Research Project Proposal: Youth and the Regional Parks System
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Project Scope. Young people's access to the Regional Parks System is crucial to reach the goals of the 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan. Parks offer to young people multiple health and recreational benefits that contribute to the Region's *livability*. Young people's park use is an important component of *equity;* Twin Cities residents under-20 experience higher rates of poverty and are more racially/ethnically diverse than older generations. Their use of Regional Parks and Trails is vital to the *stewardship* and *sustainability* of the System. The System's existence depends on an ongoing societal commitment and public support for the Parks and Trails System.[1] Today's youth will create this future shared dedication to preserve high-quality natural resources. Concerns exist that young people's visitation to parks and trails is lower than for older cohorts. To date, no study has been conducted that informs policy about the needs, motivations, and use barriers for youth to access the Regional Park System.

Research Purpose. The proposed study creates a research collaboration with young people to generate data about youth relationship to the Regional Parks system. The project methodology will generate valuable qualitative data and bring teens into parks through the research process. Focus groups and observational field study ("park audits") will be held in the Regional Park System to analyze: a) organizational, recreational, and social access to parks by youth (*how they access parks*), b) the values and motivations for park visitation (*why youth access parks and generational differences)* c) preferred outdoor recreational activities and desired amenities (*which programming and facilities are most important to youth)* d) perceived barriers that prevent use of the system (*what changes can improve access for key subgroups and young people in general)* and e) recommendations and suggestions to enhance youth visitation (*how youth themselves can inform Regional Park System priorities).* The Council will invite Implementing Agencies to serve as locations for focus groups and the workshop to create direct experiences to the Regional Park system for young people. The study is designed to align with the Council's Community Development - Research strategic plan emphasizing the values of authentic partnerships, dialogue, innovation, and holistic approach to complex questions.

Outcomes. The research will: Provide Implementing Agencies and the Council knowledge about youth access, preferences, values, barriers, and future hopes for the System; center community expertise and knowledge in the planning process; bring youth from underserved populations to experience the regional parks; enhance the pipeline of future parks/planning researchers through an experiential research opportunity.

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[1] Pennington-Gray, L., & Blair, S. (2010). Nature-based tourism in North America: Is Generation Y the major cause of increased participation? In P. Benckendorff, G. Moscardo, & D. Pendergast (Eds.), Tourism and Generation Y (pp. 73–84). Cambridge, MA: CABI and Watson, J. E., Dudley, N., Segan, D. B., & Hockings, M. (2014). The performance and potential of protected areas. *Nature*, *515*(7525), 67.

Existing Studies. The topic of adolescent use of and access to parks is important and under researched.[2,3] More youth-specific (12-22 years old) research on all topics is needed. Time spent in open, natural spaces accrues physical and mental health benefits for young people.[4,5] Parks can serve to foster a sense of belonging in spaces of positive inter-generational contact.[6] Much that is reported about adolescent use of parks is inferred from studies of adults or children, but the life stage is unique and requires separate research.[7] Policy documents frequently rely on anecdotal observations; despite widespread citation of declining youth park visitation, research does not offer definitive conclusions about whether overall usage is up or down.[8] Distance to faraway outdoor spaces is more of a barrier for youth than for adults, thus increasing the relevance of Regional Parks compared with more remote options. Early analysis based on census data and field observations indicates that youth from well-served demographic groups, particularly higher-income youth, experience fewer proximity barriers. Parks that require a car in order to visit are more likely to be accessed by youth with their family than with friends.[9]

Scant research exists on the topic of young people's connection with the natural world in terms of motivations, experiences, and changing attitudes.[10] More research is needed to help policy makers understand the new ways in which young people want to access parks, experience the existing park system, and how they think about the importance of parks to their future. Young people are less likely than older people to report personal and societal benefits of parks.[11] Youth participation in nature-based recreation is different than in previous generations in terms of enthusiasm toward various park amenities and constraints to recreation participation . Some documented differences include that youth feel: heightened concern about climate change, that park use is a connection to nature rather than a use of leisure time, a need to demonstrate identity through social media posts, a need for individualism,

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[2] Veitch, J., Salmon, J., Parker, K., Bangay, S., Deforche, B., & Timperio, A. (2016). Adolescents' ratings of features of parks that encourage park visitation and physical activity. *International Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity*, *13*(1), 73.

[3] Weiler, B, Martin, VY, Canosa, A & Cutter-Mackenzie, A. (2018). 'Generation Y and protected areas: A scoping study of research, theory, and future directions', *Journal of Leisure Research*, vol. 49, n o. 3-5, pp. 277-297.

[4] Wolch, J., Wilson, J. P., & Fehrenbach, J. (2005). Parks and park funding in Los Angeles: An equity-mapping analysis. *Urban geography*, *26*(1), 4-35.

[5] Blanck, H. M., Allen, D., Bashir, Z., Gordon, N., Goodman, A., Merriam, D., & Rutt, C. (2012). Let's go to the park today: The role of parks in obesity prevention and improving the public's health. Childhood Obesity, 8(5), 423–428.

[6] O'Donovan, R., Berman, N., & Wierenga, A. (2015). How schools can move beyond exclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *19*(6), 645-658.

[7] Cohen, D. A., Ashwood, J. S., Scott, M. M., Overton, A., Evenson, K. R., Staten, L. K., ... & Catellier, D. (2006). Public parks and physical activity among adolescent girls. *Pediatrics*, *118*(5), e1381-9.

[8] See discussion pp. 279-280 in Weiler, B., Martin, V. Y., Canosa, A., & Cutter-Mackenzie, A. (2018). Generation Y and protected areas: A scoping study of research, theory, and future directions. *Journal of Leisure Research*, *49*(3-5), 277-297.

[9] Perry, C. K., Saelens, B. E., & Thompson, B. (2011). Rural Latino youth park use: Characteristics, park amenities, and physical activity. *Journal of community health*, *36*(3), 389-397.

[10] Moyle, B. D., & Weiler, B. (2017). Revisiting importance of visitation: Public perceptions of park benefits. *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, *17*(1), 91–105.

[11] Ibid.

and a desire for pursuit of new experiences.[12, 13] Park systems must explore how technology can enhance the experience to make visitation relevant to youth.

Preferred outdoor activities vary among groups of youth,[14] but the most common activities are "playing, 'hanging out', biking, running, skateboarding, and using electronic media outdoors." Teens are more likely to engage in park activities in ways that are more sedentary than children as they hang out or socialize.[15] Nature-based activities are slightly less popular, but most frequently done are fishing, camping, hiking, and snowboarding.[16] Preferred activity differs across subgroups of youth depending on racial/ethnic identities, income, and geography (rural, urban, suburban).[17,18] Similarly to the 2016 Visitor Study, research has found that well-served racial/ethnic populations are disproportionately represented on trails.[19] Field observations indicate that Regional Parks in rural areas approximate the experiences of an urban neighborhood park (such as frisbee golf at Baylor Park in Carver County) while Trails and Parks in suburban settings offer amenities of State Parks (such as canoe portage in Lebanon Hills). Parks provide avenues for organizations to bring youth to learn, explore, and hang out. In groups, teens can socialize in public spaces free from adult supervision, such as can be observed at Cedar Lake East Beach.

Previous literature outlines four theoretical frames to understand youth access to public recreational space: (1) the importance of institutional belonging for participation, (2) ecological approaches to explain use access and barriers, (3) anti-youth bias in public spaces (4) the intersection of age with other social identities.

Institutional belonging focuses on the importance of membership in organizations that connect youth to parks and outdoor spaces. Young people are more connected to schools, afterschool programs, and other institutions than at older or younger life stages. Youth feel a sense of belonging when their organizational participation offers meaning, connection, and personal agency.[20] This suggests strategies for park programming and potential park collaborations with youth organizations. Organizations facilitate access to the outdoors for youth more than for adults.[21] Thus, budget cuts to

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[12] Ramsay, G., Dodds, R., Furtado, D., Mykhayletska, Y., Kirichenko, A., & Majedian, M. (2017). The Barriers to Millennials Visiting Rouge Urban National Park. *Sustainability*, *9*(6), 904, pp. 2-3..

[13] McGown, R. S., Laven, D., Manning, R., & Mitchell, N. (2012, January). Engaging new and diverse audiences in the national parks: An exploratory study of current knowledge and learning needs. In *The George Wright Forum* (Vol. 29, No. 2, pp. 272-284). George Wright Society.

[14] Pozzoboni, K. M., Sikand, T., Reist, S., & Roberts, N. S. (2014). Youth, the outdoors, and media: Awakening and strengthening the connection of urban youth to the land. (Project overview and review of literature).

[15] Larson, L. R., Whiting, J. W., Green, G. T., & Bowker, J. M. (2014). Physical activity of youth in non-urban parks: an observation-based assessment. *Leisure/Loisir*, *38*(3-4), 225-232.

[16] Breaking Barriers Project. (2012). Understanding motivations & barriers to youth participation in the outdoors. Online report *http://www.youthoutside.org/assets/uploads/general-upload/Breaking-Barriers-Report-English.pdf* .

[17] Wolch, J., Wilson, J. P., & Fehrenbach, J. (2005). Parks and park funding in Los Angeles: An equity-mapping analysis. *Urban geography*, *26*(1), 4-35.

[18] Larson, L. R., Whiting, J. W., Green, G. T., & Bowker, J. M. (2014). Physical activity of youth in non-urban parks: an observation-based assessment. *Leisure/Loisir*, *38*(3-4), 225-232.

[19] Ibid., p. 228.

[20] O'Donovan, R., Berman, N., & Wierenga, A. (2015). How schools can move beyond exclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *19*(6), 645-658.

[21] Perry, C. K., Saelens, B. E., & Thompson, B. (2011). Rural Latino youth park use: characteristics, park amenities, and physical activity. *Journal of community health*, *36*(3), 389-397.

programming staff may disproportionately affect youth.[22] Young people are less able and reportedly less interested to participate in outdoor access that lacks institutional connection (for example, walking a trail alone or signing up for a class targeted at individuals). Studies designed to include organizational connections in research design are more likely to successfully engage youth.

Ecological approaches analyze effects of parents, neighborhoods, peers and policy. Young people's outdoor access is limited by concerns of adults in their lives. Parental fear of safety and lack of supervision as well as scheduling conflicts restrict youth capacity to visit parks. Additionally, lack of like-minded peers curtails youth park use.[23] Because young people have less autonomy than adults, the role of organizations, parents and other contextual elements are particularly important to understand youth access to the outdoors.[24] This includes the complex relationship of historical conditions to psychological attitudes of disengagement with nature, economic constraints, and other social barriers.[25] The proposed research project will include parent perspectives through research presentations. Youth participants will identify how environment and social context shape park experiences.

The anti-youth bias perspective examines non-welcoming conditions created through mechanisms such as surveillance and park rules. Often, social norms view young people's presence in public spaces with suspicion or hostility. Because teenagers participate in different types of activities than adults, their presence in public spaces is often perceived as either a threatening or a vulnerable presence.[26] Systems focus more on policing young people than inviting them into public space. This is even more true for youth of color. Access is not just visitation; it is also participation in setting priorities. In decision-making structures, the anti-youth bias can also be seen. Young people are often defined as "not-yet-citizens," incapable of meaningful public input.[27] Community engagement can exclude youth when the processes or settings are uninviting to youth. Planning outreach usually focuses on methods favored by older residents such as public meetings and interviews, rather than youth-centered modes such as experiential place-engagement or artistic creation.[28] Participant action research provides opportunity for youth-centered knowledge creation that confronts anti-youth bias.

An intersectional approach considers how social identities such as ability, race, ethnicity, gender, and socio-economic status influence youth experiences with parks and recreational activities. Young people from underserved populations experience a feeling of not-belonging as a constraint to park use. Cultural representation in the outdoor spaces is observed by young people as they notice visitors, staff, and programming. They see when "no one in the park looks like them," highlighting the importance of cohort experiences for youth of color as well as other underserved populations based on ability, income, or national origin.[29] African Americans and Latinx young adults have lower rates of park visitation than older adults in national studies. This gap is closing more rapidly for Latinx than for Black

[22] Ibid.
[23] Breaking Barriers Report, p. 10.
[24] Ding, D., Sallis, J. F., Kerr, J., Lee, S., & Rosenberg, D. E. (2011). Neighborhood environment and physical activity among youth: a review. *American journal of preventive medicine*, *41*(4), 442-455.
[25] Taylor et al 2015,
[26] Malone, K. (2002). Street life: youth, culture and competing uses of public space. *Environment and urbanization*, *14*(2), 157-168.
[27] Gordon, H. R., & Taft, J. K. (2011). Rethinking youth political socialization: Teenage activists talk back. *Youth & Society*, *43*(4), 1499-1527.
[28] Derr, V., Chawla, L., Mintzer, M., Cushing, D., & Van Vliet, W. (2013). A city for all citizens: Integrating children and youth from marginalized populations into city planning. *Buildings*, *3*(3), 482-505.
[29] Breaking Barriers Report, p. 11.

visitors. Nationally, parks lack programming targeted at Black audiences. Historical exclusion of African Americans from park spaces, lack of people of color on staff, and lack of sites and exhibits meaningful to Black audiences present further cultural constraints to park visits. Thus, the visitation gap is due not only to ongoing discrimination or marginality (economic exclusion), but rather the effects of historical racial exclusion on present park systems.[30] Economic marginalization also affects youth participation; youth report lacking "proper equipment" and that outdoor participation "costs too much."[31] Lack of universal design excludes youth with disabilities from participation. In contrast, traditionally well-served youth (white, higher income, able-bodied, U.S. born) share with underserved youth the problems of scheduling conflicts, parental concern with safety, and lack of peer group participation.

While the barriers described in this literature review are significant, these constraints are not insurmountable. Individuals and groups "accommodate and negotiate constraints" to minimize barriers to participation.[32] This includes individual and collective processes, as well as initiatives by parks administration to implement changes.[33]

Methodological Overview. Qualitative research highlights interconnected processes, produces rich description, and presents alternative viewpoints. Data will be collected through two methods: focus groups and youth-inclusive participatory park audit workshops. The Council will invite Implementing Agencies wanting to host focus groups and the workshop onsite to create direct experiences to the Regional Park system for young people. Youth voices will be recognized as a crucial form of community expertise. They will generate civic storytelling data, building youth skills for participation in public life.[34] Such projects are rare in government planning research. When used, this technique has been demonstrated to advance youth empowerment, improve community health promotion, enhance park system knowledge about youth preferences, and expand ideas for audience access to parks data.[35]

The researcher undertakes the project using the tradition of youth participant action research. This tradition creates space for youth to share the knowledge that is created through experience and encourages youth to act as agents of change on issues that affect them directly. The approach uses research itself as a way of changing social practice.[36] Participant action research features the capacity of stakeholders to activity participate in the research process and the orientation towards improving

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[30] Krymkowski, D. H., Manning, R. E., & Valliere, W. A. (2014). Race, ethnicity, and visitation to national parks in the United States: Tests of the marginality, discrimination, and subculture hypotheses with national-level survey data. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism*, *7*, 35-43.

[31] Breaking Barriers Project. (2012). Understanding motivations & barriers to youth participation in the outdoors. Online report *http://www.youthoutside.org/assets/uploads/general-upload/Breaking-Barriers-Report-English.pdf*

[32] Zanon, D., Doucouliagos, C., Hall, J., & Lockstone-Binney, L. (2013). Constraints to park visitation: A meta-analysis of North American studies. *Leisure Sciences*, *35*(5), 475-493.

[33] Scott, D., & Mowen, A. J. (2010). Alleviating park visitation constraints through agency facilitation strategies. *Journal of Leisure Research*, *42*(4), 535-550.

[34] Vandegrift, D. (Under preparation). "Addressing barriers to emerging adult civic storytelling: Binational digital audio production workshops in the Palestinian American Youth Civic Engagement Initiative."

[35] Gallerani, D. G., Besenyi, G. M., Stanis, S. A. W., & Kaczynski, A. T. (2017). "We actually care and we want to make the parks better": A qualitative study of youth experiences and perceptions after conducting park audits. *Preventive medicine*, *95*, S109-S114.

[36] Bautista, M. A., Bertrand, M., Morrell, E., Scorza, D. A., & Matthews, C. (2013). Participatory action research and city youth: Methodological insights from the Council of Youth Research. *Teachers College Record*, *115*(10), 1-23. See also Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. (Eds.). (2010). *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion*. Routledge.

practices and settings by research participants themselves.[37] By including youth as peer researchers doing research in parks, the project seeks new ways of connecting diverse stakeholders to the production of knowledge created in planning, parks administration, and regional government. It defines access to mean both use of the Regional Park System and have influence in the priorities set for parks. Local organizations with preexisting relationships of integrity to youth will be collaborators in this project. These organizations will inform the focus group or workshop design with which they are collaborating, with adults from the organization contracted as a co-creator of the work. Additionally, 3-5 undergraduate or graduate students will be recruited to participate as co-researchers. The research collaboration will unify complementary skills among all participants to create rich qualitative data.

Focus groups: Six targeted focus groups (three with youth, three with parents) will be conducted at locations convenient to potential participants. These groups will be arranged through paid consultation with local organizations. Study participants will be identified through multiple channels, including collaborating with our internal and external contacts. The organization will be compensated for its effort in arranging facilities and focus group contact. Participants will be offered a stipend or gift card for their participation. The youth focus groups will be conducted by the Principal Parks Researcher with a youth co-researcher and digitally recorded. The parent focus groups will be conducted by a community collaborator together with a Met Council employee. Digital recordings will be transcribed using speech recognition transcription and transcript correction. The research and participating youth will analyze the data together, utilizing qualitative data analysis techniques (open and axial coding), to produce main themes.   It is hoped that selected youth will then design the park audit workshops and offer presentations to Council stakeholders.

Parents. The literature review demonstrates that parents are a key determinant. Parent concerns about safety and supervision can limit young people's visitation. The 2014 Council Study "Park Use among Communities of Color" found that lack of time and knowledge about the Regional Park System were barriers to access. Initial conversations with key informants indicate that these findings apply to parents of the youth who will participate in this project. A parallel focus group with the parents of youth who work on the research process. This would bring parents to parks, give them an opportunity to ask questions and share concerns, and receive compensation to make participation more feasible. Implementing agencies will learn more about ways to address parental concerns about safety, supervision, and other concerns.

Participatory park audits: Using existing contacts and identifying new connections, a one-day workshop will be organized in fall 2019. The workshop will include current outdoor enthusiasts, youth new to the Regional Park system, and youth interested in equity access to parks. These workshops will have a brief training in participant observation and then lead students to experience selected parks and collect data on parks amenities at a sample of eight regional parks and trails. These data will include assessment of spaces, amenities, and information for youth across diverse subgroups. Teams will end the weekend-long workshop with qualitative coding exercises in which they analyze data to identify key findings.

Presentations and Parent Involvement[38]: Based on the data they generate, youth together with the research co-collaborators will create recommendations. These recommendations would be presented

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[37] Kemmis, S., McTaggart, R., & Nixon, R. (2013). *The action research planner: Doing critical participatory action research.* Springer Science & Business Media.
[38] Thanks to Thony Thao, MA, for his contributions to this paragraph.

as a recording or a live presentation to share with implementing agencies and other interested stakeholders.

Human subjects considerations: Human subjects protocol is a form of creating accountability to ensure that the rights of research participants are respected. All youth will require parental consent in order to participate. Additionally, the research will be reviewed by a panel of Met Council employees not directly involved in the research to ensure human subjects protection. Guiding principles include: Background checks on all adult participants, parental consent forms, youth consent forms, full listing of all researchers in publications related to research, a choice by youth and their parents about confidentiality vs. recognition.

Timeline

Major Task	Expected Date
Consultation/Collaboration: Consult with implementing agencies, local stakeholders, prepare workshop logistics, identify partners, schedule park venues, pre-focus group prep.	June 1-Sept 15 2019
Recruit university student co-researchers, participating nonprofit stakeholders, youth/guardian participants. Create research protocols.	August-September 2019
In park experiences with youth and parent/guardians (focus groups, participant observation, storytelling, park audits are some possibilities for data generation. Youth will also participate in an outdoor activity)	October – November 15 2019
Data Analysis; Youth Presentations	Nov. 30-March 1
Write-Up Report and Findings	March 1 – May 31 2020