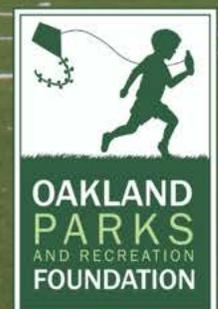


PARKS AND EQUITY:
**THE PROMISE OF
OAKLAND'S PARKS**

2020

A SURVEY OF OAKLANDERS' PARK
EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES



Land Acknowledgment

Oakland Parks and Recreation Foundation (OPRF) acknowledges that it is located on and works for land that is part of the unceded homeland of the Chochenyo Ohlone peoples. OPRF recognizes that this land continues to be the home of Ohlone people, who are flourishing members of Oakland and Bay Area communities.

OPRF recognizes that the Ohlone are the first residents and stewards of this land.

This acknowledgement demonstrates OPRF's commitment to increasingly understand and act on a responsibility to encounter its place on native land, realign its present participation in colonial settler practices and genocidal legacies, amplify Indigenous voices, and stand in solidarity with local Indigenous communities.

This acknowledgement is a living document that will grow and change as OPRF deepens its commitment to, and understanding of, right relation with the Ohlone people, with all people subject to racism and other forms of oppression, and with the land, waters, air, and natural life of Oakland and beyond.

Oakland Parks and Recreation Foundation pays its respects to the Ancestors, Elders and Relatives, past, present, and future, of the Ohlone people.

This acknowledgement draws from the Ramaytush Ohlone Land Acknowledgements guidance website, the Centers for Educational Justice and Community Engagement at UC Berkeley, the California College of the Arts, and Kanyon CoyoteWoman at acorn.wiki.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

True to the very philosophy of public parks and recreation is the idea that all people – no matter the color of their skin, age, income level or ability – have access to programs, facilities, places and spaces that make their lives and communities great. Parks and recreation truly build communities – communities for all.

-National Recreation and Park Association

In the past year, OPRF engaged in various conversations that surfaced the many ways parks serve us and deeply connect us to the functions of being human, for example, through play, celebration, recharging. Making this connection is an apt introduction to OPRF's report, *Parks and Equity: The Promise of Oakland's Parks*, because the report's focus is exactly that: the connection between Oakland's people and their parks. A generation has passed since Oaklanders were asked about their parks, and the timing is poignant as Oakland experiences gentrification and climate change-exacerbating disparities along income and racial lines. The result is the perpetuation of environmental injustices, whereby predominantly Black and Brown residents and communities are disproportionately displaced from their homes and more likely to bear the burden of harms from multiple sources of pollution and increasing hazards from severe weather events such as heatwaves, floods, and smoke. These residents are also less likely to have access to healthy neighborhoods that provide opportunities to engage with nature, quality parks, and recreation.

The Covid-19 pandemic brought into sharp relief how parks contribute to solutions to these challenges, as Oaklanders sought parks not only for exercise and mental health support but also for food distribution, community relief services, academic learning hubs for children. Parks are part of the solution because they are fundamentally about people, community, relationship to land and nature, about transformative experiences. *The Parks and Equity report*, which collected data on the eve of the pandemic, measured what the pandemic revealed and perhaps what we have known all along: parks are part of what can make Oakland not only resilient, but also vibrant, equitable, beautiful, and joyful.

In fact, one of the most extraordinary findings of our survey was that Oaklanders share such a vision for parks, one that can amount to a vision for Oakland: Fully 95% of 1,153 survey participants agreed (with strong agreement over 70%), that activated parks, i.e., parks that are well-maintained, safe, equitably accessible, and fully used:



- **Improve Oaklanders' health and wellness**
- **Strengthen Oakland communities, culture, economy**
- **Help keep Oakland's children and youth safe, provide positive options**
- **Are good for all Oaklanders and build a more just city**
- **Protect and care for the environment (94%)**

These findings are both a vision for parks and for Oakland. Parks place this vision within reach because they provide these very benefits: health, wellness, safety, cohesion, cultural and economic vitality, youth engagement, resilience.

Parks provide these benefits best when they are activated, meaning well-maintained, safe, equitably accessible, fully utilized and beloved, with community buy-in. (Figure ES1)



Figure ES1 Activated parks benefit people and communities

But when parks are not activated, when parks are unwelcoming or in disrepair, parks can contribute to crime, blight, inactivity, isolation, and real or perceived threats to safety. Because these conditions fall along race and/or class lines, investment in parks becomes a question of whether a city will dismantle, or perpetuate, structural racism. In this fashion, parks reside at the fulcrum of environmental justice and social justice, making commitment to safe, inclusive and beloved parks for all no less than a commitment to the civil right to equal, fair, safe access to public space. (Figure ES2)

The question becomes: Is Oakland fulfilling the promise of its parks?

The *Parks and Equity* report finds that significant and inequitably distributed barriers impede Oaklanders from benefitting fully from their parks. Of 1,167 participants, 95% reported that barriers to park activation kept them from fully accessing, enjoying, and using Oakland parks. Notably, in addition to safety concerns, four of the top five barriers to parks were maintenance-related. (Figure ES3)

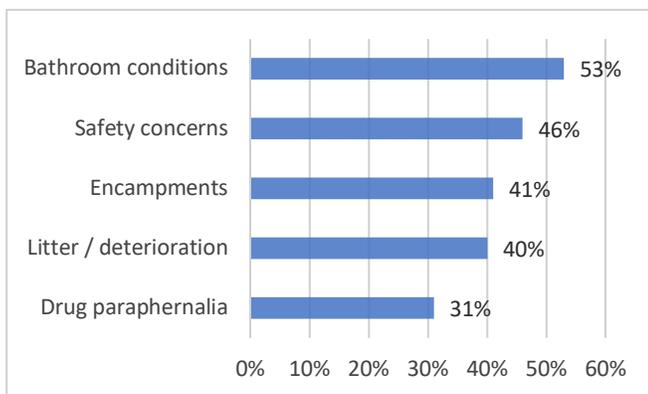


Figure ES3 Barriers to visiting and full utilization of parks



Figure ES2 Parks and the fulcrum of justice

Most barriers disproportionately impacted children: Of those who report bringing children to parks, 70% reported bathroom conditions were a barrier to using parks, compared to 44% of other participants; 64% reported maintenance issues as a barrier compared to 51% of others; and 52% reported safety as a barrier compared to 42%. Further, participants bringing children to parks were twice as likely to report unsafe routes. Given the developmental and life-long positive impacts of transformative childhood experiences in parks, these barriers have far-reaching ramifications.

Safety and access concerns were high among all participants, but notably, half of all Black/African American, Indigenous/Native American, Latinx/Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern/North African (BILAM) participants, reported safety barriers compared to 40% of white participants, and roughly 20% of BILAM participants reported unsafe routes to parks compared to 9% of white participants.

Circumstances were generally worse in neighborhood parks, which is concerning because neighborhood parks reflect people’s community environment, with potentially the most immediate impact on quality of life. (Table ES1 and ES2, p3)

- 53% of participants – across race, income, and neighborhood – felt that their neighborhood park did NOT have good security (only 20% agreed that it did). Related, neighborhood parks also scored low for organized activities.
- 32% of participants said they could not safely walk or wheelchair to their neighborhood park, regardless of income and age. Moreover, unsafe routes impacted 36% of BILAM participants compared to 25% of white participants.

Participants from East Oakland/South Hills faced pronounced barriers: Nearly half reported unsafe routes to neighborhood parks compared to 25%-29% of participants of other neighborhoods. Only one third of East Oakland participants most frequently visit their neighborhood park, compared to 50%-60% of participants from other areas, with one third having to travel over two miles to get to their most visited park, compared to 14%-22% of others. Only one quarter walk to the park they visit the most, compared to 50%-60% of others. These structural disparities in park access have ramifications for community and personal health, connection, and opportunity.

Table ES1 and ES2 The Parks Promise Scorecard for access, utilization, and safety, by 1) park type and 2) demographics

The Promise of Parks Scorecard	Score (1-4)
Citywide	
I can easily access good walking/jogging paths in Oakland parks	3.0
I can easily access good places to relax, socialize, and enjoy nature in Oakland parks	2.9
I can meet neighbors and build community in Oakland parks	2.9
It is easy to access good places for exercise in Oakland parks	2.8
Total City Parks Promise Score	2.9
Neighborhood Parks	
My neighborhood park has good places to relax, socialize, enjoy nature	2.7
I can easily and safely walk or wheelchair to my neighborhood park	2.6
My neighborhood park has good spaces or equipment for exercise	2.4
There is good signage about rules, events in my neighborhood park	2.3
My neighborhood park has plenty of good organized activities	2.2
My neighborhood park has good security	1.9
Total Neighborhood Parks Promise Score	2.5

Score key:
 1.0-1.9 = Severe Problem
 2.0-2.8 = Needs Improvement
 2.9-3.5 = Good
 3.6-4.0 = Excellent

	Citywide Park Score (1-4)	Neighborhood Park Score (1-4)
Area of Residence		
East Oakland / South Hills	2.8	2.3
North Oakland / Montclair	2.8	2.5
San Antonio / Fruitvale	3.0	2.6
West Oakland / Downtown	2.8	2.5
Race/Ethnicity		
All People of Color	2.9	2.5
Black/African American	2.7	2.4
Indigenous / Native American	2.8	2.6
Latinx/Hispanic	2.9	2.5
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.8	2.5
Middle Eastern / North African	2.8	2.3
White/Caucasian	3.0	2.6
Gender		
Female	2.9	2.5
Male	3.0	2.7
Age		
<35 years	2.8	2.4
35-65 years	2.9	2.5
>65 years	3.1	2.7
Income		
<\$75,000	2.6	2.3
\$75 - \$150,000	2.9	2.5
>\$150,000	2.9	2.5
Overall	2.9	2.5

The gap between vision and current conditions represents a tremendous missed opportunity for elevating and benefiting communities in Oakland. These conditions can no longer be tolerated, as the pandemic and the surge for racial justice require that our public services and public spaces become part of the solution rather than perpetuating problems. It is this imperative that helps explain why the vast majority of participants, across race, gender, age, neighborhood area, and income level, resoundingly called for more investment in parks:



- **94% agree we should invest more in parks, fields, pools, and recreation facilities**
- **Nearly 80% want more art, events, and cultural activities in Oakland parks, and want recreation centers to be open seven days a week**
- **92% said they were more likely to vote for councilmembers who strongly support parks**

“Revitalizing these parks would show pride of ownership, encourage communities” – survey participant

This call for investment arises from a belief in what parks can do for Oakland, and recognition that how the city cares for its parks is a reflection of how it cares for its people. It is also based on recognized need for the safety and resilience that parks and the public green and community infrastructure provide:



- **88% of participants agree Oakland’s Recreation Centers should provide relief and assistance during heat waves, smoke days, floods, fires and earthquakes**

The *Parks and Equity* report reinforces why park investment and park stewardship are essential to counter historically embedded racial and economic injustices in Oakland in a way that advances environmental justice, equity, diversity and inclusion (eJEDI). Activated parks are where solutions can start, providing essential public places and complete neighborhoods that deliver benefits for Oakland’s diverse residents and cultures to thrive.

The *Parks and Equity* report should inform policy and practice for more equitable access to the benefits conferred by public parks. Table ES3 (page 5) details recommendations that are supported by over a decade of recommendations made by OPRF and its predecessor, Oakland Parks Coalition, and are also supported by the Oakland General Plan’s Open Space, Conservation and Recreation (OSCAR) Element. To increase the effectiveness of this report’s recommendations for a new direction, we ask first for a commitment to:

Listen to Oaklanders they know Oakland and its parks, they care and dream for Oakland and its parks, and they will stand and act for Oakland and its parks.

Prioritize park activation with equitable maintenance, safety, programming, access, and community buy-in and love.

Recognize that parks are at the fulcrum of environmental justice and social justice because parks can play a critical role for an equitable, vibrant, and sustainable Oakland, but without care and investment they perpetuate structural racism and social disparities.

Utilize an environmental justice, equity, diversity and inclusion (eJEDI) framework to prioritize resources and safety for our most underserved parks, to work with communities to resolve injustices of the past while upholding standards for all parks, and to remove structural barriers to full racial and cultural inclusion.

Table ES3 Recommendations

Park Love, Park Pride: Build on the love for a solutions-oriented future



- Prepare for the Future: Prioritize parks and recreation and incorporate SB 1000* in the General Plan update and OSCAR Element update; conduct an equity-based Parks Master Plan; fully act on parks' role in the 2030 Equitable Climate Action Plan
- Support and fund OPRYD's Strategic Action Plan
- Facilitate increased investment in parks, for example, raise the gift-in-place level eligible for administrative approval
- Support youth engagement in park programming, stewardship, and leadership

Maintenance: Solve the sanitation crisis



- Convene an interdisciplinary task force inclusive of community members, businesses, non-profits, schools, and multiple city departments to craft an equity-based solution to the public sanitation issue within our parks - we can and must solve this problem
- Faithfully implement Measure Q, ensuring that the designated dollars improve park maintenance as intended

Safety: Resolve park safety concerns



- Start by fully investigating and understanding what community members need for parks to be safe, and prepare to provide services accordingly

Park Access: Make all neighborhoods complete with strong neighborhood parks, authentic belonging



- Make the natural and human heritage of our park spaces visible through interpretive signage, play structures, landscaping, art and exhibitions in a manner unique to the setting of each park, recognizing Oakland's impact on Ohlone land and people and increasing their (and the extended Indigenous/Native American community) access to parks for cultural and land stewardship
- Adopt strategic inclusion practices through multi-cultural and multi-generational programming
- Open Recreation Centers 7 days per week with extended hours to meet interests of diverse groups
- Partner for safe routes to parks

Park Utilization: Engage the community in play



- Establish a reliable, annual funding source in support of recreation programming to insulate it from the year-to-year fluctuations in the city budget and allow for long-term planning and implementation of programming
- Partner with foundations, businesses, non-profits, neighborhood groups, schools, fitness coaches, etc. to install equipment and launch inclusive organized activities in neighborhood parks, not limited to parks with recreation centers

* In 2016, California passed law SB1000, requiring local governments to identify local environmental justice (also known as "disadvantaged" communities) and address environmental justice in their general plans in order to: facilitate transparency and public engagement in local governments' planning and decision making, reduce exposure to pollution and associated health risks in environmental justice communities, and promote equitable access to health-inducing benefits, such as healthy food options, housing, public facilities, and recreation. <https://oag.ca.gov/environment/sb1000>

