

Most people just park themselves, so how do we promote more healthy activity in public parks?

Written by The Conversation USA

Parks are central to the concept of liveable cities. They are an important public resource that provide opportunities for people of all ages to be physically active, connect socially with family and friends, meet and interact with others, and for children to play freely.

Despite the opportunities parks present for physical activity, our Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition research, in partnership with Parks Victoria, Brimbank City Council, the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation and City West Water, has shown that parks are generally under-utilised and most visitors are [not very active in the park](#) .

It is predicted that Australia's [population will double by 2075](#) , with most growth expected in capital cities. By 2026 it is expected that [two-thirds more people will live in Melbourne](#) alone. Similar growth is expected in [other major urban centres](#) across Australia.

This means more people living and working in higher-density neighbourhoods in the very near future. And, in turn, there will be more people needing to use parks to maintain their physical and mental health.

Thankfully, parks are available in most neighbourhoods, are generally free to use and are enjoyed by diverse population groups. But population growth will increase demand on existing parks and heighten the need to provide sufficient and appropriately designed parks.

The availability of high-quality parks will be critical for future generations. Unfortunately, local councils often need to justify keeping existing parks and providing for essential maintenance and refurbishment.

Why do park activities matter?

Inactivity is one of the top contributors to the burden of disease in Australia, including cardiovascular disease and diabetes, and is one of the drivers of the current obesity epidemic.

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A staggering 70% of children and adolescents and 60% of adults do not do enough physical activity.

This is where parks provide an important free venue where people can be active. Examples of this include walking, jogging, cycling, group fitness, ball sports and exercising the dog. Walking to parks provides further opportunities for people to be active.

Just last week an international study involving 14 cities in ten countries found that the more parks people had near home, the [more active they were](#) .

In our recent study, however, we observed activity levels of park visitors and found that, of 4,756 visitors, most (62%) were reclining, sitting or standing. Only 29% were observed in moderate-intensity activities such as brisk walking and 9% in vigorous-intensity activities such as jogging.

Although spending time in parks may benefit mental health, it is important to provide settings that encourage park users to engage in physical activity. This includes overcoming some of the barriers to visiting and being active in parks, such as:

- safety concerns about strangers in the park;
- parents not allowing children to visit the park without parental supervision;
- poor park quality, condition and attractiveness;
- lack of suitable facilities and amenities;

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unsuitable size for physical activity; and

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poor access making parks difficult to reach.

So how can we promote more active use?

Creating new parks or modifying existing parks to provide amenities and facilities that encourage visitors to engage in physical activity may be important long-term ways to increase physical activity in our community and enhance liveability.

However, to increase park visits and physical activity we need to know what features and amenities are needed for whom and what is most important. It is essential to understand these factors so we can design and create parks that meet the needs of our growing population.

Several natural experiments we have conducted have started to examine just this. We are conducting a study to examine the impact of installing a playscape [in a large metropolitan park](#)

A previous study in a small park (25,000m²) found that modest improvements (installing a small playground, walking track, off-leash dog area and landscaping) resulted in increases of more than 400% in park use and 600% in people [engaged in vigorous physical activity](#). So even modest improvements can dramatically increase park usage and physical activity.

Parks are fundamental to vibrant and healthy liveable cities. Evidence-based planning and investment are needed to protect, maintain and improve our parks. This will enable parks to attract visitors, provide opportunities for a range of physical activities and meet the needs of a growing population in a changing urban landscape.

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In particular, based on our research, we offer these conclusions:

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Government policy at all levels is needed to protect existing green space.

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Government policy on access to green space must consider the quality and usability of the space.

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Guidelines for optimal park size, placement and design are needed to maximise visitor numbers and enhance levels of physical activity and social connectedness.

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Parks must be designed to be appealing and beneficial for people of all ages.

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