Pomona’s Parks as Areas in Need of Protection:

Is Low Perceived Safety Driving Potential Park-goers Away?

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Introduction:

The first parks of the United States were not designed with children’s use in mind. In fact, it was not until the creation San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park in the late 1880s that a children’s playground was erected in a park setting. With the construction of the first park playground came lofty ideals of how this space would contribute to the growth of children. “San Franciscans associated two of the four virtues with the children’s area. First, the program for opening day festivities linked it with public health. [...] Second, [...] the play area was to promote democratic equality among the various segments of society.” (Young 1995) Just as parks were expected to improve the character of a city’s adult demographic, it was thought that designating a spot for children to play in within a park would equate to an investment in social stock. The hope was that the children who came to play in the clean, green environment would grow up healthier and well-suited for a democratic society. This idea has persisted through generations, all the way to the present. It is no wonder, then, that playgrounds have continued to grow in number with the creation of new parks. Multicolored jungle gyms, sandboxes, and swings have become a staple of the city park landscape. Yet, while the link between healthy children and park use has been strengthened over time by a wealth of scientific studies, many cities have very limited amount of parks and greenspace within their borders. This dearth of spaces available to physical activity is thought to lead to higher rates of obesity and coronary heart disease (Babey et al. 2007), and greater psychological distress (Taylor, et. al. 2006) In park-poor areas where a great portion of the population is overweight or obese, park advocates offer the establishment of additional parks and greenspaces as a solution to the problem. Though this proposal may work to remediate the issue, it is important to consider that available land is often scarce in cities and in some areas, funding for development of parkland may be difficult to
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secure. Additionally, suggesting more parks also ignores the use or underutilization already built recreational spaces. If the existing park space is not being used to full capacity, finding out why this is and how the issue can be rectified should be a priority.

The city of Pomona and its parks:

With 48.1% of Pomona’s children either overweight or obese (Babey, et. al. 2012), the future health of the population is clearly threatened. In addition, the Pomona parks website gives total park acreage within the city as 287.11 acres for a population of 151,348. This means there are just 1.39 acres of park for every 1000 residents, ranking Pomona near the bottom with reference to amount of park space per resident in Los Angeles County. (Wolch, et al. 2002) These factors seem to paint the city as a prime candidate for adding park space. Unfortunately, Pomona is also one of the poorer cities of Los Angeles County; average annual per capita money income is just $17,035 compared with a state average of $29,527 according to 2013 United States Census Bureau data. In this economic climate, it is unlikely that significant private funding could be raised within Pomona for the establishment of new parks. Nevertheless, if city officials made the decision to dedicate additional funding for the construction or improvement of public greenspaces, they would do well to first observe the visitation patterns in the parks Pomona currently has. One may look at the ratio of park space to residents and claim that there are not enough parks, but if Pomona was truly lacking in this way, we would logically expect to see the parks that are currently available at full capacity on a regular basis. In reality, though Pomona’s parks are certainly being used by children and their parents, there are varying levels of usage between locations. Some parks are heavily utilized, and others are used much less.
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Understanding what factors influence the success of one park over another is important in order to effectively allocate the limited funding provided to parks. The purpose of this paper is to provide insight into the reasons for variances in usage, and to provide suggestions on how to best approach improving park visitation at parks that are already built. While children are welcomed into parks, they are still generally brought to these spaces by their parents or caretakers. Lower perceptions of safety have been correlated with decreased usage of parks by adults (Tucker, et. al. 2009), so it follows that children’s usage of parks may decrease in proportion with perceptions of safety held by the children’s guardians. Given the portrayal of Pomona as a site of high crime (Winton and Blankstein 2004), it is hypothesized that Pomona’s parks may be underutilized as a result of low safety perception by Pomona parents.

Methods:

Three sites were chosen for data collection: Ganesha Park in the northern sector of Pomona, Washington Park in the central area, and Philadelphia Park in the southern part of the city. Sites were selected to take a north-south cross section of the city, and to note any possible correlations between park size and visitation. Ganesha is the largest Pomona park by far at 60 acres, Washington Park follows at 22 acres, and Philadelphia Park represents the small-size parks at 4.5 acres. Within each park, surveys were administered as visitor interviews to glean the relative distance traveled to the park, frequency of visitation, average duration of stay, and general satisfaction with the safety and amenities offered. Although the aim of the survey was to derive a sense of how secure visitors felt within the park, and how this affected their usage, care was taken to avoid introducing bias into the survey. Hence, the terms “safety” and “security” were not included in the questions. Instead, interviewees were asked if there were, “any changes
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that could be made to [the] park which would lead [them] to come more often and stay longer. The assumption was that if low security within the park was a high priority issue, the sentiment would be reflected in the answer to this question. Park goers were selected randomly, and, barring one refusal, most welcomed the assessment. When Spanish-speakers were intercepted, the survey was translated and conducted as a Spanish-language interview. In total, 15 survey-interviews were conducted within a three-hour time frame on the same weekday at the three sites. A blank survey is displayed in “Appendix A.”

A walking tour was also conducted at the sites, which included taking photos and notes on details which may contribute to perception of the park as unsafe such as dangerous play equipment, unpaved trails, visible graffiti, covered graffiti, and presence of transients. The details of the walking tour were to be compared with survey responses to determine if park visitors considered any of the perceived detractors as such. Comments on how well perceived detractors matched visitor comments are included in the discussion section. Photos taken from the walking tours are included in “Appendix B”

Results:

At Ganesha Park, visitors surveyed had unanimously positive perceptions of the space. Two of the five visitors commented that although Ganesha was not the closest park to their place of residence, they traveled there “because it is large,” (G. Ramirez, personal communication, May 27, 2015) and “[because] my kids like this park, the park equipment” (D. Rincon, personal communication, May 27, 2015). Two of the five interviewed answered that they visit the park more than five times a month and that their stays usually last longer than two hours. The
remaining three visitors responded that they come to the park two to four times a month; of those two stay “between an hour and two hours”, and one stays for “less than an hour” when visiting. All respondents answered that they bring their children with them when they come to visit. When asked if there were any changes that could be made to the park which would lead to surveyed individuals coming more often or staying longer, only one replied in the affirmative. She simply asked for “more lighting” (G. Ramirez, personal communication, May 27, 2015).

Several instances of graffiti were visible during the walking tour, on rocks, pavement, and some were found on the playground. There were four transient sightings; three of the homeless individuals were sitting under the covered picnicking areas in the south side of the park, and one was seen near the amphitheater. Usage was moderate with an estimated forty-four individuals passing through the park in the hour spent taking surveys. Canvassing was done on the jogging trails in the east side of the park, large playground at the north side, smaller playground (empty) near the pool, south side of the park, and the parking lot.

Washington Park, despite being a much smaller park than Ganesha, was the most heavily used site of the three surveyed on May 27th. There were too many visitors to count, but the estimate was that well over 200 visitors passed through the park during the hour spent conducting interviews. There were a number of little league baseball games being played during the visit, but the playground, tennis courts, and soccer field were in use as well. A walking tour of the park turned up no homeless person sightings, and no clearly displayed graffiti, yet two instances of covered graffiti on the concessions building, and “12th Street Sharkies” carved into the ground nearby was visible. Despite the markings on the ground, no signs of gang activity were witnessed. Playground equipment was in good condition with no obvious signs of disrepair.
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All individuals surveyed answered that they visit Washington Park more than five times a month. Answers pertaining to duration of stay included four responses of “between an hour and two hours” and one response of “more than two hours.” Responses to what changes could be made to increase park use included, “Maintenance on park’s fields and restrooms. They only do that for baseball,” (H. Gutierrez, personal communication, May 27, 2015) “Keep the lights on longer for (sic) our kids can practice their soccer,” (R. Pineda, personal communication, May 27, 2015) “Add security at night, and keep the lights on longer,” (K. Vasquez, personal communication, May 27, 2015) and, “Keep the park the park cleaner and add doors to the women’s restrooms.” (P. Acevedo, personal communication, May 27, 2015) One individual did not answer this question. Three visitors responded that Washington Park is the closest to their residence, two traveled beyond the parks nearest to them. One cited better little league for his children and the other attributed his selection to larger park size with better fields. All respondents answered that they were usually accompanied by their children, or grandchildren, when they came to the park. Two individuals surveyed had comments to share in addition to the survey which will be discussed in the “discussion” section.

The final surveys were taken at Philadelphia Park, a park adjacent to a school located in the south end of Pomona. At the time of arrival there were only three teenagers on the swings in the entire park grounds. While waiting for more visitors to arrive, the walking tour was conducted. This park, unlike the others, had more amenities in a state of disrepair. Though the children’s play equipment was almost identical in type and condition to that at Washington Park, the basketball court was littered with cracks and uneven surfaces, and the gate surrounding it was torn open. The track was unpaved, and the dirt surface, though lined with cement berms, was pitted and uneven. Philadelphia Park has no baseball diamond, but does have an open field with
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spray-painted soccer field markings. There was only one sign of covered graffiti noted on a storage container. In the hour spent conducting surveys, an estimated sixteen people (children included) used the park space. Photos taken presented in Appendix B.

Four respondents answered that they visit the park more than five times a month, one responded that she visited two to four times a month. Selections about duration of stay were diverse: one usually stayed for “less than an hour,” two selected “an hour to two hours,” and two responded, “more than two hours.” When asked about changes that would lead them to visit more frequently or stay longer, interviewees commented, “Clean the parks and get out the drug use,” (A. Chavez, personal communication, May 27, 2015) “Less homeless people,” (I. Rodriguez, personal communication, May 27, 2015) “The park is dark and when the sun goes down, homeless people come,” (T. Villareal, personal communication, May 27, 2015) “Add a track and a water fountain,” (E. Montoya, personal communication, May 27, 2015) from a jogger who complained about the single water fountain, and “Cleaner.” (D. Victor, personal communication, May 27, 2015). All responded that Philadelphia Park was the closest park to their place of residence and that their children usually accompany them when the visit. Interviewee T. Villareal shared additional comments to be discussed in the “discussion” section.

Discussion:

In spite of media coverage portraying serious gang activity persisting in Pomona’s parks (Cerna 2014, Winton & Blankstein 2004), crime and gang activity was seldom mentioned in survey responses. When danger was a concern, it was typically in relation to darkness and the homeless population. T. Villareal in the Philadelphia park location remarked after the survey,
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“When the sun goes down, this homeless man shows up with a boombox and starts playing his music really loud. One time we saw him stabbing the ground with a knife, so we usually leave when it gets dark.” (personal communication, May 27, 2015). These types of occurrences are not classified as crime, but are categorized as incivilities which are defined as “low-level breaches of community standards that signal an erosion of conventionally accepted norms and values.” (La Grange, et. al. 1992) Higher amounts of incivilities have been associated with lower park usage (Banda, et. al. 2014), but as Villareal was only one of two people to comment on the homeless presence, it is doubtful that transients alone are keeping adults and children from coming into the parks.

Based on commentary provided by two visitors in Washington Park, it appears the issue of homeless presence (and even crime) can be reduced through the establishment of programs in the parks. P. Acevedo works with the little league program in Washington Park and revealed that even though, “the homeless people come in at night, […] they leave when people start coming in,” and when asked if gangs presented a problem for the park, he answered, “They used to be here, but not since the little league came in. They don’t like the crowds.” (personal communication, May 27, 2015). K Vasquez shared that he, “used to live in the south side [of Pomona],” and that even though Washington Park is not the closest park to where he lives, he “like[s] this park better because it’s bigger and nicer.” (personal communication, May 27, 2015)

The size of Washington Park, and its layout with fenced-in zones devoted to specific play make the space an ideal location for programs like softball, little league, and soccer. These programs bring many children to the park for physical activity, and according to Acevedo, drive out other uses which visitors may find objectionable. This accords with findings which relate greater park use and energy expenditure with more and better quality park programming. (Cohen, et. al. 2013)
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Ganesha Park, which lacks a baseball field and soccer field, may not be as effective in generating the kind of visitation that Washington Park receives.

Taking the bulk of responses into account, it is likely that perceived safety is one factor keeping Pomona residents from going to the park, but other factors including programming available, amenities, and (based on the amount of interviewees who were visiting the park that was closest to them) distance from parks and accessibility.

This study has a weakness in that only individuals who were already in the park setting were queried as to their opinions of the parks they were visiting. As a result, we would expect the findings to be biased in favor of a positive park perception. That some instances of negative park perception were still uncovered is telling and perhaps warrant additional investigation at a larger scale. This can be done through sending school-age students home with questionnaires to have parents/guardian complete and then return.

Conclusion

Given the findings, limited funds should be dedicated to bringing parks in disrepair to a safe standard and then actively seeking programs that bring in children under adult supervision. This can mean as little as adding water fountains and lighting, or as much as redesigning the entire park space. Pomona might also look to review successful examples of park programs that bring children to the parks. A group known as CAN DO in Houston, Texas launched a busing program bring kids in extremely socioeconomically depressed areas to parks near to the school. This was a reaction to having established after school programs which were seeing little used. CAN DO members identified parental concerns about safety in allowing their children to cross busy streets leading to the park. With a busing program to safely bring children to the park for
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Park activities, the program flourished and continues today into its fifth year. (NG 2015) If funds cannot be secured through private fundraising, Pomona may attempt to work with local university Cal Poly Pomona’s Center for Community Engagement to secure volunteers for chaperones or program coordinators.
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References:


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NG, M. C., Baun, W. B., Gor, B. J., & Hare, N. B. CAN DO Houston: A Community-Based Approach to Preventing Childhood Obesity.


Name _______  

2015 Pomona Park Perception Survey

1. How many times a month do you visit this park?  
   a) Once a month  b) two to four times a month  c) More than five times a month

2. How long do your visits to this park usually last?  
   a) Less than an hour  b) Between an hour and two hours  c) More than two hours

3. Are there any changes that could be made to this park which would lead you to come more often or stay longer? If yes, please explain.

4. Is this the closest park to your place of residence that you are aware of? If not, why do you come to this park instead of the one located closest to your home?

5. If you have children, do you usually bring them to the park with you when you visit? If not, please explain why.
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“Appendix B” (note: all photos taken by author)

Ganesha Park: vantage from northern end of park to parking lot.

Ganesha Park: Graffiti on playground equipment.
“Appendix B”

Washington Park: Vantage from lot to baseball diamond.

Washington Park: 12 St. Sharkies (gang) markings near concessions.
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“Appendix B”

Philadelphia Park: Cracked basketball court and torn fencing

Philadelphia Park: Unpaved path and spray-painted soccer field