

Chapter 2 | Obstacles to Youth Access to the Outdoors: Findings and Recommendations

The study's findings are derived from three primary data sources. First, Council research team members observed teens talking about or experiencing obstacles to access or enjoyment. Second, supportive adults answered questions in focus group conversations. Third, youth analyzed data in validity conversations that included reflections about obstacles. The chapter describes the obstacles and offers recommendations specific to the respective barrier based in data sources and additional literature review. The general recommendations at the end of this report contain additional steps that the Council and Implementing Agencies could take to reduce these obstacles.

Seven main obstacles prevent young people from connecting to the outdoors or diminish their connection to it were found in the study data:

- Safety concerns
- Lack of opportunity to learn necessary skills
- Racism and exclusion
- Low, or lack of, awareness of parks and amenities
- Time constraints
- Transportation constraints, and
- The intersecting obstacle of economic hardship

Safety concerns

When youth and supportive adults talked about safety, they expressed feelings about a range of factors. Youth needed to feel safe when spending time in parks. Supportive adults needed to know that their youth would be safe for them to give permission to visit the parks. Prior Council research about communities of color and regional park access note that safety concerns are a barrier, and “the concept and description of safety differ significantly across [racial and ethnic populations].”¹ Three types of safety concerns emerged in the youth and parks data: nature and remoteness, strangers, and law enforcement. The less time youth and parents had previously spent in nature-based regional parks, the more nature and stranger concerns were an obstacle. A summary of all observed safety concerns is listed in Table 2.

Safety as an issue has special dimensions for youth access to parks compared to other age groups. Because young people have less autonomy than adults, they rely on others to get to the parks. Addressing safety concerns of supportive adults is important to expanding youth access.² Additionally, social norms often view young people's time in the outdoors with suspicion or hostility. Because teenagers engage in different types of activities than adults, their presence in public spaces is sometimes perceived as either a threatening or a vulnerable presence.³

For example, parents and guardians the Organization of Liberians in Minnesota confirmed that their youth had had encountered hostility in public spaces and sought reassurances that the same would not happen to them in the regional parks. They feared for their youth's safety because people in neighborhood parks have called the police when their youth were there, when “all they want is to be out and about.” Park agencies can help create safer spaces for youth to hang out and consider how park spaces can be administered for successful intergenerational and intercultural use.

Table 2. Safety concerns expressed by youth and supportive adults

Concern	Example	Supportive Adults	Organizations
Strangers hurting youth	“People are dangerous.”	Outdoor Latino MN, Urban Roots	Organization of Liberians in Minnesota, Outdoor Latino MN, Troop 100
Violence (gun violence, assaults)	Field notes: A boy’s parents are reluctant to send him to outdoor spaces . They feel there is increased violence in the world, in the outdoors. And if there is violence out in the world, that violence can occur in the parks.	Urban Roots	Organization of Liberians in MN
Violence from police, negative police encounters	“We don’t go to [certain counties] for programming because of the danger with ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement]. Families don’t want to go there because the sheriff works with ICE.” ⁴	Organization of Liberians in MN, Outdoor Latino MN, Troop 100	Organization of Liberians in MN
Remoteness of park is dangerous (crime, illness, getting lost)	“I worry that they will get sick. With three or four kids, it’s fine. With one alone, I worry about them getting lost. I don’t know if there is some way that they can see where they’re going. The parks are large, I do worry a bit about them getting lost.”	Outdoor Latino MN	Asian Media Access
Protectiveness is a sign of good parenting	“It’s a parent’s job to worry about their kids and their whereabouts.”	Organization of Liberians in MN, Outdoor Latino MN	Organization of Liberians in MN, Asian Media Access
Nature is unpredictable	Field notes: Youth noted that being in the outdoors can be “unpredictable.” Asked about safety concerns, they said: “bad weather,” “animals can come out.”		Troop 100, Urban Roots, Asian Media Access, Org of Liberians in MN
Being in nature causes injuries	Field notes: When asked about winter sports, one boy talked about a sledding accident that ended in a fractured leg. It was clear the threat of injury was a major concern to him.	Outdoor Latino MN (E. coli concern)	Troop 100
Elders (grandparent generation) afraid for youth safety	“Older parents are afraid.” A fear of guns in the park. Physical safety. A protectiveness of their girls. Family and community understandings of nature as dangerous. ⁵	Troop 100, AMA group (elders, not parents in group)	Urban Roots
Poor sanitation creates unsafe conditions	One youth described a time when she went to Phalen Park to fish. “I looked at the water and it was so dirty. There was a bunch of food wrappers and then I found a needle.” “There’s a stereotype that places that are dirty and filled with litter make people feel unsafe.”		Urban Roots

A lack of explanation about park events created a safety obstacle to enjoyment. For example, one youth felt nervous all day at Elm Creek Park because she thought she heard gunshots. The group did not have a way to resolve the uncertainty without park staff or written information nearby. The youth also did not ask staff when she returned, perhaps because the large group setting did not feel like a good place to express fears. The young person continued to be distressed throughout the day, commenting on the noises. She was worried about gunshots in the area.

Nature and stranger-related safety concerns were more often expressed when someone had fewer prior experiences with regional parks. Without being familiar with the parks, adults and youth assessed park safety based on their experience with other public spaces. For example, one parent considered safety based on conditions at the Mall of America:

Are there going to be other people around us, other people besides us? Because with everything that's happening today, it's not safe. I go to Mall of America and I see really bad things happen, [even with] all the people around. ... There is so much security there, [so] imagine what it must be like out here [in nature]? If you're out here by yourself, sometimes you start to think, "Is something going to happen to us? If it's just me out there?"

Other youth and adults who had not spent much time in the Regional Parks considered safety there based on experiences in neighborhood parks, citing fears of “homeless people” and “strangers.”

In addition, users with less experience in regional parks drew on general understandings about the unpredictability and lack of control associated with nature. Youth new to a space often wondered whether wild animals would be dangerous there. The remoteness of some of the visited parks created a concern about getting lost, being kidnapped, or getting injured. Youth spoke these concerns out loud during the first hour of in-park experiences in more remote park settings (for example, Pine Point Regional Park, Spring Lake Park Reserve, and St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park). Notably, these concerns were not mentioned after the first hour, nor at the later post-park validity conversations. Instead, in the latter part of park visits, the youth expressed increasing feelings of joy, wonder, curiosity, and observations from their experiences. Spending time in the park seemed to make them feel safer, at least when youth were in groups of people from familiar communities.

Strategies to Address Safety Concerns

Positive nature-based experiences diminish safety concerns. This was true for both youth new to the parks and for the groups that previously had more nature-based experiences. Youth expressed concerns about safety, but they completed activities after reassurance by adults who answered questions. No youth refused to participate due to safety concerns.

Parents with outdoor experience valued how time in the outdoors taught youth how to manage risk and be safer. A Troop 100 father commented how this was accomplished.:

'Don't fall over the cliff'. Or 'You're perched too close to the edge of the dock, kid, don't fall in'. General stuff. But being outdoors teaches those kids about those commonsense things. They learn what boundaries are like. I shouldn't jump over here or go beyond this point. It creates a certain boundary or distance for safety. A way of thinking.

Park agencies can help foster feelings of safety when they provide information that helps users understand how to negotiate the park or trail. For example, what are the rules and tips that help make a safe visit? How can users get help from park staff or emergency assistance? What is the crime rate in parks compared with other public spaces? How are park staff there to help rather than discipline or discourage teens from having fun? What are the special rules and tips that help make a safe visit? After a discussion about visiting the parks in winter, one adult recommended more direct communication about safety:

You have to go to the community and tell them about things. There is also a fear of safety. I am afraid of ice fishing because I am afraid of falling in the ice. Am I safe? I need to be told about how this is safe.

The girls from Asian Media Access (AMA) had a similar recommendation. When asked how to build confidence in parents to let them visit parks, the girls suggested that parents need more invitations to visit parks:

Invite them more often so [parents] will learn about the surroundings and then when we go again, they will say, 'Oh yeah, I've been there and I know what it's like,' so then they will let us go.

Youth and adults recommended that parks and trails have accessible security staff who were not police. Researchers asked youth to discuss whether uniforms or being armed would make a difference in creating feelings of safety. The youth of Organization of Liberians in Minnesota said that these distinctions didn't matter if it wasn't the police doing security.

Public data show that the Regional Park System is a safe public space in terms of crime, injuries, and animal behavior. Furthermore, research demonstrates that park visitation provides an important health benefit by helping to protect youth from adverse mental health conditions and social isolation. In the discussions, park staff were able to turn the topic of safety into reassurances about visiting the parks and what they have to offer. Youth could build familiarity through in-park experiences, useful information, and encouragement to participate in activities and learning experiences.

Opportunity for Skills Learning

To enjoy equitable access to parks, young people need opportunities for skills learning. Skills knowledge helps achieve feelings of competence, a necessary element in building motivation for outdoor activity. Some skills, such as swimming, are baseline safety requirements to enjoy park amenities. The need for skills-attainment is a structural shortcoming due to lack of investment in opportunities. This issue was twofold. First, activities were often not clearly defined. Secondly, youth described a lack of structured opportunities to learn skills. Swimming was the most prevalent programming opportunity deficit, but others included biking, winter sports, camping, and archery. Programming, information, and relationship-building can overcome this obstacle. Many people, both youth and parents, said that they would love the opportunity to develop new outdoor skills. These skills include swimming, boating, camping, biking, ice fishing, horseback riding, and many others. "Just because they are not coming, does not mean they are not interested," the director of Asian Media Access said.

Why should the regional park system prioritize low-barrier access to skills building? Prior research offers two answers: Safety and increased motivation to visit parks. First, park activities need to be described clearly without assuming that visitors are already familiar with

them. During in-park experiences, some youth reported that they were seeing activities or learning what they were for the first time. These included archery, horseback riding, and cross-country skiing.

For example, one young person had a conversation with an outreach staff member at the archery range at Spring Lake Park Reserve. The youth saw the archery target and asked what it was for. The Dakota County staff replied that they're used in archery and asked if that were something he would be interested to try. He said no. She further explained what a bow and arrow are and how they're used in the park. He then exclaimed that he would like to participate in archery but did not know what they were before she explained it.

Other unfamiliar activities noted by youth included sledding and cross-country skiing. Girls in Asian Media Access heard a naturalist talk about the cross-country skiing trails. All the girls nodded but said nothing. The Council researcher asked them if they knew what cross-country skiing was, and they said they did not. The naturalist and researcher explained the activity, noting that it was considered a great form of exercise and a way to see the park in the winter. While clear information and explanations do not remove all obstacles to enjoying an activity, they begin to provide basic knowledge that youth can use to pursue further learning and possibly the activity itself.

Second, youth need structured opportunities to learn skills. During in-park experiences, youth described the learning they needed to be able to enjoy the parks. Swimming and cycling were the two most important skills in this category. Two in-park experiences were held near bodies of water that allowed for watercraft activities. At seeing these activities, youth expressed disappointment or fear about not being able to swim:

An eleven-year-old eyed the boats on the St. Croix River. He told a research team member, 'I wanna get over my fear of water because I don't know how to swim. But I want to learn how to swim... I'm scared of the water because I don't know how to swim and it stops me from going on a boat. But I want to know.'

Parents in Troop 100 highlighted this as a concern for some of the youth in the Troop. One adult volunteer commented, "We just went swimming and not a lot of kids know how to swim. I know my kids don't know yet."

Swimming

The lack of opportunities to learn how to swim can be a significant obstacle for youth enjoyment of regional parks, which are located in a "high-quality natural resource setting that are contiguous to lakes, rivers, or other water bodies." (2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan). Eighty-three percent of system parks, special recreation features, or park reserves (54 out of 60) have water-based activities such as swimming, paddling, or boating. When teens can't swim, they cannot fully enjoy these opportunities. For example, one youth visiting Elm Creek Park Reserve

Figure 5. Outdoor Latino Minnesota youth and a parent use binoculars to scan the scene at Spring Lake Park



was afraid to walk on the bridge going over a lake because he could not swim. Troop 100 was the only group where parents reported the opportunity for youth to take swim lessons. A supportive adult in Asian Media Access told Council researchers, "We say our kids don't know how to swim – they know how to drown!... Schools don't have swimming lessons. They don't have a pool. How are they going to learn?"

Historic conditions of segregated pool access and current spatial inequalities in access to swimming lessons mean that an estimated half of American children do not know how to swim. The figure is almost 80 percent among children in household incomes under \$50,000.⁶ In Minnesota, children of color drown at a rate seven times higher than that of white children. Open-water swimming presents additional first-time experiences that require still more knowledge to swim in an unfamiliar setting. Given the significance of water resources to the Regional Park System, this issue warrants attention to provide users with equitable access to park opportunities.

The situation faced by teens is unique because swim curricula assume the learner is a child. One adult leader in Troop 100 talked about how he felt pressure to hide his lack of swimming ability:

I personally didn't know how to swim until I was 19. I was in the troop. I always faked it. [At this point, other adults in the focus group tease him.] 'You got promoted to staff, and then you just got to go to the tower [away from the water so you didn't have to know how to swim].' I was [at] level three for two years at camp, 15 and 16 years old.

As a teen, feelings of shame about not knowing how to swim can lead to their taking risks to avoid being "revealed" as a non-swimmer, adding an additional safety concern for teen park visitors.

Other desired skills

Parents and adult leaders expressed a desire for their youth and themselves to have more access to additional outdoor skills learning:

A parent at the AMA focus group: I'd like to learn more about fishing. I fish a lot. I want to learn more about ice fishing. I know you need an auger, but that is expensive. How can I get to do those things?

A parent from Troop 100: I would like for my daughter to learn to ride a bike.... When I came, a sponsor bought me a bike, and I couldn't ride it..., I want her to learn.

Youth expressed the desire to gain new skills including:

- Youth from the Organization of Liberians in Minnesota said they wanted to learn camping skills. One of the boys then said he didn't know if he would like being outside like that for days if he went camping but was willing to try, if there was an opportunity to leave after one day if he didn't like it.
- Youth from Troop 100 said they wanted to learn fishing skills. The group all agreed that there was a lack of sport-related educational programs that parks offer to youths, such as teaching youths how to play a certain sport. An example a scout gave was, "I want them to teach me how to fish and have like a fishing tournament afterwards."

Youth expressed their most desired new skills as:

- Swimming
- Bike riding
- Camping
- Survival skills (fire building, orienteering)
- Sledding
- Horseback riding
- Archery
- Ice fishing
- Cross-country skiing

Strategies to Address Opportunity Obstacle

Park agencies in the region have innovated to remove skills obstacles for youth. Efforts include targeted skills-building classes and courses at low and no cost. For example, Dakota County and Outdoor Latino Minnesota created *Fiesta en la nieve* (party in the snow), a three-hour Sunday event where participants could try sledding and snowshoeing for free,

In addition to enjoying complimentary food and s'mores. Three Rivers Park District offers "Try It" experiences with no fees, including the annual Nordic Ski Opener and "Try It: Fishing." Three Rivers, Anoka County, and Saint Paul park departments offer camping skills courses. Three Rivers has a trailer of gear and provides training to organizational and community representatives to teach basic camping skills to be able to lead a group on an overnight trip. The gear is then free to check out, and Three Rivers staff can accompany groups new to camping to advise, as needed.⁷

The obstacle to swimming skill-building is not frequently addressed within the Regional Park System. The Swim Pond at Lake Minnetonka offers skill-building swim lessons. Learn-to-ride-a-bike programs are occasionally offered on regional trails through partnerships with Bicycle Alliance of Minnesota. Organizations, particularly youth-focused and with leaders who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color, have taught youth outdoors skills. The ability of such organizations to connect youth to the outdoors is discussed in Chapter 6.

Youth and adults talked passionately about the need to remove obstacles for families by eliminating fees and providing appropriate program scheduling. They said the application processes for free access to the parks for low-income families were cumbersome and difficult to find except for the extremely well-informed. Parks staff of the Council and Three Rivers Park District tried to apply on site for fee waivers on the day of an in-park experience

Figure 6: Youth enjoy bonfire with park staff at Three Rivers Park District



but could not because the process was too complicated to organize. Forms were difficult to fill out on mobile phones, and a bank of computers would have been required to complete. Lack of opportunities to gain skills hamper youth enjoyment and safety in the regional park and trail system. To enjoy full access to what parks can offer, young people need wider opportunities for learning outdoor skills. Skills building is a necessary component to achieve feelings of competence, a necessary element in building motivation for outdoor activity.

Some skills, such as swimming, are baseline safety requirements to enjoy park amenities. The need for skills-attainment is a structural shortcoming due to lack of investment in opportunities. Without this investment, the opportunity to enjoy outdoor activities is unevenly allocated based on economic factors.

In-park racism and unwelcoming park culture

Structural racism is an ongoing concern in park systems locally and nationally.⁸ The issue of in-park racism was emphasized by parents of color and described by the youth research participants. Parents and youth recounted experiences with racism, racial exclusion, and cultural climate when visiting outdoor venues. The problem is barrier to achieving racial equity. A central priority in the Council's 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan is to "strengthen equitable usage of regional parks and trails by all our region's residents..."⁹ Finally, racial equity is a crucial factor for youth access in particular, considering 40 percent of youth in the Twin Cities region are of color. At the same time, other research has found that cultural issues and racism are less important constraints to accessing recreation than limited knowledge, limited access, and feeling too busy to visit.¹⁰ Although racism may rank somewhat lower than other constraints in this study, it nonetheless presents major personal and emotional obstacles for children, their parents, and other involved adults to fully enjoy the parks and their amenities.

The research identified two ways that racism affects the park experience for youth of color. The first is *in-park racist acts*, the encounters with police and other visitors that create a sense of discomfort, even danger. Encounters with racism are harmful to young people can cause parents to keep children from visiting the parks.¹¹ The second is *unwelcoming park culture*, the subtle and not-so-subtle messages that send the message to make people of color feel unwelcomed in parks.

Parents reported encounters with racism while visiting leisure and recreation spaces in the outdoors, including the regional park system, and in other parks in Minnesota. The spectacular resources of Twin Cities region outdoors are denied to many Minnesotans because of historical and contemporary patterns of racial exclusion.

The adults from all five youth supporting organizations interviewed for this study specifically named racism as a deterrent to park visitation and enjoyment. Participants in all adult focus groups recounted incidents of racism in Minnesota natural spaces, including within the regional park and trail system.

They had additional concerns about park inclusivity, such as lack of representative staffing, omission of their own cultural history, non-inclusive promotional materials, lack of multilingual materials, and "going to the park and no one like me is there." Adults and youth agreed that these elements sent the message that "parks are for white people." The fact that this group of the most motivated parents felt that racism was a barrier may suggest that infrequent and nonusers of color might also be limited by this obstacle.

No one variable or factor can explain racial exclusion in parks. Instead, a combination of prejudicial intrapersonal (attitudinal), interpersonal, and structural factors together create an obstacle to visitation for youth of color.¹²

In-Park Experiences

Police

Parents from Organization of Liberians in Minnesota (OLM) and Troop 100 explained that targeting by police was an obstacle to park visitation, particularly for young men. When asked in a focus group, “Is there anything preventing your kids from visiting the park?”, a parent from Organization of Liberians in Minnesota immediately replied:

Now, our family has problems with racism in the park. There are problems with park policy. They see my boys, and they think they are some threat. This is the reason you don't see us in the parks as much. Our kids are loud...

The program coordinator for the youth enrichment program at OLM agreed, adding:

We tell kids, 'Use your inside voice.' That means that the outside voice is loud... They want to run wild, but this does not mean they are violent. They are not violent. They are not causing trouble. People call the police on them. All they want is to be out and about.

Racialized policing of youth of color in parks and other public spaces is a national problem. Young men of color are particularly vulnerable, as the OLM mother notes in her concerns. Race and age intersect to create unique vulnerabilities for young people of color through negative police encounters, creating a major obstacle that prevents a growing demographic of Minnesotans from enjoying their public parks.

Other visitors

Parents of color expressed concerns about the potential racist behavior of other park visitors, saying that they visited park spaces feeling concerned that something negative would happen. In the outdoors, they would receive subtle and not-so-subtle messages that indicated that some white park users saw families of color as an anomaly in the outdoors.

One dad, Henry, was an enthusiastic mountain biker. He felt the mountain biking community was friendly. However, the risk of encounters with racist outdoor users was still on his mind:

I haven't had any racial confrontation or anything like that. The only thing we talk about [with other park visitors] is what we love to do. That's it. As far as thinking about taking my kids out, I do think about stuff like that, but it's never happened. You know, we get the stare and that's pretty much it. Like, 'Oh, I haven't seen you around.'

Another dad in the focus group offered his interpretation of this kind of encounter: 'Yeah, you're out of place. What are you doing in this neck of the woods?' Henry agreed, 'Yes, like you're out of place.'

Supportive adults of color described these encounters as ranging from “looks” to questions to aggression. Troop 100 supportive adults had spent more time with their youth in nature-based

recreation relative to other parent focus groups. They described experiences that remained with them when thinking about their youth getting outdoors.

A Troop 100 father described both the feeling and the incident he experienced:

We're minorities, we're people of color. Depending where you go [in the outdoors], it can be tense. For example, if you're out west, you get questions about things a lot. In areas where it's predominantly white, in less diverse communities. So I, as a parent, that's always in the forefront of my mind.

I was fishing down at Shakopee. We're on canoes. There's three of us. It's a tiny watercraft. But there's this bass boat that kept zipping. On this huge lake, but they are right there next to us, zipping by, creating wakes that will rock our canoe. After we left, they left, too. So maybe I might have been reading into it, but that whole experience of...you know, it wasn't very pleasant.

Unwelcoming Climate

Another contributing factor to an unwelcoming climate for park access is created through operations and management of parks, including marketing and communications efforts, community engagement, physical features, programming, social context, and transportation.¹³ Youth and adults talked about being “outsiders” – feeling out of place, overly strict park rules, and lack of diversity in staffing.

Feeling out of place

Young people and their supportive adults noticed and commented on occasions when they felt under scrutiny or felt too different from the majority of park visitors. For example, one Liberian-American youth described discomfort while visiting Elm Creek Nature Reserve:

An OLM youth: I feel like I am not at home here. [Asked why he doesn't feel at home]... 'how awkward people make things.' [Then asked how people make things awkward]... 'when people stare at you.'

Even when having fun, a parent from Outdoor Latino Minnesota had the feeling of being the “only one” at an organized ski event. She commented:

There is a chance to do skiing with Outdoor Latino in December. One time, we seemed like the black bean of the family. We went, two families of Latinos, and we were the only ones. Only [white people were] there. No Black people. No Asian people. They like to do this sport. And you feel a bit weird, because you always see all races at the park. But not at that event.

Negative responses of other visitors – staring or making comments – can turn discomfort into avoidance. Feeling out of place hinders visitation if the discomfort of visiting exceeds the pleasure and perceived benefits of visiting. As Ambreen Tariq, founder of @BrownPeopleCamping writes:

So, for many of us people of color, venturing into remote wilderness spaces to try something new or challenging, all [the] while hauling the extra weight of being self-conscious or anxious as a minority in the

outdoors, can make for a pretty uncomfortable experience. I would, but no one out there looks like me. I would, but I don't feel safe being the only minority.¹⁴

Teens of color particularly tend toward avoidance when they feel out of place. Social relationships and “fitting in” are especially important to adolescents.¹⁵ Park operations can pay close attention to ensuring that youth don't feel like they're the “only” in park programming.

Park rules

Park rules can contribute to the sense of exclusion. Youth are afraid of inadvertently breaking the rules¹⁶, and this concern is shared by parents:

I want to make sure that my kids know all the rules. They need to know the limits and regulations and stuff. I want to make sure they know the law and respect the environment and all that stuff.

– Troop 100 dad

Navigating the rules is a concern. For example, young adults in their 20s and 30s who volunteered with Troop 100 described fear of rules being unequally applied to Hmong youth, particularly at regional parks in more rural areas:

The rules and regulations can be a barrier. Policing can [intimidate] in rural regional parks. We can get approached when we're not even doing anything wrong.

We want to do karaoke outdoors at family gatherings. This is a competition that clans like to do at picnics. Every clan does a picnic. The whole clan will go together.

Similarly, OLM adults noted that rules about food and music deterred adults from bringing youth to parks for family and cultural celebrations:

The health department tries to regulate traditional food. We are preparing our food, in our culture. They tell us that in order to be in the park, we have to cater our food. I might as well stay home and cook there.

The first information is whether you can have facilities permission. The local parks do not want any music in the park. People have the event, and that is one of our community concerns, of music.¹⁷

Adults and youth from the Hmong community mentioned a chain of circumstances in which youth would not be able to access parks because elders did not support the visitation, and elders would not visit in part because of a fear of inadvertently breaking the rules. As a young adult volunteer in Troop 100 explained:

I think the customer service aspect can do a lot, too. A lot of times, Hmong elders, their interactions with authority tends to be only because they're in trouble. Because it's negative. So people at the parks can just say 'Hi' and talk with them; [then] they won't have the mindset that anytime a park employee talks to me that something is wrong.

As he made this response, all the participants in the Troop 100 focus group nodded. A mother of Scouts in the troop, added, in reference to her own elder relatives:

They want to get outdoors, but they're so afraid. They're not sure who to ask. They don't know, they're not sure who to ask. You're not going to get in trouble for asking questions. But they think that they are going to get in trouble for asking questions.

Study participants wanted to make sure teens in the park followed the rules. Across six in-park experiences with over 80 youth, Council research staff did not observe a single disciplinary exchange with park staff or an example of breaking the rules. Teens and their parents want park visitation to be safe and environmentally sustainable. They also want the rules to be fair, applied equitably, and be established with multiple cultural contexts in mind. Among supportive adults noted that family relationships required elders to receive information and friendly exchanges with parks staff in order to feel secure about the rules. Sometimes, rules were an element to keep in mind, while at other times the rules were an obstacle to youth park visitation.

Parks staffing

One of the primary findings to emphasize is that parks staffing is a crucial component to connect youth with the outdoors. A skilled recreation professional provides a high-quality experience to build youth feelings of autonomy, competency, and connectedness. Staff diversity mattered. A staff member at Urban Roots provided feedback to the Council lead researcher during the validity conversation, “Your project works because you have a diverse team with researchers of color. The kids see that people in the outdoors look like them.” This observation affirms research that adolescents are more likely to see role models in adults who are like them, a concept known as “role model congruence.”¹⁸

The need for role model congruence with parks staff was most often advocated by supportive adults who themselves had recently been teens, offering feedback from the perspective of young professionals. Some of them worked in parks and recreation, while others served in other youth-serving professions. Like the Urban Roots staff member, they spoke frankly of a lack of parks staff of color in the park system:

The regional and state parks need to diversify their workforce. It needs to look like the people who visit. Not just the people who live close by. Because we don't live there, but we go up there every summer. You don't see...[a parks staff person who] represents the people of Minnesota.

As early career professionals, they described experiences with institutional barriers of job networks that keep professionals of color out of desirable parks and recreation jobs. This can contribute to a lack of role models for youth of color in the outdoors.

Figure 7. Former Troop 100 members guiding troop youth through St. Croix Bluffs Regional Park



This situation also contributes, as noted in the previous finding, to people of color feeling out of place:

My brother...had an experience. He's in water management, water research. And just going to those conferences, it feels like a very old white boys club. There is no representation in panels on those conferences. If you have to go through the employment line [to get a job like that]...the barriers you have to overcome...the qualifications you have to meet.... Other layers of hidden pathways you have to learn how to navigate. It comes down to who you know, [and] do they like you? These are some of the institutional barriers. This is my observation.

In other regions, park agencies have worked to mitigate unconscious bias and diversify park staff, recognizing this effort as a key opportunity to engage and develop youth. These efforts include hiring that values applicant-lived experiences, networking opportunities for staff of color, professional development, and mentorship.¹⁹ As the coordinating body of the Regional Park System, the Metropolitan Council could have a role in encouraging such a networking opportunity across the 10 Implementing Agencies.

Strategies to Address Obstacles of In-Park Racism, Exclusion and Climate

Addressing these obstacles aligns with all Regional Park System efforts to repair the historical, institutional, and personal harm created by racism. These obstacles make other barriers worse, such as lack of awareness of park opportunities, safety concerns, and lack of opportunity to learn new outdoor skills. Youth and adults talked specifically about racism in relation to in-park experiences, welcoming climate, non-inclusive cultural histories, and staffing. In addition to next-steps mentioned here, the findings and recommendations offer other potential opportunities for action.

In-park incidents and culturally exclusionary rules reveal the need for conversations about race, Engagement notes, racism and culture throughout the park system. Amanda Fong, supervisor of community

As we're doing community engagement, the changes need to happen [in other areas of park administration]. Do youth have trouble with park policy? What are the internal operations within the full system? It doesn't make sense to bring in an organization to enjoy the park if they then run into an issue with facility staff or the Park Police.... Our department's relationship with the police has been mostly good. The few conflicts that we've have led to further conversations, including coaching sessions for police officers involved, informal staff training, and increased communication between community engagement and police.

Fong's analysis details two insights. First, efforts to end in-park racism and other forms of racial exclusion are an all-agency effort, with communication across agency sectors. Second, the efforts need to come from the park system rather than expecting community members to be the change agents. Conversations around rules, a specific context discussed by research participants, is one area where all-agency conversations could address this obstacle. Youth

researchers recommended parks that offered clear communication of rules and explanation of *why* the rules are in place.

Park agencies can set expectations that racist acts by visitors are unacceptable through public notices, help-line phone numbers, reporting protocols, and staff interventions. Communications can message to visitors that the park's visitors are a multicultural, multilingual population. Some of these strategies would also address issues of exclusion and climate. For example, Washington County obtained grant funding to install multilingual loudspeaker announcements and signage, informing *all visitors* that a diverse usership is expected. Research in the Council and nationally have found that these constraints can be addressed "by increasing diversity among park staff, creating programs relevant to racial and ethnic minorities, partnering with relevant community organizations (for example., church groups, communities of color coalitions), and considering more facilities and services where appropriate (for example, barbeques, picnic areas)."²⁰ Youth researchers spoke and read English fluently but noted that multilingual signs made it easier for their families to enjoy the parks. Information in non-English languages can also take the pressure of youth to serve as translators for older family members.

Creating welcoming park spaces

One suggestion was continued investment in creating more inclusive spaces. A father from Troop 100 described:

I think creating the space to be more inclusive. We do this all the time in schools, print posters of people who look like the kids going to school. Representation.

Another parent in the group continued:

When [he] mentioned signs, it reminds me of the whole name change of Lake Calhoun. Changing it to Bde Maka Ska. I still have a hard time with the name. But even that in itself just changes the vibe around. It felt like a little bit more welcoming. More inviting all of a sudden. Not as dictated by boundaries, and history and who was here before. It had that aura all of a sudden. So maybe more inclusive practices from signs to training for people who work there. Maybe how to be more competent in working across cultures.

The father's discussion of Bde Maka Ska expresses appreciation for Minneapolis Parks and Recreation's investment in inclusivity even when related to ethnic identities different from one's own. The new Metropolitan Council equity analysis requirement includes consideration of historical context. Many parks and trails have rich multicultural histories, including Indigenous connections to place (Indian Mounds Regional Park), immigration stories (Phalen Lake Park), African American architectural design (Lilydale Regional Park), and history of socio-economic inequality as a former poor farm (Pine Point Regional Park). Youth and supportive adults expressed enthusiasm to know more about these stories. Urban Roots youth wrote in their public comment letter about the Regional Parks Policy Plan amendment:

Parks are more impactful when they provide a bigger history...Telling histories is meaningful. Then, when visitors come, they know what land they're standing on, what it means to stand there, and who is connected to the land. When we visit a park, we want to know about all the events that happened there and how the land has

changed...The histories need to be more inclusive, not just one group. It's neat to know these things. Can parks include more than one history?

Lack of culturally relevant programming is a constraint that prevents attachment and belonging to park spaces. Youth made many enthusiastic recommendations about programming to create connections between the park and area residents of color. Youth recommended bringing cultures together and celebrating specific cultural heritage events. Sesay of Urban Roots interviewed his uncle for the research project. Noted a Council researcher during Sesay's validity conversation presentation:

Sesay's uncle answered all the questions in the interview and Sesay took notes to present. Sesay highlighted that his uncle suggested winter ice skating and more pavilions to hold events at, as well to "make the park more inclusive [to all cultures and ethnic groups]." He suggested signage in different languages and large annual communal parties.

Another Urban Roots youth researcher, Sadie, interviewed a neighbor. Sadie's interviewee suggested that the parks should have more communal projects. When asked what the neighbor meant by that, Sadie referenced the Pagoda/Chinese temple. They would like to see a "variety of projects that include everyone else's cultures [because] it might bring them in more or make them feel more welcome."

The findings in this section are not new or unexpected. Council and other research has extensively documented similar research results. In-park racism and park racial climate issues are not disconnected from the other obstacles discussed in this report or prior Council research. At the same time, the issue merits continued attention, honest dialogue, and bold action. Experiences of racism result in lost opportunities of youth connecting with our regional park system.

Increasing awareness of park opportunities

In the Twin Cities region and nationally, lack of awareness is a primary obstacle to park visitation. It exists across racial/ethnic and income groups and is more important than even proximity to parks as a constraint on visitation.²¹ In a study of 37 communities and 34,000 respondents, only time limitations exceeded lack of awareness as a reported constraint. Enjoyment of and support for parks requires that potential visitors know that parks exist, programming is available, and that outdoor resources are accessible. National data show that the public tends to be less aware of trails and parks than of golf courses, swimming pools, and pharmacies. To influence visitation, awareness of park features and characteristics is as important as knowledge that the park exists at all.

This section describes how youth are affected by this constraint and the recommendations by youth and adults to raise awareness of parks and trails in the Twin Cities region. Particular recommendations address social media advice, teen-specific programming, and connecting with communities, not just individuals. This research affirmed the findings of the *2014 Park Use Among Communities of Color* that described knowledge gaps related to "a) what a regional park is, b) where regional parks are located, c) how to get to regional parks, d) regional park rules, e) what to do in regional parks, and f) events occurring in regional parks." Awareness, like skill-building, has multiple components. Potential users need to be aware of a park to be able to visit it. A frequent

comment from adults accompanying youth on visits was, “I didn’t know this was here.” When Celestial Paladins dance troop visited Battle Creek Regional Park, one of the leaders expressed amazement as she looked around, commenting, “This park was not even on the radar. I just didn’t know, and it’s in my neighborhood.” Lack of information and wayfinding guides can be an obstacle enjoying the park and whatever events may be scheduled. Adults who brought teens to Spring Lake Park Reserve felt apprehensive traveling to the park because “it is a bit hidden, without any signs to find it.”

Awareness includes park amenities and characteristics. Another element is a lack of shared vocabulary to understand what park agencies mean when they describe amenities. Participants in Outdoor Latino have connected around a love of doing activities in parks, but they sought clarification about how to define park units. In the focus group, the concept of a trail was unfamiliar to some:

Figure 8. Family activity at Spring Lake Park Reserve



Council staff (in Spanish): *Have you been in a regional park or trail before?*

Parent: *But what is the difference between a park and a trail? When you’re in a park, it’s because you’re in a park, but what is a trail?*

Council staff: *Sendero [path] es ‘trail.’ They are miles long. Very well known. For example, the trail that goes along the three lakes in Minneapolis.*

Parent: *These are the most common; there are trails near us.*

Adults were also uncertain what, exactly, a regional park was. “Is there an identity to regional parks? State parks have their identity. Local parks have an identity. What about regional parks?” Many had visited a regional park, most often for picnics or walks.

Adult Awareness and Youth Visitation

Lack of adult awareness is a crucial obstacle to youth access to the outdoors. Because of transportation, family interdependence, and concerns about youth safety, youth most often access the parks through organizations or guardians. Three teenage girls from Outdoor Latino Minnesota talked about why they were at the in-park experience. One said, “Mom comes home and tells you you’re going to a park.” The other girls laughed and nodded their heads. For all of them, it was the parents who decided when and how they would get to parks. So lack of adult awareness is a barrier for both generations.

On the other hand, adults are influenced by what their youth and children want, and youth can be the ambassador to encourage families to visit. Explained one parent in OLM, “If [kids] are exposed, they will know and they will ask the parents to take them. I want to make my kids happy. If they ask me to go there, I will go. Kids are interested.”

Lack of awareness vs. outdoor experience

Lack of awareness of the Regional Park System was not associated with a lack of experience in the outdoors. Young adults and parents in Scout Troop 100 had extensive camping, fishing, and cycling experience. Yet many had very little prior knowledge of outdoor opportunities in the regional parks. “With the regional parks, they’re not as well known.... If [people] don’t know anything about the regional parks, they can’t get started,” advised a Troop 100 dad.

Another group of experienced outdoor users were unaware of opportunities in the regional parks – the members of the Three Rivers Teen Council, a group of 14 youth who demonstrated ongoing commitment to civic engagement with the parks. They identified “not knowing about opportunities there [that] are for teens” as the second-most frequently mentioned barrier, after time constraints.

The focus on amenities and characteristics (“things to do”) suggests that potential users need to know what they can do in the parks to be motivated to visit them.

Figure 9. Importance of interpersonal relations in connecting people to parks

1. Out of five participating organizations, how many found the opportunity without a direct email invitation?
2. Of the 14 teens who joined the Three Rivers Teen Council, how many participated based on finding the opportunity themselves from the website or social media?

Answer to both: Only one. The rest joined because a trusted person or organization shared the opportunity with them.

Strategies

In-park information builds awareness

When Urban Roots youth staff visited Pine Point Regional Park, they spent time carefully reading information board materials. “It would be good to have a second information board in the middle of the park. All of that information was good.” They added that the signs should be in different languages because it is “more inviting” when not just English. “I learn when I go into the park. I went in to walk, and then someone tells you [about programming opportunities] when you are in the park. You see a lot going on, and then you go,” explained an adult with Outdoor Latino. A youth from Outdoor Latino Minnesota said he liked reading informational pamphlets or signs. In her feedback for the Pine Point master plan, a youth from Urban Roots recommended there be signs to identify different trees and flowers, “You know, education to learn about the place.”

Relationships foster awareness

Supportive adults in Outdoor Latino Minnesota reported that they occasionally found programming from public information from an Implementing Agency More often, they accessed the information through events on their organization’s Facebook page. “It’s better to visit with *Outdoor* [Latino], as they provide the information,” commented a parent.

Research participants referred to communities of interest and relationships when they talked about raising awareness. They mentioned organization [groups], community, and gatherings. Girls from the Hmong community emphasized the need to build trust with elders, to foster youth access. “Invite [the adults] more often so they learn about the surroundings and then when we go again, they will say, ‘Oh yeah, I’ve been there, and I know what it’s like.’ So, then they will let us go. Using multiple media to reach youth

Communication channels such as websites, social media, text messages and email lists can potentially reach users. Youth and adult recommendations demonstrated that using various types of media is just one strategy to build awareness.

The range of recommendations also included a warning that media can't replace first-hand experience. At the same time, social media, print, and peer-to-peer media contact were all described as ways that youth and their supportive adults gained awareness about parks and outdoor opportunities. Sometimes the search for adventure outside comes from the electronic world.

Seeing an activity for the first time on YouTube may spark someone to try it out on their own. For example, in the summer of 2020, the company, *Fish Sunflowers*,

grew a number of sunflower fields that became popular on a social media site and sparked interest in visiting the flower plantings.

Recommendations on media and communication strategies are summarized in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3. Adult recommendations on media, marketing and park awareness

"I pick up brochures all the time, when we go someplace (like the library), I pick up a bunch of brochures."

Sponsorship at affinity group festivals.

"Can you send stuff home with high school students? The kids got older and we never hear about anything anymore."

Facebook events to learn about things happening.

"Advertising via TV would reach more people."

"I visit the state park website and county park website looking at different places to visit. I live in Saint Paul, so I look at Ramsey and Washington County."

My information searches are "driven by interest. Do we want to go to a lake? Do we want to see birds? We do google searches. But also, we find out within our area. I live in Brooklyn district."

"I use a mountain biking app. Anywhere in the country, I can find a trail. Regional parks are in there. Any place that has a trail."

Facebook live events hosted by an organization,

Pop-up ads found in mobile phone games where you have to watch or earn items to continue in the game.

"I like to read informational pamphlets or signs."

Table 4. Youth recommendations on media, marketing and park awareness

Taking kids to the park is the best way.
Don't just use social media. "Instagram may be a great source, but it is not the only great source and it's better to learn from actually talking and communicating."
Books about the parks.
Programs at high schools. ("Three Rivers came to my school to talk about careers, and now I want to apply there.")
Interpersonal social media posts, "like snapchat stories saying, 'slide through' and put the location tag on." "Having events on Facebook (although Facebook is dead) and that they should tell youth that there will be food."
Peer-to-peer or social media influencer posts on Instagram about the parks. I'm on Instagram almost all the time, see and share with friends.
Put up information at schools and rest areas/gas stations. "I like to read informational pamphlets or signs."
Instagram isn't good. You may not know how to find information about the Regional Park System in Instagram. It can't explain "how it feels" to visit a park.
"Snapchat is the best because you have more people on it and mostly they're all your friends."
Pop-up ads found in mobile phone games where you have to watch or earn items to continue in the game.
"I like to read informational pamphlets or signs."

One-on-one meetings with YSO leadership

Meeting with YSO leadership (youth and adult) proved to be a way to build awareness and relationships. Before each in-park experience, Council researchers met with YSOs to find out what they wanted from outdoor experiences. These sessions identified the priorities, concerns, and definitions the YSO leadership used to connect their youth to the outdoors. In response, Council staff shared programming possibilities and the amenities of the Regional Park System. (A sample list of conversation questions is part of the [toolkit](#) on the Council website.) Outreach staff are a recommended investment to build awareness with schools, outdoor clubs, religious congregations, affinity groups, career clubs, and other youth serving organizations.

Hosting awareness events

Youth and adults were eager for their respective communities to know more about the parks. "Can you host a party for the community to get to know the [park]?" brainstormed one youth from Urban Roots. "You need to have a gathering to introduce what is there... Parks need to get out to people, let them know what they can do there." "There could be a teen night, a parents' night out, a ladies' night to enjoy the park," recommended an adult leader in Organization of

Liberians of Minnesota. These recommendations were then converted into a “word cloud” graphic, where many common terms reflected ideas defining awareness in active terms such as “activities,” “events,” and “participate.”

Other potential avenues of outreach included:

- A park representative who could talk about the opportunities the parks offer and what there is to see that would make you want to go there.
- Sponsorship at organization’s festivals.
- Programs at high schools. (“Three Rivers came to my school to talk about careers, and now I want to apply there.”)
- Information posted at schools and rest areas.

Transportation access to parks

For teens, transportation challenges can determine whether they can access the parks alone or with peers. Transportation issues for youth differ from those of adults, who typically have drivers’ licenses. Fewer teens are getting their license than in the past. Additionally, teens are affected by their parents’ transportation constraints. Youth in this research expressed a desire to spend time with peers only, even though they also enjoyed time with family in the outdoors. For these reasons, park agencies that want to attract teens to the outdoors need to be aware that youth have particular transportation obstacles compared with adults.

Teens Depend on Adults to Get to Parks

When asked about how they accessed the parks, one youth responded, “By car with family or biking or walking if alone.” Some teens could rely on parents to get them there. A Scout in Troop 100 commented, “I feel like riding a bike is useless because you can just use a car.” “But you can’t drive,” the researcher replied. He shrugged and said, “Yeah, but the adults can.”

For others, the reliance on adults sometimes means they don’t get to go out because parents are too busy to drive. “My parents have two jobs. I don’t get out. I’m stuck in the house,” a youth researcher explained. Teens felt that a lack of a driver’s license prevents them from accessing parks. When thinking about getting to the parks by car, a Three Rivers Teen Council member replied, “For my family, yes, but it’s hard for me individually, as I don’t have my driver’s license or a car yet, and public transport is difficult.”

Transportation Costs Matter to Some Families

Transportation was not the most frequently mentioned obstacle, but it has unique dimensions for youth compared with adults. Private transportation costs can limit park visitation by youth, and park visitation can be a lower priority relative to other ways to spend money for leisure activities that involve transportation.

Analyzing the relationship between car use and park visitation, teen researchers found:

It is easy to get to parks with the condition that I would actually go to the park in the first place.

Sometimes families have to conserve the gas that they use to do fun things because they have to use that gas to get other places, and using to go to the park would be [perceived as] a waste of money.

I can get to the park with a car but we have limited time and I don't want to waste gas money. My parents would feel safer if there was a bus taking me there or a chaperone present.

[I] just walk. Don't have a car. True, we can get there by car, but there is no time or commitment to use gas all the way there.

Public transit was an option for park access for some older teens over 16, but it was less popular than walking, biking, or riding with parents. When the Asian Media Access group visited Battle Creek Regional Park, naturalist Ken Pelto explained that even though many of our parks were inaccessible, the Route 70 bus runs through Saint Paul and comes directly to Battle Creek. At the time, the girls in the group talked about how physically inaccessible parks are. When AMA analyzed their in-park data, an adult in the group said that the bus route information was not relevant because, “We don’t take city buses.” Another AMA adult confirmed that sentiment. “We’ve never taken the city bus before.”

Older teens in Urban Roots had taken the bus to parks, and they traveled by bus to work. But they recommended different options to connect youth and families to parks. The regular bus would take too long and be a burden to the family. “Good transit is key because it is a waste of gas money to drive your car.”

Strategies to Improve Access

Youth researchers raised the need for expanded and more creative ways to access parks. They suggested that, to visit alone, walking and biking trails would need to safely connect them to parks. They also requested that signs be posted that told them what parks they could reach from a trail. “One time, I got on the trail and had no idea where I was going. I rode a long ways. I got lost and made it home late. My mom was mad at me,” said one Urban Roots youth analyst.

Dedicated buses to parks was a popular recommendation. Transit routes sometimes require taking more than one bus, stops located far from park entrances, and long travel times. When asked how to solve the problem of transportation to the parks, youth in Urban Roots and Troop 100 offered similar suggestions:

Rapid transit/special buses that would go to the parks in a timely manner. Perhaps a shuttle or train route.

An express bus or train route only in the inner city in the metro area that went only from pick up locations and directly to the park.

We would use designated shuttle or tourist bus if offered.

A parent in the Troop 100 focus group affirmed that idea.

What if you adopted the casino model where you take the buses to certain hubs? I see the Mystic buses all the time, taking the old folks. They know how to hop and transfer buses to get to the Mystic line. What if that were available for the day?

This solution could involve collaboration between the Council’s Parks Unit and Metro Transit. The City of Seattle [provides summer weekend bus shuttles from transit centers to trailheads](#), expanding in 2019 due to popular demand. Other communities have used philanthropic efforts to create [dedicated funding for transportation](#) to get youth to field trips focused on environmental education.

Park agency collaborations with organizations can remove transit as an obstacle for youth. Youth in Organization of Liberians in Minnesota reported that their only prior regional park visitation had been through field trips where a bus transported them to the park and back to school at the end of the day. Youth serving organizations have access to transportation and parental trust to transport youth. This factor is discussed in in the recommendations section.

Priorities and time constraints

What do teens and parents mean when they say they don't have time to spend in the outdoors? The constraints are complex. Part of the obstacle is rooted in competing priorities and a lack of time. This issue can particularly affect youth populations, such as homework and school obligations. And it can overlap with household priorities, families' understanding of the benefits of park visitation, and the perceived relevance of outdoor recreation in light of other aspects of young people's lives.

Youth and their guardians sometimes feel that recreational activities are less important than time spent on academics. In this cited study, young people reported lacking time to visit parks because of school requirements, parental work, and their own work hours. At the Teen Council of Three Rivers Parks, 70 percent of youth identified lack of time as the most significant personal constraint to park visitation. Schoolwork and too-busy parents were cited as specific obstacles. Youth without access to their own transportation relied on supportive adults to get them to the outdoors.

A parent from Organization of Liberians in Minnesota explained, "Parents are low income and they work a lot. They have a hard time making time to go to the park... Now that I am working full time, I can't take my youth out a lot." A supervisor from Asian Media Access explained that "many of the parents work night shifts, so they are unable to attend evening events." A parent from Outdoor Latino described similar situations: "There are many parents who can't take their kids because they have to work or [do] other things. They can't make time to take their kids out, so they can run and see things, enjoy the animals. It's important that there be activities like the ones you do in the park system [because parents do not have time]." Youth Council members of Three Rivers Park District could not drive and provide their own transportation.

Some youth had work commitments that cut into leisure time. A youth visitor from Outdoor Latino told a research team member that he was tired because he had to work nights while going to school. He reported working five nights a week on an overnight shift. He said the shift lasted from 7 or 8 at night until 3 or 4 in the morning, when the work was done. The young man talked about his daily schedule: work at night, then usually just staying up and going to school when it's time, then homework right after school for a while, and then sleeping for a few hours until time to go to work again. He said he would probably be heading to work after the in-park event.

In such cases, time entails an allocation of priorities. When young people face other demands, the "cost" of spending time in parks becomes very "expensive." Poor transportation, long distance to parks, an encounter with racial bias, or lack of experience with culturally competent programming – any of them can reduce the payoff.

A lack of awareness of the benefits of park visitation makes regional parks a lower value for time spent. Without an opportunity to learn skills or without the ability to swim, visiting nature-based resources becomes less appealing. Park safety can be another factor. When parks are perceived to be unsafe, the incentive to visit them understandably declines. Parents are likely to

make park visitation a low priority if they think their youth will get in trouble or miss out on more important opportunities. Ways to increase the perceived value of time spent in the outdoors is discussed in the next section.

Strategies to Foster Park Visitation

Everybody is busy in their life. Going to the park could be a fun day for them to take a day off from a busy work life and just to have fun, to not stress about work.

- Invitation to visit Battle Creek Regional Park by members of Celestial Paladins Dance Troop/Asian Media Access

When young people and their families get out to the parks, the experience can help to shift time priorities. Like the Celestial Paladins girls, who advocate for parks as a way to break from their busy life, youth who attended the in-park experiences repeatedly said that it was time well-spent. After experiencing the park first-hand, they, in turn, became advocates for visiting the parks.

Adults from YSOs said they would promote park visitation to others in their community, after they had time spent in parks and got to know the park staff. Connections to the park through high-quality programming increased the perceived value of time spent in parks.

Thus, strategic efforts at programming and raising awareness can help to make time in the outdoors become a higher priority for youth and their families. The strategies include ways to shift perceptions about time investment in park and reducing the factors that exacerbate time obstacles.

Members of communities with specific scheduling needs to accommodate recreation are more able to invest time if park programming accommodates those needs. Constituent-led organizations are in a position to help park staff understand specific time constraints of people within the various communities. For example, Outdoor Latino Minnesota programming happens only on Sunday afternoons, “because this is a time when families in our community have free time and are wanting to get out and do something.” When scheduling their in-park event, members of the Organization of Liberians of Minnesota also preferred Sundays because “youth in our community have chores to do Saturday morning, so we can’t go to the park during that time.”

Adults in Outdoor Latino, Organization of Liberians, and Asian Media Access advocated for programming that would provide activities for teens while parents were at work. “We need events to drop kids off all day [for park activities]. Of course, we want our kids to not sit at home all day, but we need all-day options.” Activities where they could drop off and pick up would benefit minority families, explained one family.

The youth of Celestial Paladins emphasized the need for flexible park hours. When asked to choose a picture that represented her desires for park visits, one youth chose what she called a “dark picture,” explaining:

I want a program mainly for people who don’t have a lot of free time. Programs [that are] open 24/7 for those who don’t have a lot of free time to do these fun things.

Parents said they wanted park opportunities for their children. Youth reported that parents want them to spend their time in ways that offered learning, employment, safety, and health. One Urban Roots youth mentioned that her parents would never let her go to the park on her own, just for “no reason.” “They do support me completely when it’s for work or for volunteering. Then they support me all the way. But they are not going to want me to go someplace just for fun or where I’m going to get in trouble.”

Organization of Liberians in Minnesota adult leaders requested that the Council research team tell youth how their research and presentations with our team could be described on college applications. Three Rivers Park District’s teen council offered leadership opportunities, a structured time commitment, and peer interactions to align park use with other youth priorities. The new experiences in parks would contribute to youth’s school performance, explained an OLM leader:

Figure 10. Youth present on Battle Creek Regional Park amenities



Going to educational activities in parks helps them. They will do better in school and learn other things about life they can take to school. If they go to the parks, they have something to write about. They can gather information they can use in reports.

Parents said that their youth prioritize electronics, which can reduce time spent in outdoors. A Troop 100 parent told us, “More time outdoors means less time on electronics. That keeps them disconnected from nature.” Academic research supports this observation that less time in the outdoors corresponds to increased screen time.

A father in Outdoor Latino explained it this way:

When my son is outside, he’s entertained all day, period. And all of a sudden, he’s like, ‘Where did the time go?’ When you’re outside, time just flies by. Inside, not so much. Definitely, things are better when he gets time outside.

When supportive adults saw their youth in the outdoors, they themselves advocate for prioritizing outdoor time. A Troop 100 father who frequently took his children out camping noted:

Kids in nature have a lot of confidence. A lot of comfort in their own skin. A lot of it is that exploring aspect. You are willing to touch bugs ... It allows curiosity to build. And they know how to do things. I know how to pitch a tent, build a fire. I can identify trees and bugs and things like that. That adds to confidence in other areas like school, is what I’ve seen.

Messaging can encourage teens and adults to prioritize youth park visitation. Messages to align with teen and adult priorities include health, educational benefits, possibly later employment opportunities, and reduced screen time. “There are health risks like diabetes that are happening because we spend more time at McDonald’s than we do in the outdoors,” one father said.

Like other obstacles, lack of time is both a true scarcity and a prioritization issue. The Council and Implementing Agency staff have the opportunity to learn more from families and youth about how different communities think about allocating time for youth activities. Can schedules be made more accommodating in response to community needs? Can connections be made with schools to more closely integrate learning with nature-based recreation? How can challenges with proximity (transportation and park access) be better understood to reduce the required time investment? Collaboration and creativity are resources that can lower this obstacle.

Economic hardship

Financial circumstances influence all other obstacles. One study in the Pacific Northwest found that the survey respondents with the lowest incomes were 60% less likely to have participated in outdoor recreation compared with the highest income respondents. In the Twin Cities metropolitan area, 40% of youth live in households within 250% of poverty line, with income of less than \$65,000 per year. Youth described economic hardship as a contributor to transportation obstacles, where gas money for parks might be seen as extravagant and travel hindered by limited public transportation to parks. Programming and entrance fees might also seem a barrier, although these issues were less mentioned.

At the writing of this report, an increased number of families were experiencing hardship due to Covid-19. Lack of money and the need to prioritize spending contributed to lack of opportunity to learn skills, time constraints, and transportation constraints. Strategies for addressing all of the obstacles in this section included consideration of financial constraints, paying attention to solutions that were most available to The Council and Implementing Agencies. For example, Carver County, a regional park implementing agency in the western metropolitan region, eliminated park entrance fees in recognition of the universal health benefits offered by park access.²²

Endnotes

- ¹ Salk, R. (2014). Regional Park Use among Select Communities of Color: A Qualitative Investigation. Retrieved from <https://metro council.org/Parks/Publications-And-Resources/PARK-USE-REPORTS/Park-Use-Among-Communities-of-Color-2014.aspx>
- ² 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.
- ³ Malone, K. (2002). Street life: youth, culture and competing uses of public space. *Environment and Urbanization*, 14(2), 157-168; Owens, P. E. (2002). No teens allowed: The exclusion of adolescents from public spaces. *Landscape Journal*, 21(1), 156-163. <https://doi.org/10.3368/lj.21.1.156>
- ⁴ Details of this concern were covered in local media. <http://www.citypages.com/news/lawsuit-cops-turned-minnesota-woman-over-to-ice-for-having-mexican-id/477916353>
- ⁵ These comments cannot receive adequate contextualization in this report. It's recommended to begin studying of this topic through sources cited in Appendix 2.
- ⁶ USA Swimming Foundation. (2017). USA Swimming Foundation announces 5-10 percent increase in swimming ability among U.S. children. Retrieved from <https://www.usaswimmingfoundation.org/utility/landing-pages/news/2017/05/25/usa-swimming-foundation-announces-5-10-percent-increase-in-swimming-ability-among-u.s.-children>; Waller, S., & Norwood, D. M. (2017). What African Americans can do to bridge the swimming gap: A call to action. *International Journal of Aquatic Research and Education*, 5(4). <https://doi.org/10.25035/ijare.05.04.10>
- ⁷ Interview with Three Rivers Community Engagement Supervisor Amanda Fong.
- ⁸ Kellogg, Michelle; Nelson, J. (2015). Racial equity in parks and recreation. Retrieved June 12, 2020, from Parks & Recreation magazine website: <https://www.nrpa.org/parks-recreation-magazine/2015/december/racial-equity-in-parks-and-recreation/>
- ⁹ See page 15 of the 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan.
- ¹⁰ Rushing, J. R., Needham, M. D., D'Antonio, A., & Metcalf, E. C. (2019). Barriers to attachment? Relationships among constraints, attachment, and visitation to urban parks. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism*, 27.
- ¹¹ Trent, M., Dooley, D. G., Dougé, J., Trent, M. E., Cavanaugh, R. M., Lacroix, A. E., ... Wallace, S. B. (2019). The impact of racism on child and adolescent health. *Pediatrics*, 144(2). <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-1765>
- ¹² Arai, S., & Kivel, B. D. (2009). Critical race theory and social justice perspectives on whiteness, difference(s) and (Anti) racism: A fourth wave of race research in leisure studies. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 41(4), 459-472. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00222216.2009.11950185>.
- ¹³ National Recreation and Parks Association. (n.d.). Guidelines for Developing an Inclusion Policy. Retrieved from <https://www.nrpa.org/siteassets/Inclusion-Guidelines-for-Developing-Policy.pdf>, p. 14.
- ¹⁴ Tariq, A. (2017, April). I would but: I am the only person of color. *Outside Online: REI Co-Op Journal*. Retrieved from <https://www.rei.com/blog/camp/i-would-but-i-am-the-only-person-of-color>
- ¹⁵ Wallace, T., Ye, F., & Chhuon, V. (2012). Subdimensions of adolescent belonging in high school. *Applied Developmental Science*, 16(3), 122-139.
- ¹⁶ Roberts, N. S. (2012). Youth Outdoors and Nature: A Review of the Literature.
- ¹⁷ The research team reviewed online rules and found that all the participating park agencies had rules against amplified music.
- ¹⁸ Yancey, A. K., Grant, D., Kurosky, S., Kravitz-Wirtz, N., & Mistry, R. (2011). Role modeling, risk, and resilience in California adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 48(1), 36-43; Rao, T., & Roberts, N. S. (2018). Voices of women of colour: Dreaming of an inclusive outdoor leadership environment. In *The Palgrave*

International Handbook of Women and Outdoor Learning (pp. 815–835). https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-53550-0_56

¹⁹ See, for example, the [Crissy Field Center in San Francisco](#).

²⁰ P. 8 in Rushing, J. R., Needham, M. D., D'Antonio, A., & Metcalf, E. C. (2019). Barriers to attachment? Relationships among constraints, attachment, and visitation to urban parks. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism*, 27, 100228.

²¹ Penbrooke, T., Layton, R., Cares, C., Dunlap, B., & Packebush, D. (2019). *Awareness and the use of parks*. Retrieved from <https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/74db42b4c00f4c9eac3a71ad05f741b6/park-awareness-report-summary-final.pdf>

²² Some studies find it to be one of the most significant barriers (for example, Ramsay, G., Dodds, R., Furtado, D., Mykhayletska, Y., Kirichenko, A., & Majedian, M., 2017). The barriers to millennials visiting Rouge Urban National Park. *Sustainability (Switzerland)*, 9(6) (<https://doi.org/10.3390/su906090>) while other studies find it to be less important than concerns related to awareness, amenities, cost, and time (Penbrooke, T., Layton, R., Cares, C., Dunlap, B., & Packebush, D. (2019). *Awareness and the use of parks*. Retrieved from <https://www.nrpa.org/contentassets/74db42b4c00f4c9eac3a71ad05f741b6/park-awareness-report-summary-final.pdf>