



Review article

A complex landscape of inequity in access to urban parks: A literature review



Alessandro Rigolon

California State University, Northridge, Department of Urban Studies and Planning, 18111 Nordhoff Street, Los Angeles, CA, 91330, United States

HIGHLIGHTS

- Access to parks is conceptualized based on parameters of park proximity, acreage and quality.
- Ethnic minority groups have slightly better access to parks in terms of proximity.
- Striking inequities exist for parameters of park acreage and quality.
- Landscape planning strategies can target specific inequities related to proximity, acreage, or quality.

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the growing environmental justice literature documenting access to urban parks across socioeconomic and ethnic groups. The extensive public health and sustainability benefits of parks, combined with the long history of discrimination against people of color in the United States and elsewhere, motivate an update of the literature on access to parks. Although a few reviews showed evidence of inequity in park provision, no previous review fully conceptualized and analyzed different components of access to parks. To address this gap, I conducted an analytical literature review focusing on three groups of parameters: park proximity, park acreage, and park quality. Based on a sample of 49 empirical studies mostly focusing on cities in developed countries, my review shows fairly inconclusive findings for park proximity, but striking inequities for park acreage and park quality. Low socioeconomic and ethnic minority people have access to fewer acres of parks, fewer acres of parks per person, and to parks with lower quality, maintenance, and safety than more privileged people. These demographic inequities often reflect geographical divides between inner-cities and suburbs. These findings are particularly concerning for public health because large, high-quality, well-maintained, and safe parks can better foster physical activity and its associated benefits than small parks with few amenities. Also, identifying inequities in access to parks based on proximity, acreage or quality can help develop targeted landscape planning strategies to address specific inequities.

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E-mail address: alessandro.rigolon@csun.edu<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2016.05.017>

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1. Introduction

Increasingly, research has studied how access to public and private amenities like parks, public transportation, and food outlets, differs by socioeconomic and ethnic group (Bullard, 2003; Powell, Slater, Mirtcheva, Bao, & Chaloupka, 2007; Wolch, Byrne, & Newell, 2014). The literature on the spatial distribution of public amenities has been named “equity mapping” (Talen, 1998) because studies generally map resources in relation to the residential location of different demographic groups, with various needs of public services. Among public amenities, urban parks have received particular attention (Wolch et al., 2014). In this article, I review the growing body of literature documenting the spatial distribution of urban parks across neighborhoods with different ethnic and socioeconomic compositions. Also, as the size of parks and the amenities they offer matter for their public health and sustainability benefits (McCormack, Rock, Toohey, & Hignell, 2010), I adopt a comprehensive approach to review the scholarship on access to parks, including parameters of park proximity, acreage and quality. Based on my findings, I discuss different patterns of park provision in urban areas, which highlight significant implications for park planning.

As publicly-funded elements of the urban landscape, parks provide significant public health and sustainability benefits to urban communities. In terms of public health, urban parks offer opportunities for repeated contact with nature and for physical activity even in dense urban settings (Chawla, 2015; McCormack et al., 2010; Wolch et al., 2014). Research in several countries has shown that daily contact with nature positively contributes to people’s health and wellbeing, regardless of cultural variations. For adults, having access to neighborhood parks is associated to higher levels of physical activity, better mental health, lower levels of stress, and better overall well-being (Bratman, Hamilton, & Daily, 2012; McCormack et al., 2010; Roe et al., 2013). For older adults and seniors, living in proximity to parks is linked to more frequent park visitation and better perceived health (Payne, Orsega-Smith, Roy, & Godbey, 2005). For young people, contact with nature offers numerous benefits for physical health, mental health, personal well-being, cognitive functioning, and socio-emotional development (Chawla, 2015). The public health benefits of urban parks are particularly relevant for ethnic minority people, as young people and adults of color tend to have higher obesity rates than their white counterparts in the United States (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2014).

Parks are key elements of sustainable urban landscapes, providing environmental, social, and economic benefits to urban areas (Chiesura, 2004). Green space offers important ecosystem services to cities, including providing habitat for flora and fauna, improving air quality, reducing noise, helping stormwater management, and moderating temperatures (Wolch et al., 2014). In particular, green spaces can help reduce the urban heat island in warm, dry climates, especially when they include diffused trees and water (Norton et al., 2015). Socially, urban parks can contribute to quality of life for park visitors by providing places to gather and to experience nature (Chiesura, 2004). Finally, urban parks provide economic value to cities, including a boost to property value of real estate located in their proximity (Harnik & Crompton, 2014).

As a form of public investment, urban parks should serve every community fairly (Boone, Buckley, Grove, & Sister, 2009). Public parks are particularly important for people with limited mobility or with inadequate access to private recreation, including youth, senior citizens, low-income people, and ethnic minority people (Boone et al., 2009). Therefore, an equity-oriented approach to landscape planning, which considers park needs, can better balance recreation and public health disparities than equality-based strategies, which distribute park resources regardless of demographic needs (Boone et al., 2009). In summary, the public health benefits of contact with nature for people, the role of urban parks in sustainability planning, and the potential of parks to mitigate recreation and public health inequities motivate an update of the literature on access to urban parks.

2. Access to parks and environmental justice

The environmental justice literature, which started in the 1980s to document ethnic minority people’s disproportionate exposure to environmental hazards like landfills and power plants, has more recently focused on the spatial distribution of environmental amenities across income and ethnic groups, particularly on parks (Boone et al., 2009; Schlosberg, 2004; Wolch et al., 2014). Environmental justice, which has been the theoretical framework for most research on access to parks, can be defined in terms of decision-making processes and their spatial outcomes: equitable geographic distributions of environmental threats and resources as a result of fair decision-making processes to locate threats and resources (Schlosberg, 2004).

2.1. Reviews of the literature on access to parks

A few journal articles and reports reviewed the literature on access to parks. The National Recreation and Park Association (2011), which undertook the most comprehensive review, found consistent evidence of inequity in park provision in the United States. Macintyre’s (2007) review showed that low-income communities of color in some instances have better access to health-promoting facilities than other groups, including parks. A recent article by Wolch et al. (2014) reviewed the literature on access to green space and, similarly to the National Recreation and Park Association’s (2011) report, found that low-income communities of color experience lower park service than white and affluent groups. However, Wolch et al. (2014) suggested that scholars measured access to parks with different metrics, which need to be considered when evaluating their results. Wolch et al. (2014) also highlighted that park visitation, with its associated public health benefits, depends on other factors besides park location, including park amenities and park crowding.

Although these reviews provide evidence of inequity in access to parks and urban green space, the way access is defined matters. For example, studies analyzing distances to the closest park, regardless of size or quality, measure a very different metric than inquiries evaluating park acreage within a neighborhood. The aforementioned reviews did not fully conceptualize the different components of access to parks, and did not analyze these compo-

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