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Perceptions of Urban Parks as Havens and Contested Terrains by Mexican-Americans in Chicago Neighborhoods

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The objectives of this study were to (1) identify the benefits of parks for Mexican-American urban residents and the roles they play in the dynamics of their communities and (2) explore issues related to their existence and utilization in Latino communities. Bedimo-Rung, Mowen, and Cohen's (2005) model of the Role of Parks in Public Health was employed as a conceptual framework in this study. Data were collected in the summer of 2007 with two focus groups with 26 Mexican-American residents from two predominantly minority Chicago communities. Benefits of urban parks for Mexican-American residents were classified into five categories—environmental, social, psychological health, physical health, and cultural. The study also identified many problems related to the existence and utilization of parks in Latino communities that detracted from the benefits Mexican-Americans could obtain from visiting parks. They included insufficient access to parks, poor maintenance of the existing parks, crime and safety issues, and interracial conflict and discrimination. A new framework was proposed to model the benefits of parks for minority urban residents and factors that affect utilization of parks in minority communities.

Keywords parks, Mexican-Americans, minority communities, benefits, problems

The beneficial role of urban parks has been documented in numerous studies. Parks have been shown to promote physical activity (e.g., Hua, Payne, Orsega-Smith, & Godbey, 2003), allow residents to experience nature closer to home, reduce visitors' stress, improve their moods, and allow for relaxation (e.g., Chiesura, 2004). They may also help build social relationships and increase the sense of community (Kweon, Sullivan, & Wiley, 1998), maintain community cohesion and pride, build social capital (Glover, Shinew, & Parry, 2005), and improve interracial interactions (Shinew, Glover, & Parry, 2004). At the same time, however, it has been shown that minority residents usually have less access to quality parks and recreation facilities, public spending on parks and other open spaces

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in communities of color is often significantly lower than in more affluent areas, and poor environmental quality may serve as an additional constraint on recreation participation among minorities (Floyd, Taylor, & Whitt-Glover, 2009). For example, a nationally representative study of youth in the United States found that major types of physical activity resources, including public parks, were distributed inequitably (Gordon-Larsen, Nelson, & Page, 2006). Also, Powell, Slater, and Chalupka (2004) examined the relationship between community physical activity settings, such as parks and green spaces, as well as race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. They found that communities with higher poverty rates and higher percentages of minorities were significantly less likely to have parks and green spaces in their areas. Moreover, natural environments in minority communities are often the settings of conflict, sites of discrimination, and even serve as “green walls” between neighborhoods (Gobster, 1998; West, 1989). Thus, the beneficial effects of parks may not be realized for low-income members of minority populations.

The benefits of parks and other natural areas are well documented, and researchers have begun to acknowledge the problems associated with access to and utilization of natural environments in minority communities. Further, some studies have reported differences in the importance ethnic groups place on specific benefits of natural environments (Gramann, Floyd, & Saenz, 1993; Shaul & Gramann, 1998; Tinsley, Tinsley, & Croskeys, 2002). For instance, the results of Tinsley et al.’s study showed Latinos rated escaping duty and affiliation as more important than did non-Hispanic White recreationists. Gramann et al.’s study, on the other hand, showed that people of Mexican ancestry rate family togetherness as a recreation benefit much higher than the Anglos. None of the existing studies, however, has provided a thorough and in-depth examination of the benefits Mexican-Americans obtain from visiting urban parks. In particular, it has not been explored to what degree such benefits are similar to those obtained by the majority of recreationists, as well as how they may differ, due to factors such as Mexican-Americans’ distinctive cultural values, socio-economic status, or residential location. Similarly, we know little about the extent such benefits can be realized among minorities who reside in urban central-city locations. As Buchner and Gobster (2007) observed, “the factors that affect access [to places, including parks, where physical activity can be undertaken] are incompletely understood and only a few of the many possible interventions to increase access have been evaluated” (p. S39). Considering the rapidly increasing population of Mexican-Americans in the United States, the fact that Mexican-Americans constitute a growing user base of urban parks, and that parks are important settings for their leisure, we believe exploration of the benefits of parks for the Mexican-American population and factors that affect their use of urban parks could provide an important addition to the existing literature. Therefore, the *objectives* of this study were to (1) identify the benefits of parks for Mexican-American urban residents and (2) explore issues related to their existence and utilization in Latino communities. Bedimorung, Mowen, and Cohen’s (2005) framework of the role of parks in public health was employed in this study.

Theoretical Background

A number of theoretical approaches have been used to model recreation participation among ethnic minority members. Gómez (2002) identified 11 models starting with Lindsay and Ogle’s (1972) framework that predicted that one’s socioeconomic status affects recreation behavior both directly and indirectly through conditioning opportunity for participation in leisure activities. Other notable models reviewed by Gómez included those by Washburne (1978), Klobus-Edwards (1981), West (1989), and Floyd, Gramann, and Saenz (1993). Washburne’s theory postulated that outdoor recreation participation among minorities

(African Americans in this case) is affected by marginality (socio-economic) and ethnicity (cultural) factors. In Klobus-Edwards' model, race, sex, marginality, and residence conditioned leisure participation both directly and indirectly through influencing motivations for and barriers to recreation. West argued that race and marginality affect urban park use among African Americans both directly and indirectly through influencing discrimination. He also proposed that race affects urban park use by conditioning subcultural preference. In Floyd et al. and several other studies (e.g., Floyd & Gramann, 1995; Stodolska, 1998), recreation participation among minorities was conditioned by levels of assimilation, including acculturation, structural assimilation, and behavioral-receptional assimilation (perceived discrimination). In Gómez's Ethnicity and Public Recreation (EPRPM) model, acculturation affected minorities' socioeconomic status and subcultural identity. These, in turn, influenced recreation participation directly and indirectly via perceived benefits of recreation and perceived discrimination.

Similarly, benefits of recreation participation and use of wildland areas have been investigated by a number of researchers, most notably Driver and his colleagues (Driver, Brown, & Peterson, 1991; Driver, Brown, Stankey, & Gegoire, 1987). Driver and Brown (1975) approached recreation experience from a psychological perspective and defined it as the "package" or "bundle" of psychological outcomes desired from a recreation engagement" (Manfredo, Driver, & Tarrant, 1996, p. 189). This approach helped to explain why people engage in recreation, what they want from recreation, and what the benefits of recreational engagements are. In a major shift from the prevailing activity-based management framework, Driver (1996) proposed experience-based and benefits-based management (BBM) frameworks. The BBM called for managing public lands for recreation benefits and expanded experience-based management framework to focus on individual, social, economic, and environmental benefits (Stein & Lee, 1995). In the BBM framework, benefits were classified into four categories: personal (e.g., improved physical and mental health and personal growth such as reduced depression and anxiety); social (e.g., improved bonds with family, friends, and community); economic (e.g., economic growth, reduced health care expenditures); and environmental (e.g., ecosystem protection) (Lee & Driver, 1992). As Stein and Lee put it, "individual recreation experiences are benefits when they result in positive changes or prevent worse conditions. (. . .) Desired benefits are, therefore, the outputs around which recreation managers need to design management actions" (p. 54).

Bedimo-Rung et al. (2005) developed a similar framework from the public health perspective that focused on recreation benefits of parks. Their model specifically highlighted linkages between physical activity and benefits of park visitation. It illustrated the relationships among park environmental characteristics, park visitation, and park benefits (see Figures 1 and 2). In the framework, park visitation was shown to lead to physical activity that, in turn, resulted in physical health benefits (e.g., lower risk of obesity, heart disease, diabetes), psychological health benefits (e.g., stress reduction, improved mood), and social benefits (e.g., facilitating social interactions and social integration). Parks were also shown to have economic and environmental benefits, such as increasing property values and purifying the environment. The correlates of park use were grouped into two categories—the characteristics of individual park users (e.g., age, gender, race/ethnicity) and environmental characteristics of parks. According to Bedimo-Rung et al. (2005), park environmental characteristics were to be composed of "six conceptual areas that operate through four geographic areas to support physical activity within parks" (p. 163). The four geographic areas included park activity areas, park supporting areas (e.g., community buildings, restroom/changing facilities), overall park environment, and surrounding neighborhood. Park conceptual areas included features (e.g., sports fields, facilities, programs), conditions (e.g.,

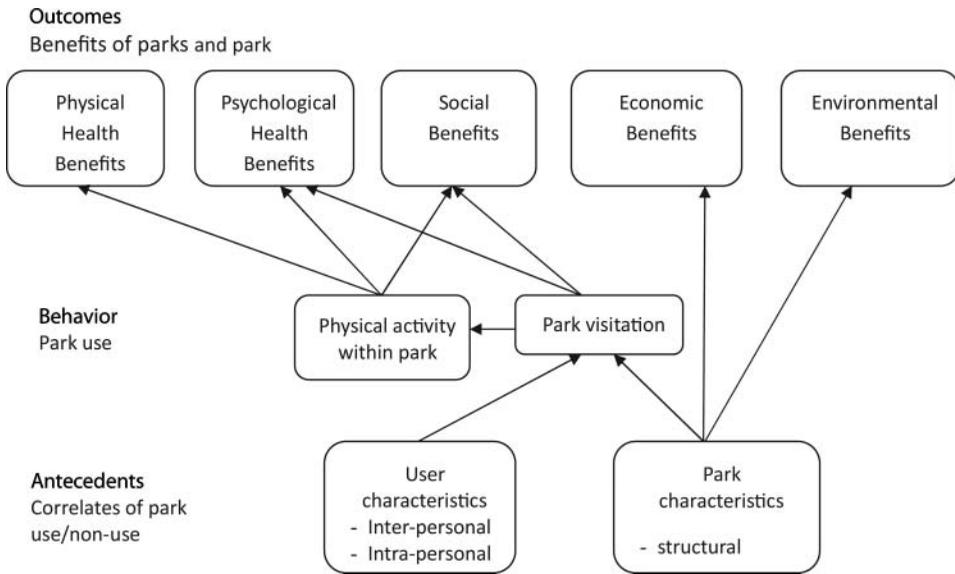


FIGURE 1 The relationship between parks and physical activity. In: Bedimo-Rung et al. (2005, p. 160).

maintenance, safety of facilities), access, esthetics, safety, and policies (e.g., park design policies, park management practices).

Buchner and Gobster (2007) presented a synthesis of the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) model developed by Driver and Brown (1978) and Bedimo-Rung et al.'s (2005) model. The ROS framework proposed a typology of recreation opportunities that varied according to the combination of experiences, settings, and activities made available by management (Manfredo et al., 1996). The framework was based on a premise that "providing a diversity or spectrum of recreation opportunities through management of recreation settings will help ensure that a variety of visitors will be able to achieve desired recreation experiences" (Stein & Lee, 1995, p. 54). Buchner and Gobster identified three key determinants of people's activity within park: management-related conditions and settings, physical factors

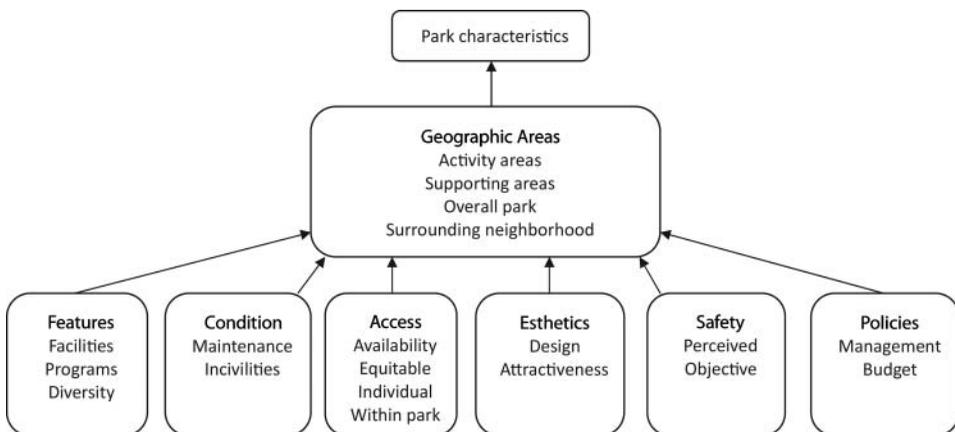


FIGURE 2 Environmental classification of park attributes. In: Bedimo-Rung et al. (2005, p. 163).

(both built and natural), and human factors (both individual and social). The outcomes of participation included five types of benefits: physical health benefits, psychological health benefits, social benefits, economic benefits, and environmental benefits.

In the current study, Bedimo-Rung et al.'s (2005) framework will serve as a starting point in our exploration of the benefits of parks for Mexican-Americans. The model has been selected because it is comprehensive and because the focus of this study was closer to the behavioral public health perspective than to the resource management approach of Driver's work. However, although Bedimo-Rung's framework incorporated insights from studies on leisure behavior of minority groups, it addressed issues of diverse users only in passing. For instance, the framework acknowledged that certain populations, such as ethnic and racial minorities, are less likely to use urban parks and that minority communities might have poorer quality parks. This article uses the framework to describe recreation experiences of Mexican-Americans, to identify benefits of parks to Mexican-American urban residents, and correlates of their park use.

Literature Review

Park Benefits

The literature that demonstrates the beneficial role of parks has grown substantially in recent years. In this study, we will define benefits as "a change that is viewed as advantageous—an improved condition or gain—to an individual, a group, (or) to society" (Driver et al., 1991, p. 4) and briefly review the literature pertaining to the physical, psychological, social, and environmental benefits of parks.

Physical Benefits. Parks provide a number of physical benefits, of which promoting physical activity has been extensively documented. Gobster (2002) found that 44% of Chicago's Lincoln Park users were engaged in active individual pastimes (mainly walking and bicycling) and that 23% were active in team sports. Similarly, Raymore and Scott (1998) discovered that more than half of Cleveland Metropark visitors were actively engaged in walking or hiking. Hua et al. (2003) confirmed the beneficial role of parks for increasing physical activity and reported that 7 out of 10 park visitors engaged in moderate to vigorous physical activity during their visits. Giles-Corti et al. (2005) found that individuals who used public open spaces were nearly three times more likely than nonusers to achieve recommended physical activity levels. Since physical activity has been linked to lowering risk of obesity, heart disease, and diabetes, the role of parks in promoting people's health is difficult to dispute (Bedimo-Rung et al., 2005).

Psychological Benefits. According to Chiesura (2004), stress reduction, mood improvement, relaxation, and need to experience nature and escape from the city are among the most important benefits of parks. A study by Tinsley et al. (2002) reported that immediate sense of pleasure or gratification were important psychosocial benefits derived by Lincoln Park visitors. Godbey, Roy, Payne, and Orsega-Smith (1998) reported that elderly visitors to Lincoln Park in Chicago appreciated interaction with the natural environment and opportunity to reduce stress. Hull and Michael (1995) found that the longer participants stayed in a park, the less stress they reported (as cited in Bedimo-Rung et al., 2005). Similarly, Orsega-Smith, Mowen, Payne, and Godbey (2004) discovered that older individuals with health problems benefited from a longer park visit due to reduced stress and positive moods. A study by More and Payne (1978) also established that park-based leisure experiences were related to an increase in positive moods and a decrease in levels of sadness and anxiety. In addition to the psychological benefits people derive from visiting parks,

the presence of the park itself provides a variety of mental health benefits. For example, Ulrich (1981) found that hospital patients who had a window view of trees and nature recovered much faster than those patients whose views were restricted by buildings (as cited in Chiesura, 2004).

Social Benefits. Research findings also provide evidence that parks promote health and well-being through fostering leisure-based social interactions. This is significant for the quality of life of the community as leisure companionship and friendship buffers stress caused by depression and physical illness (Iso-Ahola & Park, 1996). A study by Kweon et al. (1998) found that green common spaces helped build social relationships between older inner-city residents and their neighbors and increased a sense of community. Similarly, Tinsley et al. (2002) revealed that for many park users, the highest rated benefit of a park visit was the opportunity for affiliation with others. Other researchers have established that community gardens in urban areas encourage development of social capital by serving as a social space in which people build relationships and develop a sense of community and belonging (Glover et al., 2005; Shinew et al., 2004). Moreover, community gardens may encourage positive interracial interactions among different ethnic and racial groups.

Environmental Benefits. As Dwyer, McPherson, Schroeder, and Rowntree (1992) argued, “the presence of urban trees and forests can make the urban environment a more pleasant place to live, work, and spend leisure time” (p. 229). Studies have also found that trees in urban parks are vital to improving air quality by capturing gaseous pollutants that are harmful to people and reducing the amount of ozone in polluted air (e.g., Dwyer et al., 1992). McPherson et al. (1997) estimated that in 1991 Chicago’s urban forests provided \$9.2 million in air-quality improvement by removing 5,575 metric tons of air pollutants. Vegetation also has been shown to decrease noise levels in urban areas and to shield visual intrusion of traffic (Bolund & Hunhammar, 1999). Temperature reduction in urban areas has been attributed to the presence of parks (McPherson, 1992).

Benefits of Parks for Latino Americans

Recently, the literature on park visitation and park benefits has begun to focus on visitors of diverse characteristics (e.g., Ho et al., 2005; Tinsley et al., 2002). For instance, Tinsley et al. found that escaping duty and affiliation were more important benefits of parks for Latinos than for non-Hispanic Whites. In Ho et al.’s study, improving spiritual well-being, overall health, and social well-being were found to be the three most important benefits for Hispanic park visitors. Gómez and Malega (2007) showed that distance from the park, acculturation, gender, income, and perception of discrimination were predictors of perceived park benefits among Puerto Ricans. Perception of park benefits, on the other hand, was a predictor of park visitation and those who perceived greater benefits visited parks more often. As Gómez (2002) concluded, “Puerto Ricans may not conceptualize derived benefits [from visiting urban parks] in the same way mainstream users do” (p. 60). Gómez’s study also showed that parks served as proxies for *plazas*, which are central to Latinos’ leisure lifestyles, especially for recent immigrants.

Studies also explored benefits among Latinos who visit wilderness areas, such as national parks. For instance, Gramann et al. (1993) showed that people of Mexican ancestry rated family togetherness as a more important benefit than Anglos. Findings also indicated that “getting back to nature” was more important for Mexican-Americans than for Anglos. Shaull and Gramann (1998) examined the effects of cultural assimilation on the importance of family togetherness and nature enjoyment as perceived benefits of outdoor recreation. Their study showed that family-related benefits were more important to bicultural Hispanics

than to Anglos and to their less assimilated counterparts. Moreover, the least assimilated Hispanics rated nature-related benefits as more important than did the Anglos and the most-assimilated Hispanics. Carr and Williams' (1993) study confirmed the social role of visits to natural environments among Latinos. They also highlighted special roles of natural areas for religious celebrations and their environmental benefits such as having clean air and water. None of the studies, however, has provided an examination of the benefits of urban parks to Mexican-American recreationists, or of the factors affecting the degree to which such benefits can be realized. Most importantly, the literature has not examined whether Mexican-Americans derive unique benefits from park visitation and whether, and to what extent, benefits identified by the majority recreationists are also important for Mexican-American users. While the existing research on constraints, for instance, has established that "traditional" constraints such as lack of time and money take on a new dimension for minority recreationists (Stodolska, 1998), little attention has been paid to the benefits of urban park use for ethnic and racial minorities. This study is designed to fill this gap in the literature.

Factors Affecting Park Use

Because of the number of benefits provided by urban parks, it is important to ensure that they are accessible and that park visitation is encouraged. A number of studies have explored factors that affect park use. Access, defined by Bedimo-Rung et al. (2005) as "the ability of people to get to and navigate within a park" (p. 164), seemed to be the key dimension. The authors discussed issues of park availability in the community, distance from the visitors' place of residence, and ability to navigate within the park. In their 2004 study of people's perceptions and use of Chicago River greenways, Gobster and Westphal established that the aesthetic appearance of a natural area is critical in attracting visitors. Almost half of their respondents referred to vegetation, wildlife, and other natural characteristics as being important to their trail enjoyment and use. In Giles-Corti et al.'s (2005) study, trees, water features, and the presence of birds were most often listed as contributing to people's enjoyment of open spaces. Similarly, Schroeder and Anderson (1984) found that the degree of naturalness and woody vegetation increased park users' perception of the quality of the park environment. Corti, Donovan and Holman (1996) discovered that parks were more likely to promote physical activity if they were aesthetically pleasing to visitors, such as tree-lined paths rather than empty open space.

An additional factor that affects park visitation is the availability of amenities. For instance, in Corti et al.'s (1996) study, swings and barbecue equipment, among others, influenced people's use of parks. In Gobster's (2002) study, lakes and ponds, beaches, zoos, and varied activities were sought the most. Conversely, litter, vandalism, and dirty restrooms were the most disliked attributes of the park. The location of the amenities is also important, as studies show that locating facilities along the perimeters of the park where they can be easily seen can improve their utilization (Gobster, 1998; Jacobs, 1961). Maintenance and safety have received considerably less attention, although they are likely to affect whether or not people visit parks and which activities they engage in while at the park. As Bedimo-Rung et al. (2005) noted, "Park users are more likely to visit a park where the features are maintained on a regular basis and shun those places containing elements that are in disrepair" (p. 164). Similarly, the condition and safety of play equipment is likely to play a role in parents' decision to visit parks with their children (Bedimo-Rung et al., 2005). The condition of park grounds and maintenance of facilities have been shown to be lacking in parks in minority neighborhoods (Blahna & Black, 1993).

Studies have also illustrated the importance of safety from crime in affecting park usage. For instance, Gobster's (2002) study revealed that perception of park safety influenced visitation especially among White users, who were more than twice as likely to feel unsafe in the park as other groups. Two elements of safety have been discussed: perceived safety (how safe one feels in the park) and objective safety (actual incidence of crime) (Bedimo-Rung et al., 2005). Visual cues such as trash, graffiti, broken bottles, and disruptive social behaviors (e.g., drinking, loitering) can contribute to perceptions of lack of safety among visitors (Bedimo-Rung et al., 2005). A study by Stodolska, Acevedo, and Shinew (2009) showed that gangs and gang-related drug activity in parks dissuaded Latino residents from using local parks, made them visit parks only at certain times of the day, and employ other avoidance strategies to minimize the risk of being exposed to crime. Gobster and Westphal (2004) argued that to enhance perceptions of safety, parks should be designed with open sight lines in which naturalness and vegetation do not create hidden areas. Brighter lighting, open space, open buildings with staff present and increased police and citizen patrols have also been suggested to increase feelings of safety in parks (Loewen, Steel, & Suedfeld, 1993).

Methods

This study employed focus groups with Mexican-Americans residing in two minority communities in Chicago—Little Village (pop. 91,071, 83% Latino) and East Side (pop. 23,688, 68% Latino) (U.S. Census, 2000). Four focus groups were conducted between June and September 2007. Two were conducted with Mexican-Americans born in the United States and two with first-generation immigrants. Focus groups were conducted until theoretical saturation had been reached, that is, until no new or conflicting information was obtained in conversations with participants. Interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling through the existing contacts of the researchers, as well as through local churches and Latino-owned businesses.

In all, 26 Mexican-Americans (13 men and 13 women) took part. Participants' ages ranged from early 20s to late 60s. All interviewees were of Mexican descent. Participants were not asked about the legality of their status in the United States, only about their socio-economic characteristics, place of residence, and length of residence at this location. All participants have been given pseudonyms in this study.

Focus groups lasted between 1½ and 2½ hours. Interviews with first generation immigrants were conducted in Spanish and those with Mexican-Americans born in the United States were conducted in English. One of the researchers was born in Mexico and, for a period of time, resided in one of the neighborhoods investigated in the study. His cultural background, fluency in Mexican Spanish, and knowledge of issues of local Latino communities helped to establish rapport with participants and to interpret findings of the study. Participants were paid \$25 for participation. Focus groups were tape-recorded and videotaped. They were transcribed verbatim and those conducted in Spanish were translated to English by the Mexican-American researcher. The translation was verified by two independent individuals fluent in both languages.

An interview guide was used to help structure the focus groups. Focus groups started by asking participants about their attitudes toward, and their use of urban parks for recreation, benefits of urban parks, and factors that affected their recreational use of parks. Among other questions, participants were asked: "What comes to your mind when you think of 'natural areas'?" "What roles do natural environments/natural areas, such as parks, play in your life?" "How important is it for you to have natural environments in your neighborhood?" "Why is having a natural environment in your neighborhood important?"

The analysis of the material began after the first focus group had been completed and continued throughout the duration of the study. Following each focus group, two sets of notes were created. The first set included the contextual information regarding the focus group in question. The second included a summary of the main themes that had surfaced during the conversation and the researchers' preliminary interpretation of the information. After the focus groups had been transcribed, the transcripts were analyzed using a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). To isolate the themes and subthemes and to group them into categories, each transcript was independently read several times by all four researchers and then discussed until a consensus had been reached on the classification of the interview responses. Five main types of park benefits were isolated: environmental, social, psychological health, physical health, and cultural benefits. Four themes were isolated under the category "problematic role of parks": (a) insufficient access to open spaces, (b) poor maintenance of the existing parks, (c) crime and safety issues, and (d) interracial conflict and discrimination. After the relevant points had been synthesized, the transcripts were re-read to ensure that all of the important aspects had been included.

Because part of the focus groups dealt with sensitive issues (experiences of participants with crime, including neighbourhood gangs) and because it was likely that many of our interviewees were undocumented immigrants, we decided not to ask participants for their contact information. This precluded the possibility of sending focus group transcripts to the participants for verification and feedback. To increase trustworthiness of the study, however, we relied on several methods of data recording (two independent voice recorders and a video recorder) that ensured accurate transcription of the discussions. Moreover, each transcript was verified with the recording by at least two researchers to avoid possible transcription errors. Member checking was also used in which themes that emerged from the study and interpretations of focus groups were presented to several knowledgeable community members who were asked to comment on the plausibility of our interpretations (Baxter & Eyles, 1997). These individuals included people in charge of several community organizations (e.g., Little Village Environmental Justice Organization [LVejo], Little Village Development Corporation [LVCDC/Enlace]), Commander of the 10th District of the Chicago Police Department, Superintendent of Piotrowski Park, a school principal, and a pastor of a local church. Information from these member checks was used to help explain and put in context some of the findings of the study. For example, they discussed community efforts to increase the availability of natural environments in the neighborhoods, to police the parks, and to deal with park maintenance issues.

Results

Benefits of Urban Parks for Mexican-American Recreationists in Chicago

Benefits of urban parks identified by focus group participants were divided into five categories—environmental, social, psychological health, physical health, and cultural.

Environmental Benefits. Many participants viewed parks as helping to keep the air pure and clean. As Jesus said, "the green areas consume a lot of carbon dioxide. This permits that the trees, green areas, create oxygen which is vital for life. The oxygen is fundamental for every human being." His views were shared by Carmen, Cristina, Esther, and Gloria. Esther commented, "The trees, the green areas are like a lung. They allow you to breathe better and to decrease pollution. Where there is less pollution we can see the sun and the stars." Parks were particularly important in cities where "a lot of cars pass by [and] there will be a lot of smoke. The trees will consume all that and everything will be a lot cleaner" (Jorge). Similarly, Juan and Sandy commented that city parks are important as they help

to decrease pollution, and that “pollution comes from factories, and the natural resources. Parks give you fresh air for yourself, for your family, for the kids” (Sandy). Gloria also added that it was important to have trees and green areas since “most of the [Mexican] kids here in the United States are mostly indoors. It is a way to go outside and breathe air.”

Social Benefits. Social benefits were another common theme identified in the study. Many participants commented that parks provided means for family and friends to socialize and to enjoy leisure activities together. Parks were seen as particularly important for people with families who could not afford expensive recreation and who did not have large backyards. As Michael from Little Village commented:

I think the point is that in a park there is more space. For example, in your backyard you can only invite a certain amount of people. In a park there is more opportunities. You can invite your family and have a bigger cookout. It’s away from everything, from buildings, from cars and there are more things to do.

Juan brought up a cultural aspect of participation:

Everyone can go to it [a park] and have little social interaction because of these social networks that are from Mexico or other places of South America. And you can invite family that was here—cousins, aunts and uncles. Otherwise for newcomers it could be extremely difficult to fit into this complex social network.

Parks were also seen as convenient places to have celebrations such as birthdays or graduations as they could accommodate extended families. Parks’ benefits for children were also stressed by the participants. They could help them “release energy that has accumulated by having them indoors all winter” (Jesus), “have fun and play” (Carmen, Casimero, Sandy), “play sports and grow up healthy” (Sandy), and “run and be along with other kids” (Esther). Jesus, Sandy, and Iris also stressed that visiting parks helped kids to “stay on track and not become involved in negative things” (Jesus). Iris added:

I think it kind of takes them away from the streets because instead of going out and doing stuff they shouldn’t be doing, you see them even at night, they’re playing baseball or volleyball. They’re doing stuff which is keeping them away from doing crime.

Esther focused on the social aspect of park visitation that also led to fostering social capital in the community: “Kids are indoors and going to a park makes them social and then you can meet people that live in other blocks of the area or little farther away that come to the park.”

Psychological Health Benefits. Many participants stressed that visiting parks allowed people to relax, reduce stress, and escape the “urban life.” For example, Carmen commented, “It is important because we have a place where we can go rest, have fun, and relax and so the children can be joyful while playing.” Esther added, “[Parks] attract the young. Maybe there are stressors at home. Maybe there is a lot stress in school. When they see trees or something natural they can go and lie down or sit down in a park, think and relax.” Elsa said that she often traveled to parks outside of her neighborhood (Little Village) to just “sit on the grass, read a book and relax.” Some participants from Little Village also saw trips to parks and forest preserves outside of the city as opportunities to escape dangerous inner-city life. They believed that their neighborhood park lacked the space and security,

so when going to a “true park” (bigger and better maintained parks in other areas of town), they could enjoy the open space and relax in a secure environment.

Physical Health Benefits. Few participants related visiting parks to actual health benefits. Many of them, however, commented that parks provided opportunities to participate in sport and physical activity, which have been shown to result in health benefits. For example, Jesus commented, “The adults can use [parks] to do exercise, run, bike. They can use the sport complexes to play basketball, football, and baseball.” He also observed, “These are sports that are very economical because they do not require a lot of investment. The only thing you need is time and a little bit of food for the kids.” Erik played soccer and basketball in parks, while Elizabeth did rollerblading and biking. Roxana mentioned that she liked hiking, but she always traveled “way south on [I] 55.” She did not stay in her neighborhood parks as “I don’t see the point. It’s dirty; you don’t feel it’s a park.”

Cultural Benefits. Visiting parks also gave people an opportunity to be outdoors, which was seen as part of Mexican culture and an important component of leisure life of immigrants in their home country. Parks were considered a substitute for Mexican *plazas*—a central point in the social life of the community. For example, Paulina commented, “I think there is a little bit of a culture where older people in Mexico hang out in the *plaza*. They just like to be outdoors.” Carla also linked residents’ desire for having parks in their community with their cultural heritage and upbringing in Mexico:

If you live in Little Village it’s because you are just coming in from Mexico, and you’re used to bigger green areas. You don’t usually necessarily come from the city. You come from the working land, and they’re used to those big areas. They’re used to having trees. They’re used to having a big space to run in.

Martha also mentioned that residents of Little Village had limited access to backyards and that this increased the importance of park spaces in the community:

In Little Village not a lot of people have backyards. And you can’t just let your kids running by themselves. They need to play. In Mexico there are bigger spaces than just an apartment. Some people don’t have backyards and they are used to being outdoors. You walk a lot in Mexico. You do a lot outside. You are used to that.

Esther also mentioned that parks helped preserve cultural traditions among Mexican-American children. She commented, “Kids want to play and they can see traditions. They can see the ice cream vendors, vendors like in Mexico. In other parks you can’t really see that.”

Problematic Role of Parks in Mexican-American Neighborhoods

Although all participants commented on the positive roles of parks, many of them also noted problems related to the existence and utilization of green spaces in their communities.

Insufficient Access to Parks. Residents of Little Village commented that park spaces in their neighborhood were insufficient to meet the needs of the growing community. Little Village has only 61 acres of public open space for more than 91,000 residents, the second lowest open space-to-resident ratio of the 77 Chicago community areas (LVCDC, 2005). With its 23 acres, Piotrowski Park is the neighborhood’s largest park. Douglas Park, located

on the northeast edge of the community, is rarely utilized by Mexican-Americans especially residing on the west side of the community due to its poor accessibility to pedestrians and the perception that it “belongs” to a neighboring predominantly African American community. Although East Side has better access to parks, the majority of its natural areas are former brown fields, now overgrown with grass, criss-crossed by industrial canals, and surrounded by factories and oil refineries.

Asked whether they thought Little Village had sufficient access to parks, Belen responded:

Definitely not! I live on 31st and Pulaski. There is only in existence one park. It is also very small for all the people that live there. A lot of times we pass driving through there and it’s always full. My kids need more sociability and they are no places where they can be. I rather go to a bigger park. There is need for more parks.

She later commented that those residents of Little Village who owned cars could drive out of the neighborhood on weekends in search of open spaces, but only a few residents had that privilege. Roxana and Gloria commented on the overcrowding of Piotrowski Park: “There is just too many people there. It’s just too overcrowded to begin with. It’s just not a very comfortable place to go and be outside” (Roxana) and “Piotrowski Park is very small for all the people that live there. A lot of times we pass driving through there and it’s always full. There is need for more, bigger parks” (Gloria).

All of the stakeholders who were asked to comment on the findings of this study agreed that lack of parks was a major detriment to the quality of life of Little Village residents. Carlos (LVCDC/Enlace) commented, “I am talking about [insufficient] park space, I am talking about youth centers. Half of Little Village population is under the age of 25 and we have two Boys and Girls Clubs and one small park. It’s not enough!” Elena from LVejo added, “We have been struggling as a community for open space for a long time. With a community of this size we should have at least 120 acres of open space [referring to the city’s official Cityspace Plan], and we are barely at maybe at 20–25 acre mark.”

Poor Maintenance of the Existing Parks. The existing parks and other natural environments available in the communities were often described as “wastelands” that instead of adding value to the community and providing benefits for its residents were eyesores and sites of illicit activities. Jogging trails full of potholes, dilapidated playground equipment, trash, lack of water fountains, and unsanitary restrooms dissuaded people from visiting local parks. Elsa commented about Piotrowski Park in Little Village:

It is disgusting! When it rains it is always flooded on the path around the park. There are these big holes that they just filled them up with big rocks and part of the track around the park. There is broken glass all around. The water runs in the bathroom. You can’t see yourself in the mirrors because they are so dirty and so scratched up. The pool is just crowded, dirty. You feel uncomfortable. Where the grass doesn’t grow there is just glass.

Daniel made a connection between the poor condition of open spaces in Little Village and the crime problem:

If there was a lot more clean areas, like having actual grass, some flowers that would induce people to bring more children, people running at the park instead of [it] being taken over by gang bangers. Because it’s deteriorating. It’s not a park

anymore; it's just a wasteland that gangs can use for whatever they want. Not for exercise or for having fun like it's supposed to be.

Some participants believed that insufficient funding was to blame for the problems with park facilities, while others admitted that community members were partly responsible for the poor state of local parks. For instance, Carla commented about better maintenance of parks in suburban communities: "More money goes into it, it's the upkeep, and people keep it nice. You don't see someone drinking a can of Kool-Aid and throwing it on the ground. They actually take the time to take it to the wastebasket."

Maria, one of the people responsible for managing Piotrowski Park, described park's improvement initiatives and commented on problems with maintaining parks in Little Village:

I've never seen as much graffiti, tagging, as in this community. It costs so much money to remove the graffiti from park buildings! I wish I could put the money we spent into removing graffiti into additional programs. Our [Latino] families do not respect the park the way they should, they throw away diapers, food. I have asked people personally to respect the park "Would you throw this dirty diaper on the floor in your house?" "Would you throw this plate on your own floor?" You are only as good as your community is!

She added that the maintenance issues had gotten better since the adult men's soccer leagues started to clean up after themselves and that significant capital investments were being made in the park.

Crime and Safety Issues. Parks were also seen as locations of crime and were often the subject of territorial fights among competing gangs. Gang members selling drugs and the mere presence of gangs deterred legitimate park use. Many incidents of drive-by shootings in the vicinity of parks were recalled by the interviewees. As one of them (Jesus) commented,

There is a thing with gangs and parks. For example the only park we have is Piotrowski. The gangs have it really controlled. The gangs gain hold of the parks. Then, it doesn't really matter if you have a park and you don't have security in it. No one would want to go to the park.

Michael commented on the dangers associated with gang members being present in parks, saying, "When they have a meeting, another gang might pass by and they might conflict with each other. Bottles might be thrown or even a gun." Elsa revealed that she would visit the local park, but that the presence of "gangbangers" detracted from her recreation experience. She commented:

The other day I went [to the park] and there were groups of 20-year-old something men in a little circle on the path, so you have to run around them. I was with my nephew and he was on his bike and then we stopped because he was hurt or something. They [the gangbangers] were just walking off. I was scared, like, are they walking towards me?

Elizabeth, a 31-year-old East Side resident, described her experiences from Calumet Park in these words:

The lake in Calumet Park . . . My mom said we used to always go to the lake, and it used to be okay. Now we go and you see a lot of gangbangers, and the families start leaving early. Even if you go there now, you'll see all the young crowds doing drugs.

All of the stakeholders confirmed the detrimental effect of fear of crime on the quality of life and on the utilization of parks by local residents. District 10 of the Chicago Police Department took active steps to curb the crime problem in local parks. Special patrol cars were dispatched to patrol park areas in the times of high use, police officers were assigned to visit the park field house at least once a day (our review of their logs indicated several daily visits), and certain areas of the park were designated as "hot spots" for crime activity, which gave the police powers to disperse youths congregating on park corners. Nevertheless, many interviewees were skeptical of the effectiveness of the police efforts to curb crime problem in parks. As Lucia commented, "They drive around, but it takes them a long time to go all the way around. By the time they come back, they're [gang members] done doing whatever it is they're doing."

On the other hand, some of the interviewees also observed that parks might serve an important function of helping to fight crime in the community. Parks were perceived as ideal places in which to provide sport and recreation programs for the children. Such programs would offer an opportunity to engage in productive activities and to form positive associations, which could counterbalance the influence of the gang culture. For instance, Carla, a young East Side resident commented:

Where there's a park, there's after school programs and sport programs that'll keep the kids away from trying to find something to do with their time. I think gangs develop from not being involved in something and trying to find something to do, and that leads to getting in trouble. Having parks is a benefit because there's a lot more programs for families and the community.

Interracial Conflict and Discrimination. Cases of interracial conflict and discrimination were also reported in parks. Mexican-American participants narrated stories of their children's not being allowed to enter a pool by non-Hispanic attendants and of African American and Mexican-American mothers' having open fights over playground equipment. For instance, as Carmen described:

I got to see a Black mom that was fighting with a Mexican mom because Mexican mom was far and the kid was there and the Black lady took the kid from the swings. So they started fighting there. So much that they had to call the police.

Other interviewees remarked that they did not frequent parks located on the edges of the Latino and African American community (e.g., Douglas Park), since they were defined as "Black parks" and since they feared passing through the neighborhood inhabited by members of rival gangs. Asked why she did not visit Douglas, Elsa remarked, "It's a Black neighborhood too. You can see probably racial tensions." She later made a comment about the racial information imbedded in recreation spaces. "Hispanic people often wouldn't go to the park because that park is the *Black people's park*. You are starting to see Black people in Piotrowski Park, but you wouldn't see that often because that is the *Hispanic park*."

Several participants also perceived discrimination against Mexican-Americans by the staff of recreation agencies. For instance, Lizet believed that Mexican-American children were being prevented from using a local pool when African American attendants

were on duty. Other interviewees believed that local park staff intentionally failed to distribute information in Spanish to give preference to children of White, Anglo residents. Since recreation programs offered by the local park district were used to capacity during the summer months, lack of information in Spanish restricted participation of the Mexican-American children. Allegations of discrimination were also directed at the local police. For instance, several participants commented that they felt unwelcome in parks and other recreation locations due to being closely followed by the local police and even sometimes by other recreationists. Some felt they were being stereotyped and that all young Mexican-American men were considered suspicious due to frequent gang activity in the area.

Discussion/Conclusion

The results illustrate that parks offer numerous benefits not only to mainstream urban residents but also to minority groups, such as Mexican-Americans. They provide an opportunity to get away from urban life, relax, breath fresh air, participate in sports, and maintain cultural traditions. However, many of these benefits may not be fully realized by Mexican-Americans. Besides identifying a range of park benefits for minority residents, this study also offered another, more critical look at the role and place of parks in minority communities. Parks can be locations of crime and conflict, discrimination, and often poorly maintained, overcrowded, and understaffed spaces that add little to the value of local communities. As some of our interviewees commented, natural environments in minority communities are frequently nothing more than “wastelands,” full of trash and graffiti-clad walls. They are convenient settings for drug dealing among gangs and are perceived as frightening rather than inviting. As Gobster (1998) poignantly described, parks in minority neighborhoods often serve as “green walls” that divide communities rather than offer opportunities for interaction and spending quality time. Thus, we postulate that studies that explore benefits of parks, so prevalent in the leisure literature of the last decade, should acknowledge that benefits of parks may not be enjoyed to the same extent by different segments of the population. While “healthy,” well-maintained and safe parks in more affluent neighborhoods can offer opportunities for physical activity, spending quality time with family, or just relaxing among lush greens, such park environments are often a distant dream for many inner-city minority residents. Thus, as participants in this study remarked, in order to experience quality natural environments, one needs to travel to the distant suburban locations. Moreover, many urban parks may not be designed or managed with minority users in mind. For example, as the results showed, parks serve an important function of bringing together multigenerational Mexican-American families and are important spaces for social interaction. Parks that are located in areas with a large concentration of the Mexican-American population should be adequately equipped to make such uses possible. Large shaded picnic areas, adequate provision of play equipment for children as well as presence of food vendors and sanitary facilities are necessary if park areas are to be enjoyed by the Mexican-American users.

As one of the first steps in our analysis of the study findings, we developed a new model (see Figure 3) in which we merged the two separate frameworks developed by Bedimo-Rung et al. (2005) and classified factors that condition park visitation among ethnic and racial minorities into those related to their intra-personal characteristics (largely beyond the scope of this study), characteristics of neighborhoods in which parks are located (also largely beyond the scope of this study), and characteristics of the parks themselves. Although the focus of the study was on parks in Latino urban communities, the results suggested that the benefits derived by Mexican-American visitors were not only affected

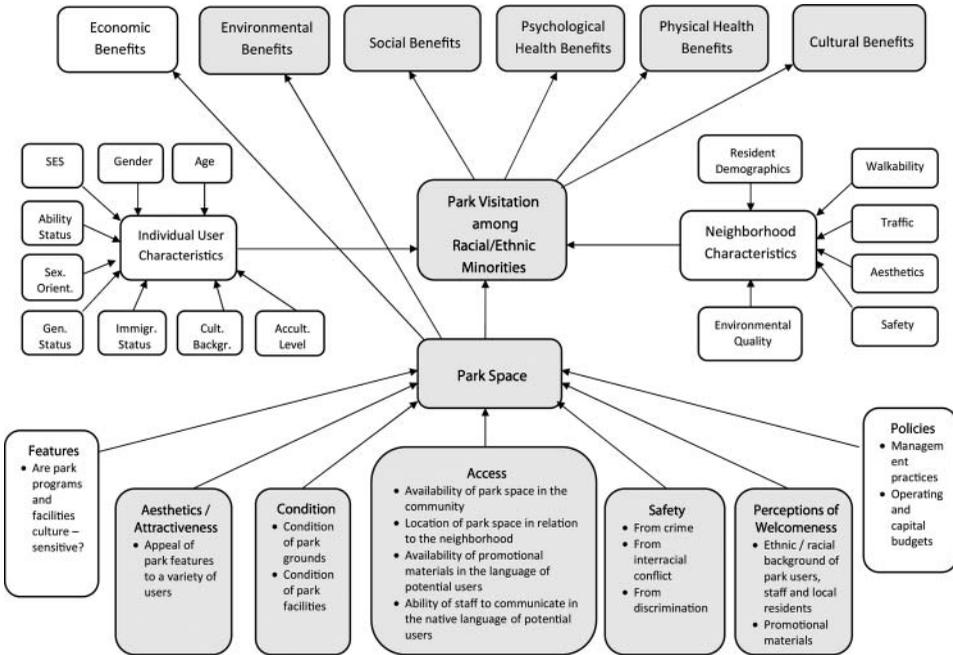


FIGURE 3 Park characteristics and benefits of park visitation among minorities. Note: Shaded boxes indicate the main issues covered in this paper.

by the characteristics of the parks themselves but also by the traits of the users (e.g., cultural background, socio-economic status) and the characteristics of the neighborhoods in which the parks are located (e.g., safety, environmental quality, racial makeup of the population). These issues will be dealt with later in this section.

An important goal of this study was to examine if there are unique benefits of parks for Mexican-American recreationists and correlates of their park use. Many of the park benefits identified in this study seemingly overlapped with Bedimo-Rung et al.'s (2005) classification, as they fell into the categories of environmental, social, physical, and mental health benefits. However, upon closer examination, we discovered that even though many of the same benefits were received by Mexican-American residents, they often took on a different meaning or were more pronounced than those among mainstream recreationists. In some instances, cultural background of the visitors was likely responsible for these subtle differences, while in others they appeared to be caused by social class. In this respect, our results are consistent with the findings of studies on constraints among minorities that showed that even though ethnic groups experience similar *types* of constraints as the mainstream (e.g., lack of time, money, family obligations) they may experience them with different strength or in a different way (Ruble & Shaw, 1991; Stodolska, 1998). For instance, and in support of studies by Dwyer et al. (1992) and McPherson et al. (1997), our Mexican-American interviewees commented on environmental benefits of parks such as keeping air pure and clean, creating oxygen, and decreasing pollution. Although mentioned in the original model, these benefits seemed to be particularly important to Mexican-Americans and likely other minorities as well as people of lower socio-economic class who reside in inner-city communities located close to industrial corridors. Most of the comments on the environmental benefits of parks were humanistic in nature and contained

undertones of family and future-orientation.¹ It would be worthwhile to examine if these benefits retain their importance for Mexican-Americans after they have moved to more affluent communities with fewer environmental concerns (Stodolska & Shinew, 2009). Isolating the effects of the social class of residents from those of the cultural background as determinants of the perceived value of environmental benefits could be more readily accomplished for such populations.

The beneficial role of parks as providing opportunities for socialization (Kweon et al., 1998; Tinsley et al., 2002) was also stressed by the interviewees. In this respect, parks were particularly important for Mexican-Americans for whom spending time with the family constitutes a central part of their leisure (Juniu, 2000; Shaull & Gramann, 1998) and who are accustomed to organizing family celebrations in natural environments. As one of the interviewees commented, parks were convenient spaces for family gatherings among Mexican-Americans who typically have larger families. Such celebrations might be impossible to stage in small back-yards of multiple-story houses typical to central-city Chicago communities or in the apartments of residents who do not have access to any green space and who cannot afford to travel to farther recreation sites. Such social gatherings in parks are also beneficial for the newcomers to the United States who need to rebuild their social networks. As Juan, one of the focus groups participants, observed, parks were particularly important for immigrants due to the fact that they helped them to “fit into this complex social network” that need to be restructured due to immigration. The phenomenon of family separation due to “phase immigration” has been well established in the Latino and ethnic studies literature (Guarnizo, 1994; Lopez Castro, 1986). It is a common feature of the Mexican migration to the United States that people migrate alone, many of them leaving their spouses, siblings, parents, and children in their home country. It is only after many years that some immigrants are reunited with their kin, while others establish new families in the country of settlement. Long-term family separation has severe negative consequences on the psychological adjustment of immigrants. Loneliness, depression, and feelings of isolation and “inner-rupture” have been reported in studies by Conway and Cohen (1998), Stodolska and Santos (2006) and others. Thus, the need to develop social ties with extended kin residing in the United States and other co-ethnics who might be helpful in the initial adjustment process is of critical importance. Parks that provide convenient spaces for large family gatherings where such connections are more readily established may play an important role in the immigrant adjustment process. The social benefits of parks were also touched upon by the interviewees who commented on the positive role they may play in the socialization among Mexican-American children and, indirectly, in crime prevention efforts. As some participants, such as Carla, remarked, parks are convenient settings for sport and recreation programs for the children that can provide them with “positive” forms of association and, thus, reduce crime in the community.

Mexican-Americans perceived similar psychological benefits from park visits to other groups—they helped to relax, reduce stress, and rest (Godbey et al., 1998; Orsega-Smith et al., 2004). One may argue, however, that opportunities to release stress were particularly valuable for Mexican-Americans who experience additional hardships related to physically strenuous work, postimmigration adjustment problems, and who live in dangerous urban neighborhoods. As our interviewees commented, trips to well-maintained suburban parks offered them opportunities to “escape the urban environment” and to spend free time in crime-free places.

¹We would like to thank one of the reviewers for bringing this to our attention.

Physical health benefits have not been mentioned directly by the interviewed Mexican-Americans. None of the participants have commented on the possible role of parks in lowering blood pressure or helping fight obesity (Bedimo-Rung et al., 2005). Parks, however, were described as settings of free sport participation, where people could engage in soccer games, play basketball, or rollerblade. This is consistent with the role parks are believed to play in improving the health of the population. Public health messages that promote exercising in natural areas may not appeal to Mexican-American residents. Alternatively, Mexican-Americans may not consider the informal “play” that takes place in parks as helpful in reducing obesity or addressing diabetes issues. They may consider management of diabetes and other diseases as the purview of medication and doctor’s visits, that is, a more formal process.² Another possibility is that Mexican-Americans may be aware of the positive roles of physical activity but also simultaneously be constrained from using local natural environments for exercise due to substandard levels of maintenance or lack of safety. This would constitute a topic of future research, as promoting leisure time physical activity among Mexican-Americans is critical due to their high rates of obesity, diabetes, and other negative health outcomes.

In addition to social, environmental, psychological, and physical health benefits that were similar to those experienced by the mainstream visitors (economic benefits did not surface in this study), we also identified a range of unique beneficial outcomes of park visitation (or parks themselves) that might apply specifically to minority park users. For instance, a new category of cultural benefits of park visitation surfaced in this study. Participants revealed that spending time outdoors was a part of Mexican culture and that many Mexicans were accustomed to walking outdoors. In this respect, results of our study seem to be consistent with findings of existing research that has shown that Latinos born abroad display more pro-environmental attitudes than those born in the United States (Schultz, Unipan, & Gamba, 2000). Latinos, and Mexicans in particular, have been often described as having a close relationship with nature, which is evident in their spending large portions of their leisure outdoors as well as in the traditional Mexican symbolism (e.g., many Mexican sport teams are named after animals; animals also play important roles in traditional holiday celebrations).

Moreover, the study revealed that the elements of culture (e.g., seeing traditional ice cream vendors, using parks as *plazas* that are considered the central space in the community) could be performed and preserved in the context of park setting. The important role of plazas in shaping leisure lives of Latinos was noted by Gómez (2002), Mendez (2005), Smith (2004), and Acevedo (2009). For instance, Cronan, Shinew, and Stodolska (2008) observed that “being open, free, and public, [open natural areas around city trails] have great potential for recreating culture and providing a space for ethnic groups to express cultural values” (p. 80). The results of the study by Acevedo that was conducted in Mexico showed that *plazas* were central to the leisure lives of Mexicans in their home country and were especially critical in shaping leisure of young people. *Plazas* provided spaces where the youth could spend time with friends. Moreover, the popularity and power structure among the youth was established based on with whom they socialized and which *plaza* they visited. Going to the *plaza* provided opportunity for social interaction, especially with people of the opposite sex, allowed visitors to buy gifts, magazines, or arts and crafts that were sold around the *plaza* or simply “window shop” for those who could not afford other forms of leisure. As our study showed, urban parks performed similar functions in the Latino communities in Chicago. Interviewees enjoyed purchasing food from local vendors who

²We would like to thank one of the reviewers for bringing this to our attention.

had their mobile stalls around the parks or who were selling *paletas* (Mexican popsicles) from push carts in the park. Others took pleasure in sitting on grass or park benches, chatting and observing other people pass by. Urban parks, however, were not designed to support these fundamental aspects of culture of the majority of the local population. It seemed that in locations such as Piotrowski Park, important activities associated with Latino culture were performed *despite* the park design features that were intended to support “traditional” uses (e.g., baseball diamonds, tennis courts). Managers of parks located in Latino communities should acknowledge the important role parks can play in the social and cultural life of Latino communities and design park spaces to promote this type of usage among the local population. Installing benches, water features, and perhaps re-designing central spaces in parks to accommodate Mexican-style *kiosko* that could serve as a stage for performers and a meeting place for people could be a good start. Parks should also be better integrated with the local communities. Open-air cafés, food stands, and small shops would encourage people to visit parks and help make local parks welcoming spaces for local Latino residents.

Cultural benefits of park visitation are likely to be related to the level of acculturation (or the level of attachment to the traditional culture versus adoption of the mainstream American values and traits), which has been found to affect park usage in other studies. In our research, consistently with Gómez’s (2002) EPRPM model, “subcultural identity” (or the “extent to which one identifies with a culture other than the dominant one” (p. 133) seemed to be related to the perceived cultural benefits of recreation among Mexican-Americans. Although ours was a qualitative study and no statistical tests could be performed, participants who were born in Mexico and who spoke predominantly Spanish were also the ones who emphasized the importance of urban parks for preserving cultural traditions among their children and made references to the role of parks in their home country.

A number of factors conditioned park visitation and consequently the benefits that Mexican-American residents derived from park use. One of the most relevant factors was access. Little Village has only 61 acres of open public space, but the largest park in the community of more than 91,000 residents is the 23-acre Piotrowski Park. According to Bedimo-Rung et al. (2005), the national average of park space per capita is 15.8 acres/1000 residents. In Little Village it was 0.25 acres. The parks and other natural environments that were available in East Side were reclaimed brown fields located close to factories and in a heavily contaminated environment. Issues of environmental justice that manifest themselves by minorities’ lack of access to quality natural environments suitable for recreation have been poignantly described by Floyd and Johnson (2002). They highlighted the fact that residents of lower socio economic status, many of whom are minority, lack political clout to fight environmental degradation in their communities, are often unable to mount successful legal action against the industrial lobby, and cannot afford to move out to other neighborhoods. This was certainly the case for the Mexican-American participants who also commented that lack of legal status and transitory nature of the local immigrant population hindered advocacy efforts to secure more quality park space in their communities.

Problems with park access were exacerbated by the racial makeup of the surrounding communities (a neighborhood characteristic) that often led to interracial conflict, which in turn limited Mexican-Americans’ access to other nearby parks. Access to suburban park spaces, on the other hand, was hindered by the lack of automobiles among many people and inability to afford gas (individual-level characteristic related to the lower SES of the interviewees), or to obtain a driver’s license due to their undocumented status. Somewhat similar issues were raised by West (1989) who examined factors that constrained access of African Americans to suburban Detroit parks. Access to programs organized in parks was also raised by the interviewees who commented on the lack of information about programs in Spanish and the inability of the staff to communicate in Spanish. Such issues are likely

to hamper access to parks and park programs not only among our interviewed Mexican-Americans but also among members of other minority groups across the United States.

Bedimo-Rung et al. (2005) identified a category called “condition” that referred to condition of features located in parks and to visual cues of incivilities. Poor condition of park grounds and facilities featured prominently in our conversations with Mexican-Americans. They attributed maintenance problems to the lack of funding received by local parks (a factor refuted by the interviewed park staff), to the overuse of facilities in crowded parks, and to the carelessness of many Latino park users. Both the focus group participants and the interviewed Latino staff members commented that some Latino residents “just don’t care about local parks,” which was attributed to their lack of pride in their neighborhood, the transitory nature of the population, and a lack of belief that anything was going to change in their community. Poor maintenance of parks was also attributed to the crime problem, as parks were seen as a gang territory, which further dissuaded law-abiding residents from visiting the area. Similarly “aesthetics/attractiveness” (a category in the Bedimo-Rung’s framework) was mentioned by the interviewees who commented on the unappealing condition of the grounds that diminished pleasure they derived from recreating in parks. It needs to be noted that Piotrowski Park underwent major improvements in 2009–2010, including installing a new playground and a skateboard park.

Safety, a category identified by Bedimo-Rung et al. (2005), did not comprise solely of the fear of crime, traffic, unattended dogs, or injury, as it was identified in previous research (King et al., 2000; Loukaitou-Sideris & Eck, 2007; Roman & Chalfin, 2008). All focus group participants and stakeholders who commented on the study identified fear of gang violence as a factor constraining park use. Interviewees also mentioned interracial conflict in parks and their fear of discrimination by the police, park staff, and other recreationists. Such cases of discrimination have been reported by Blahna and Black (1993) and Johnson, Bowker, English, and Worthen (1998) and are not limited to parks in Latino communities surveyed in this study. Thus, in addition to safety from crime (gang violence in this case), two other categories of safety were identified in our model: safety from interracial conflict and safety from discrimination. Most of the research on the effects of discrimination on recreation participation among minorities has explored the issue from the perspective of users and not as one of the characteristics of recreation environments. Perceived discrimination has been claimed to be conditioned by the socio-economic status, subcultural identity, and acculturation of visitors (e.g., Puerto Ricans in Gómez’s 2002 study); to be one of the components of assimilation (e.g., Floyd et al., 1993; Stodolska, 1998); or to be related to the racial background and marginality (measures of income and access to transportation) of visitors (West, 1989). In our study, the possibility of exposure to discrimination is considered to be one of the characteristics of unsafe park environments.

Perception of welcomeness was a new factor affecting park visitation and the benefits that Mexican-American urban residents could derive from park use that was identified in our research and closely related to issues of safety, including discrimination. Perception of welcomeness, although mentioned in previous literature on minority recreation behavior (e.g., Philipp, 1999; West, 1989), can play a particularly important role among Latinos. In many Latino countries, it is an establish custom to provide a warm and semi-official welcome to people who are new to the area that is meant to make them feel comfortable or welcomed by their neighbors and to cement the social networks and relationships of newcomers. Lack of welcomeness can be considered an insult and akin to a “loss of face” from family to family. The fact that “lack of welcomeness” was mentioned by the interviewees may indicate that the issue has evolved from the micro to the macro level in the context of American urban communities.³ Perception of welcomeness may be related to

³We would like to thank one of the reviewers for bringing this to our attention.

the ethnic and racial background of park users, park staff, and people who live in the vicinity of parks. Promotional materials distributed by the park and types of activities organized in parks are also likely to play a role in how welcome minorities feel in park spaces. Perception of welcomeness may be based on visitors' past experiences with discrimination in or on their way to the park, their past failed attempts to access park programs, or word-of-mouth in the community that labels park in a particular way (e.g., "Hispanic park" or "African American park").

Categories of features and policies identified by Bedimo-Rung et al. (2005) did not surface in this study. One may argue, however, that they also may take additional meaning in minority communities where park features (facilities and programs) may have not been adapted to the needs of a multicultural clientele and where various management practices (e.g., signage, by-laws) may work to marginalize diverse visitors (Chavez, 1991).

There are several limitations of this study that need to be acknowledged. First, the findings of the study are based on focus groups with a limited number of residents of two urban communities in Chicago; thus, the results are not generalizable. The participants in this study were all of Mexican background and their views may not be shared by other Mexican-American residents of the studied communities. Also, problems shared by Mexican-Americans in Chicago may not translate to other minority groups in the United States.

Second, a number of factors are likely to condition park visitation among minorities, in addition to the park characteristics, which have been the focus on the study. Those other factors are acknowledged in our model but were intentionally omitted from this article. Consequently, we believe that future studies should adopt more of an ecological approach and examine community- and individual-level factors conditioning minority park visitation. Park environments should not be examined in isolation from the broader communities in which they are located, as factors such as environmental quality, community design, transportation routes, and resident demographics are likely to affect park use patterns. Moreover, future studies should go beyond demographic breakdowns (e.g., Gobster, 2002; Hua et al., 2003) and focus more on individual characteristics of visitors. Minorities' park visitation patterns may depend not only on their socio-economic characteristics but also on how long they have resided in this country, their cultural background, and on whether or not they feel confident navigating their host communities.

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