Researchers have found that public parks can benefit citizens by providing opportunities for social interaction, fostering an appreciation for diversity, and increasing community involvement and pride.

Attractive, proximate public parks have been available in the United States since the 1850s when Central Park first gave New Yorkers an escape from busy, hectic city life. During the Industrial Revolution, parks provided factory workers an opportunity to socialize with other community members and to be physically active.

In today’s information age, with its urban sprawl, information overload, and dependency on automobiles and technology, the need for urban parks and their benefits remains.

Like their 19th-century counterparts, modern-day parks serve as venues for social interaction. In a study of park users in Los Angeles, California, more than 70 percent of the participants said that they interact with others when at the park.

Women surveyed at a park in Brooklyn, New York, described it as being “friendly,” “neighborly,” and “neighborhood,” and as offering “a feel of a community.” Those park users said that they enjoyed encountering and “interacting with others whom they ordinarily might not.” The value and familiarity they enjoyed from visiting parks resulted from:

- “Chance meetings with friends and acquaintances in the park”
- “Becoming better acquainted with others whom they saw in the park regularly”
- “Developing a sense of familiarity and friendliness with strangers who nonetheless remained anonymous”

The respondents also said that the park felt like “a small community” and that they valued the diversity of people they met. The researchers noted: “Some described very brief, casual encounters, such as a quick smile and ‘hello’ when they passed other joggers whom
they saw regularly, which were enough to foster a sense of familiarity, if not intimacy.”

A study of public spaces in two public housing developments in Chicago found that the presence of natural elements, such as trees, can increase the likelihood of social interactions. Parks serve as “green magnets” that pull together people from different backgrounds and nearby neighborhoods.

Active-friendly environments help create a sense of community by fostering social interactions among neighbors and friends. Park users in Singapore said that proximity was important because “the neighborhood park provides a convenient place for social contact and interaction.” The park offers social opportunities and encourages the formation of relationships by providing a gathering place for groups such as teens and socially isolated mothers to meet other people.

Our increasing dependence on automobiles discourages physical activity and social interactions among neighbors. Residential patterns over the past 50 years have reduced the sense of community in urban areas, leading to disconnect, fragmentation, and social isolation.

However, West Virginia University researchers found that survey respondents who lived in walkable neighborhoods were more likely to know their neighbors, participate politically, trust others, and engage socially.

These findings indicate that good environments can encourage casual interactions at community places such as parks and walkable spaces, and that active-friendly communities promote social interactions that develop social capital.

Research on three greenway trails by Texas A&M University and the Texas Transportation Institute found that trails also foster social interactions—often a wave or smile—and a sense of community creating a sense of familiarity and contributing to the residents’ positive perception of their quality of life.

Some residents of Henderson, Nevada, credited the increase of their town’s sociability to recent developments in their park system. As one community member explained, “Sociability between neighbors is reappearing in cities like Henderson because they have a developing park and trail system. ... It is a very welcome trend.”

As communities become more diverse and dense, planners need to locate and design community parks to provide opportunities for social interaction and cohesion as well as to help maintain community culture, interaction, and pride.

For more information


Parkland and Open Space Planning: Urban and Municipal Park Planning Programs. agrilife.org/urbanparks


Cover photo: Since the 1850s, New York’s Central Park has been giving visitors a place to socialize with others, walk in a natural setting, and take a break from city life.

Source: Jose Elias D’ La Crux (CC BY 2.0)