rung et al., 2005). A wide range of studies have documented that the features (e.g., trails, playgrounds, restrooms, lighting) and quality

(e.g., cleanliness, maintenance, incivilities) of community parks can significantly impact the extent to which they are safe and inviting spaces for facilitating healthy behaviors among youth and adults (Kaczynski et al., 2008; Bai et al., 2013; Besenyi, Kaczynski, et al., 2016). Unfortunately, much research has also reported that the facilities (e.g., playgrounds, trails), amenities (e.g., lights, restrooms), and quality (e.g., maintenance, aesthetic features) of parks can vary dramatically within and across communities, including by factors such as neighborhood income and racial/ethnic composition (Kamel et al., 2014; Vaughan et al., 2013). Several studies have reported that measuring the detailed attributes of park environments through the use of observational audit tools can facilitate effective engagement through meaningful involvement in the evaluation, advocacy for, and promotion of park planning and improvements among both professionals and citizens alike (Kaczynski et al., 2012).

Within efforts to design healthy communities, including better parks, youth can be especially valuable resources for their innovative ideas and energy and the impact their voices can have on decision makers

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: galleran@email.sc.edu (D.G. Gallerani), gbesenyi@augusta.edu (G.M. Besenyi), sonjaws@missouri.edu (S.A. Wilhelm Stanis), atkaczyn@mailbox.sc.edu (A.T. Kaczynski).

(Checkoway et al., 2005; Ribisl et al., 2004). Moreover, encouraging youth engagement in civic actions can lead to the development of important life skills and can promote interest in and capacity for future public health leadership (Checkoway et al., 2005; Ribisl et al., 2004; Rodríguez and Conchas, 2009). In spite of their potential contributions, youth and adolescents are often overlooked or under-represented within efforts to promote public health (Valaitis, 2002; Millstein and Sallis, 2011). Investigating such issues can aid in understanding youth attitudes and preferences in order to advance youth empowerment and engagement efforts to promote individual and community health.

Efforts to engage youth in health promotion are often grounded in theoretical frameworks and models related to youth empowerment and action. For example, the model of Critical Youth Empowerment highlights six dimensions (i.e., safe, supportive environment; meaningful participation; shared power; individual- and community-oriented; socio-political change goals; critical reflection) as a way to achieve individual (i.e., self-efficacy, self-awareness, social bonding) and community (i.e., collective efficacy, political efficacy, sociopolitical change) benefits (Jennings et al., 2006). Likewise, Millstein and Sallis (2011) referred to youth advocacy as the next wave of social change for health and provided a model describing overlapping influences (i.e., individual advocate, social environment, built environment, policy) as well as inputs, processes, and outcomes specifically related to youth engagement and advocacy for obesity prevention. Building upon these models, this study incorporated elements of critical youth empowerment (e.g., meaningful participation through interactive technology, critical reflection through community-oriented participatory data collection) as well as individual and social inputs from Millstein and Sallis' model (e.g. knowledge, attitudes, enjoyment, training opportunities) deemed important for cultivating youth empowerment and engagement in community change processes.

Overall, these models provide frameworks for engaging youth in research and participatory action activities that can enhance healthy community design efforts, while encouraging greater equity among youth and adult stakeholders with mutual interests in ensuring healthy community environments.

The purpose of this study was to explore youths' experiences and perceptions about community engagement as a result of participating in a community-based data collection project using paper and mobile technology park environmental audit tools. The original paper-and-pencil Community Park Audit Tool (CPAT) was developed as a comprehensive yet user-friendly means of evaluating parks for their potential to promote youth physical activity (Kaczynski et al., 2012). It includes six pages and four sections (park information, access and surrounding neighborhood, park facilities, park quality and safety) which capture the presence, condition, and usability of important elements within a park and its surrounding neighborhood. A total of 34 diverse stakeholders in the Kansas City area participated in the development and testing of the original CPAT tool, although only two of these individuals were youth (high school students) (Kaczynski et al., 2012). More recently, an electronic tablet app version of the CPAT (eCPAT) was developed as a means to increase the accessibility and appeal of the CPAT among youth and the general public (Besenyi et al., 2016a). Few park audit tools have been developed or used extensively with youth (Kaczynski et al., 2012), nor has research employed qualitative focus groups or interviews to explore in depth the perspectives of youth engaged in such projects. Therefore, this study describes the experiences and perceptions of a large number of youth using the paper (CPAT), electronic (eCPAT), or both versions (CPAT and eCPAT).

2. Methodology

2.1. Study setting and participants

This study was part of a broader project to engage youth in becoming advocates for healthy community design through innovative technology

in Greenville County, SC (Besenyi et al., 2016b). As part of the larger eCPAT project, 136 youth ages 11–18 were recruited through schools in Greenville County, after school groups, and parks and recreation programs, through flyers, emails, as well as a recruitment booth at a local summer park event. Over the course of the study, 17 youth were lost to attrition leaving 119 youth who completed park audits based upon one of three randomly assigned audit tool formats (paper CPAT = 43, eCPAT = 45, Both = 31) to investigate similarities and differences in their responses and perceptions. Youth completed corresponding 3-hour training workshops consisting of a brief overview of the project, training for their assigned audit tool, onsite park practice, and a brief questionnaire including demographic information. The youth in each group then completed two park audits using their assigned audit format (both formats for youth in the Both group) in a group setting where project staff were always present for data collection and safety/liability purposes. Youth participants were asked to provide their own transportation to the audit sites. Upon completion of the pre and post surveys, training workshops, and two park audits, youth received a \$50 gift card for their participation. Youth participating in follow-up focus groups (as described below) were provided an additional \$20 gift card. Combined, the youth audited a total of 47 diverse parks within a 30-mile radius of Greenville, SC in June of 2014. Further analyses of the youth audit testing are reported elsewhere (Besenyi et al., 2016b).

At the completion of the larger eCPAT project, a subsample of youth were recruited by follow-up emails to all youth inquiring about their willingness to participate in retrospective focus groups. Fifty out of 124 youth completing the larger eCPAT project agreed to participate ($n = 14$ paper CPAT, $n = 16$ eCPAT, $n = 20$ Both). Table 1 provides characteristics of the focus group participants. Focus group participants were fairly representative of the larger eCPAT project with respect to mean age (13.4 years vs 13.6 years), gender (34.0% male vs 37.9% male), race (56.0% white vs 62.1% white; 24.0% black vs 25.0% black) and free or reduced lunch (22.0% vs 18.5%). As well, youth participating in both the larger eCPAT project and post focus groups were fairly representative of the Greenville County, SC population with respect to gender, race/ethnicity, and socioeconomic indicators (United States Census Bureau, 2015).

2.2. Data generation

Focus groups were held one week after conclusion of the larger project at a local park community center. Nine focus groups were conducted (three per audit group) ranging in size from 3 to 8 youth and lasted 30–50 min. Two trained moderators, experienced in working with adolescent youth, used semi-structured focus group guides consistent with previously established methodology (Krueger and Casey, 2002) consisting of open-ended questions and probes to elicit youth thoughts surrounding four content areas: experience participating in the project, intrapersonal changes as a result of participation, suggested use of

Table 1
Youth focus group participant characteristics.

Participant Characteristic	Study group			
	Total	Both	Paper	eCPAT
Total (n, %)	50 (100)	20 (40.0)	14 (28.0)	16 (32.0)
Age (Mean, SD)	(13.4, 1.49)	(13.8, 1.68)	(12.9, 1.23)	(13.3, 1.40)
Gender (n, %)				
Male	17 (34.0)	6 (30.0)	8 (57.1)	3 (18.8)
Female	33 (66.0)	14 (70.0)	6 (42.9)	13 (81.3)
Race (n, %)				
White	28 (56.0)	10 (50.0)	5 (35.7)	13 (81.3)
Black	12 (24.0)	5 (25.0)	5 (35.7)	2 (12.5)
Indian/Alaska Native	2 (4.0)	1 (5.0)	1 (7.1)	0 (0.0)
Two or more races	8 (16.0)	4 (20.0)	3 (21.4)	1 (6.3)
Qualify for free lunch (n, %)	11 (22.0)	4 (20.0)	4 (28.6)	3 (18.8)

Data were collected in June 2014; Greenville County, SC USA.

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