

REGIONAL PARK USAGE AMONG SELECT COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION



March 2014

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The Metropolitan Council is the regional planning organization for the seven-county Twin Cities area. The Council operates the regional bus and rail system, collects and treats wastewater, coordinates regional water resources, plans and helps fund regional parks, and administers federal funds that provide housing opportunities for low- and moderate-income individuals and families. The 17-member Council board is appointed by and serves at the pleasure of the governor.

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Introduction

Metropolitan Council's Regional Parks System boasts nearly 55,000 acres of designated parklands and over 300 miles of trails throughout the seven county Twin Cities metropolitan region. The vast Regional Parks System is comprised of regional parks, park reserves, special recreation features and regional trails (hereafter all referred to as "regional parks"). The Regional Parks System is owned and operated by 10 park implementing agency partners which include the counties of Anoka, Carver, Dakota, Ramsey, Scott and Washington, the cities of Bloomington and St. Paul, as well as the special park districts of Three Rivers Park District and Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board.

The 1974 Metropolitan Parks Act established the Regional Parks System which sought to meet the recreational needs of the people of the metropolitan area. Since then, the Regional Parks System has grown with over 45 million visits annually. However, in 2008, a Metropolitan Council survey of Regional Parks System visitors indicated that usage of our regional parks was not representative of the overall demographic makeup of the region, specifically as it relates to communities of color.

To better understand and address park usage inequity, a qualitative research project was conducted. The project sought to identify visitation barriers and suggestions to enhance visitation to the Regional Parks System among distinct subpopulations within the metropolitan region, most notably among communities of color. Specifically, the study sought to explore: a) preferred outdoor recreational activities and desired amenities, b) perceived barriers that prevent use of the system, c) issues or concerns about regional parks and d) recommendations and suggestions to enhance visitation.

Methods

Metropolitan Council staff partnered with several local community-based organizations (CBOs) and public agencies to organize focus groups in the metropolitan region. Where appropriate, organizations were provided small incentives for their efforts. The focus group sessions were conducted October 2013 - January 2014 at locations pre-arranged by Metropolitan Council organizational partners. Interpreters and participant incentives, in the form of retail gift cards, were provided, where appropriate. Metropolitan Council staff facilitated the focus groups, which lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours in length. The focus group sessions followed a semi-structured format, which included a set of pre-determined questions (Appendix A).

Each focus group session began by passing out a sign-in sheet that sought to collect participant demographic data, including their race and/or ethnicity, primary language, gender, number of children, and vehicle ownership status. The focus group sessions were audio recorded, transcribed and, if necessary, translated. Transcripts were analyzed utilizing a qualitative approach to produce emergent themes.

Results

A total of 16 focus group sessions were conducted. The focus groups averaged 16 people in size, with a range of five to 36. In sum, a total of 263 individuals participated in the focus group sessions. Focus groups were comprised of various racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Several CBOs catered to a particular racial, ethnic or cultural demographic segment. Other CBOs provided services to diverse racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Further yet, one agency provided educational services to immigrant populations from a wide array of backgrounds and sought to organize different sessions based on background. As such, in many cases, the focus group sessions had an innate organizational structure based on race, ethnicity and cultural backgrounds. The 16 focus group sessions included four sessions comprised of Asian Immigrants or Asian Americans, three sessions comprised of

Hispanics/Latinos/Latinas, two sessions with African Immigrants, two sessions with African American participants and five sessions composed of participants from a variety of racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds (termed “diverse composition”). It is important to recognize the rich diversity inherent within these racial and ethnic groupings. Interestingly, however, parallel perspectives were often encountered across the similar racial and ethnic focus group sessions; thereby incorporating an analysis based on race, ethnicity or immigrant background could not be ignored.

In terms of participants racial and ethnic background, almost one third (29.6%) identified themselves as African (African Immigrant) (Table 1). An additional 28.8% indicated they were a recent Asian Immigrant or Asian American (28.8%). An additional quarter (25.7%) indicated they were Hispanic or Latino/Latina. Over 10% of focus group participants identified as African American and less than 5% indicated they were Caucasian. Several Caucasian participants were recent immigrants from places such as Morocco and Russia. A total of five participants were U.S. born Caucasians and their input was not included in the analysis of the transcripts. Finally, less than 1% of participants indicated they were multi-racial or Native American.

Table 1. Race/Ethnicity of regional park usage focus group study participants.

	Frequency	Percent
African Immigrant	76	29.6
Asian Immigrant or Asian American	74	28.8
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	66	25.7
African American	28	10.9
Caucasian	11	4.3
Multi-racial	1	0.4
Native American	1	0.4
Total	257	100.0

Predominantly, participants were female (74.6%; Table 2). Participants ranged in age from 14 to 79 years of age, with an average age of 39.6 years old. More than a quarter (27.6%) indicated they did not have children in the household under the age of 18. Of those that had children under the age of 18, almost one third (28.4%) indicated they had two children. With regards to participant’s primary language spoken in the home, a total of 23 different languages were reported. The most frequently noted languages were Spanish, English, and Somali (Table 3). In terms of vehicle ownership, more than two thirds of participants (71.3%) indicated owning a vehicle.

Table 2. Gender of regional park usage focus group study participants.

	Frequency	Percent
Female	191	74.6
Male	65	25.4

Preferred outdoor activities. Participants were first asked what outdoor activities they prefer. The most frequently noted activity was walking, followed by picnicking and/or barbecuing. The third most preferred activity was playground use. Swimming or going to the lake and spending time with friends or family rounded out the top five preferred activities. Less frequently noted activities included biking, fishing, viewing nature, rest or relaxation and celebrations. Differences between the various focus group types did emerge in their top three preferred outdoor activities (Table 4). Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus groups identified their top three preferred activities as walking, fishing and rest or relaxation. African Immigrant focus groups most frequently noted playground use, walking and being with family. Hispanic focus group participants most frequently noted celebrations and parties, followed by picnicking and/or barbecuing and spending time with family. African American focus group participants identified picnicking and/or barbecuing as the most frequent preferred activity, followed by

biking and basketball. Walking, playground use and swimming or going to the lake were the top three most frequently noted preferred activities among diverse composition focus groups.

Table 3. Primary language among regional park usage focus group study participants.

	Frequency	Percent
Spanish	55	22.1
English	41	16.5
Somali	40	16.1
Vietnamese	25	10.0
Amharic	19	7.6
Karen	15	6.0
Chinese	8	3.2
Cambodian	6	2.4
Spanish/English	6	2.4
Arabic	5	2.0
Oromo	5	2.0
Tigrinya	4	1.6
Khmer	3	1.2
French	2	0.8
Korean	2	0.8
Laos	2	0.8
Nuer	2	0.8
Thai	2	0.8
Hmong	1	0.4
Kachi	1	0.4
Mina	1	0.4
Portuguese	1	0.4
Romanian	1	0.4
Russian	1	0.4
Somali/English	1	0.4
Total	249	100.0

Table 4. Preferred outdoor recreational activities by focus group type.

	African American Focus Groups	African Immigrant Focus Groups	Asian Immigrant/Asian American Focus Groups	Hispanic/ Latino/ Latina Focus Groups	Diverse Composition Focus Groups
1	Picnic/BBQ	Use Playground	Walk	Celebrate/ Party	Walk
2	Bike	Walk	Fish	Picnic/BBQ	Use Playground
3	Basketball	Be with Family	Rest/Relax	Be with Family	Swim/Go to Lake

Participants most often identified being with family or friends when they engage in their preferred outdoor activities. Very few participants denoted that they engage in their preferred outdoor activities alone. Participants most frequently noted they were either with less than five people or between 15 and 20 people. However, the range denoted went from being alone to being with 250 people.

“Park” conceptualization. Focus group participants were asked what came to their mind when they heard the word “park”. Several themes emerged. The top theme was nature. Participants noted many natural features that they associated with “parks”, including trees, flowers, lakes, grass, among others. The second most frequently noted theme was related to safety and security. Many participants had unsafe associations when they hear the word “park”, while others spoke to a more generalized concern and questioning attitude. For instance, one woman stated, *“I have to make sure that the place is safe,*

and if accident happens, the police, they can come right away, you know or there's some police sometimes in the park, you know, in the summer. I get that support and feel safe to play with my kids" (diverse composition focus group member). A small number of participants, who had a greater degree of regional park experience, spoke to feeling safe in regional parks. The third most frequently noted theme was a tie between amenities and animals or wildlife. Amenities most frequently noted were playgrounds and picnic areas. Animals and wildlife cited included dogs, deer, geese and ducks. Playgrounds were the next most common theme noted. One woman said "when you say park, my mind is like really playgrounds for kids" (diverse composition focus group member). Playground attributes noted included swings, slides, monkey bars, among other play structure features. Another tie was produced with the fifth most common theme. The themes were related to activities one does in a park: picnics or barbecues and walking, hiking or trail use. Celebrations or fun and bonding with friends and family tied for the sixth major theme. In this vein, participants saw "parks" as an opportunity to bring people together for a celebratory event (e.g. birthday party) or to spend quality time bonding with friends or family. The last major theme participants thought of when they heard "park" was solitude and relaxation.

Table 5. What comes to mind when one thinks about a "park" among regional park usage focus group study participants.

1	Nature
2	Safety/Security
3	Amenities
	Animals/Wildlife
4	Playgrounds
5	Picnics/BBQ
	Walk/Hike/Trails
6	Celebrations/Fun
	Bonding with friends/family
7	Solitude/Relaxation

Regional Parks System visitation. A description and visual illustration of the Regional Parks System was provided and participants were asked if they had visited a regional park in the past. Several focus groups were comprised of just a few participants with regional park experience, whereas other focus groups had a majority with previous experience. Most often, participants indicated they were familiar with Como Regional Park and Special Recreation Feature, located in St. Paul, but less than half of queried participants indicated they had previously visited another regional park. Focus groups that exhibited a greater number of previous park users differed from those with limited experience in one significant manner. The focus groups with participants with greater regional park experience spoke to a perceived disparity across the system. For instance, one participant spoke to the difference she notices when she goes from one regional park in one jurisdiction to a regional park in another jurisdiction. She concluded her remarks by noting, "There's not very equitable distribution of amenities across different parks" (African American focus group member).

Participants were then asked what makes it easy to visit a regional park. Overwhelmingly, participants identified proximity and transportation as the greatest contributors to regional park visitation. For example, related to proximity, one female participant noted, "when we go to a park, I'm not going very far" (diverse composition focus group member). In terms of transportation, motorized and non-motorized options were perceived to make visitation easy. For instance, one participant noted, "it's easy to get to the park by driving" (Female Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus group member). Participants cited multiple transportation modes which aided Regional Parks System usage including automobile, bus and train, as well as biking and walking. Non-motorized transportation was noted most frequently in instances wherein participants noted they resided a short distance from a park.

Barriers to Regional Parks System visitation. One of the main objectives of the study was to explore perceived barriers to Regional Parks System visitation. Several perceived barriers were identified. However, eleven major themes were identified (Table 6). Each major theme identified is described in detail below.

Table 6. Most prominent barriers to regional park system visitation among regional park usage focus group study participants.

1	Lack of Awareness
2	Time
3	Fear/Safety Concerns
4	Lack of Transportation Options
5	Language Barrier
6	Weather
7	Cost
8	Map Challenges
9	No One to Go With
10	Cultural or Religious Insensitivity/Discrimination*
	No Desire*

* Items tied.

Lack of awareness. The chief barrier identified was lack of awareness. Lack of awareness was described in various ways, including knowledge gaps related to: a) what a regional park is, b) where regional parks are located, c) how to get to regional parks, d) regional park rules, e) what to do in regional parks and f) events occurring in regional parks. Therefore, lack of awareness was understood by participants to be multifold. For instance, a male African American participant noted that *“I think there may be a lack of awareness and, so lack of awareness is [number] one. Two, there would be some who are aware the parks are there, but they need additional information to see how they can incorporate the regional parks into their lives”* (African American focus group member). For some participants, confusion surrounded the very idea of a regional park. Most notably, how it differed from local or city parks. One participant described it as follows: *“I think visibility is also huge...I mean to be honest with you, a lot of people are not even really aware about regional parks or even, you know, like this is a regional park and what does it mean... the Met Council is just not visible to ordinary citizens”* (Female African American focus group member). Several individuals indicated they possessed awareness of a specific regional park or trail, but did not know how to get there. For instance, one participant stated, *“I don’t know how to get there. I’m scared to get lost”* (Female Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus group member). Several participants noted confusion surrounding regional park rules served as a deterrent. A Hispanic male, relatively new to the area, captured the sentiments shared by many participants. He stated, *“yeah, people know already about it [rules, park hours], but, for example, for me, it’s all new. So those little details, for example, so that you know that you need a license to go fishing, all that information that minorities, probably most of us, we don’t really know. I think that would be really helpful [to know]”* (diverse composition focus group member). Related to activities in regional parks, several participants did not know what activities were permitted or supported. For instance, one female noted, *“the thing is that us Hispanics don’t know how to use the parks. We always go there to sit down and eat. We don’t know what activities can be done. Walking, for example”* (Hispanic focus group member). Several participants perceived regional parks to provide residents a sense of community and spoke to not knowing about events that occur within the regional parks. One participant stated, *“you never know, because you don’t see in the like newspaper or something happening in the regional park. Sometimes there will be like a picnic, a huge picnic, for the whole city, but I never know if something is happening in the park”* (Female diverse composition focus group member).

Lack of time. The second most frequently perceived visitation barrier was lack of time. If participants expanded upon their notion of a lack of time, it was either that they perceived individuals were too busy or that they were consumed with trying to meet their basic needs. For instance, one participant noted, *“you’re working, you have a family at home. We don’t have time to go to the park”* (Female African Immigrant focus group member). Another participant noted, *“the reason why many Hispanics don’t go to the parks—they are working. White people have better jobs. They have more time to go to the park”* (Male Hispanic focus group member).

Fear and safety concerns. The third most prominent perceived barrier identified was fear and safety concerns. Interestingly, the types of fears identified differed across the various focus group types (Table 7). One of the most striking differences was that Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus groups, as well as Hispanic focus groups spoke to fear of wildlife (e.g., snakes) and water quality, while African Immigrant, African American, and diverse composition focus groups cited fears related to violent crime. African American focus group participants described violent crime as getting jumped or shot, whereas African Immigrant focus group participants noted the fear of getting raped, killed or stabbed. For instance, one female stated, *“somebody can kill you, somebody can rape you”* (African Immigrant Group, Female). Other fears were also noted across the various focus groups, including getting lost, behavior of others, drowning and getting hurt.

Table 7. Fear and safety concerns by focus group type.

	African American Focus Groups	African Immigrant Focus Groups	Asian Immigrant/Asian American Focus Groups	Hispanic/ Latino/ Latina Focus Groups	Diverse Composition Focus Groups
Fears	Violent crime: get jumped, shot Ran over Accidents Behavior of others	Violent crime: rape, killing, stabbing Kids get lost Drowning Being alone Too big=lost	Snakes Bees Water-viruses Too big=lost Hunters Being alone Behavior of others (drinking)	Water-viruses Getting Lost Darkness Crime Animals People Getting hurt	Violent crime: kidnap Too big=lost Kids unsafe Strangers Crazy people Behavior of others (drinking, loitering) Animals

Lack of transportation options. The fourth most common barrier identified was a lack of transportation options. Although transportation was identified as aiding regional park visitation, it was also identified as a barrier. For instance, one female noted *“if we don’t drive, we don’t have a way to go”* (diverse composition focus group member). While transportation was perceived by some as a barrier, it was more frequently identified as a potent mechanism that made going to regional parks easy. Unexpectedly, the barrier of lack of awareness was noted 2.5 times more than transportation constraints.

Language barriers. The next most frequently noted barrier was related to language, most prominently discussed in focus groups comprised of recent immigrant learning English. For instance, one participant stated, *“I really want to go there, but it’s hard for us because of the language barrier, and we’ve never been there”* (Female Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus group member). Several participants noted that English is their second language. One participant stated the reason she perceived people did not visit regional parks was *“because most of the people have a second language”* (Female diverse composition focus group member). Another participant noted, *“if they say they’re going to provide some Spanish too...then I’m going to come smiling”* (Male diverse composition focus group member).

Weather. The sixth most common barrier that served as a deterrent to regional park visitation was weather. Several participants indicated that winter is too cold to be outside and, therefore, perceived

the weather to likely be a significant hindrance to park visitation. Other weather conditions cited included rain and heat.

Cost. Cost was also identified as a deterrent to park visitation. Cited costs associated with park visitation included entrance fees, parking fees, parking tickets, transportation and food. While cost was cited as a perceived barrier, several participants also noted the relative low cost, as compared to other leisure time activities.

Map and directional challenges. The next most frequently noted barrier was related to challenges understanding maps and lack of directions. Many participants acknowledged that they did not know how to read a map. Subsequently, they were afraid of getting lost either en route or onsite. Other participants noted the need to provide better directions. For instance, one female stated, *“even like the park itself, when you get there, is confusing”* (African American focus group member). The participant then went on to describe a recent regional park visit, wherein she drove around for over an hour looking for an area within a park.

No one to go with. The ninth most frequently identified barrier was no one to go with. Having someone to go with was seen as a mechanism to be introduced to the regional park system, as well as a reflection of an individual’s recreational preference. For instance, one woman noted that her desire to go to a park is influenced by whether she has someone to go with. She stated, *“sometimes you don’t have a friend to go, and if you go alone to the park, it’s not happy”* (Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus group member). In other instances, participants identified their comfort level of going to the regional park for the first time would be enhanced by having someone to accompany them.

Lack of desire. The last two major themes identified were noted with the same frequency. The first of the two was lack of desire. Several participants believed that some people simply don’t possess a desire to go to parks. For instance, one participant noted, *“some people—some people they do not want to go”* (Female Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus group member). Another participant noted, *“us Latino, [we] generally don’t have in us that curiosity to explore nature”* (Female Hispanic focus group member).

Cultural or religious insensitivity. The other last theme that tied lack of desire was labeled cultural or religious insensitivity/discrimination. Cultural or religious insensitivity/discrimination was quite nuanced and described in varied ways. One female participant questioned whether the regional parks befit cultural preferences. She stated, *“sometimes I wonder if people feel like the parks are culturally friendly. Like I know for me, the one thing I don’t like is that they took the noise—the noise ordinance that they passed for the parks, like the ability to have music and play music in the park...So, if I want to do a celebration at the park, I don’t feel like it’s culturally friendly for some of the things that me as a culture would like to do at that park”* (African American focus group member). Another woman noted, *“sometimes when we go to parks, we are dressed like this [wearing Hijab]. Some people when they see this dress, they may not know about it...They’re just looking all the time, so you might like—you might feel you might not have to come to this park because they’re like—they don’t even know you, you know? They might think, when they see you, they may think you are a bad person or something like that. They just keep looking at you or something like that, so you’re not feeling very comfortable”* (African Immigrant focus group member). Another woman noted constraints she faces. She said, *“we have to pray like five times a day, so we’re supposed to have a place that we can pray...Men can pray everywhere, like outside, something like that. But the women, they’re supposed to have like a little cover, maybe a small room, something like that...So if we pray five times a day, we cannot go outside because we are thinking about that time of praying”* (African Immigrant focus group).

Several participants noted prior negative experiences at regional parks. For instance, one woman noted, *“the other day we had an experience. We were sitting down there [at the park] with my family. We made it to the lake and we sat down, but there was a person with whom I think they communicate. He came over and stopped us. He said, ‘You have to stand up. You cannot stay here because it has been rented.’ Like that with verbal aggression. We got angry and began to complain. Some of us speak in Spanish, some in English. My family. But, he never said, ‘please’, ‘oh see, I have a paper’, nothing. The person who rents the parks, who is responsible for that area, should be taught to be polite with people, because sometimes people get aggressive, there are problems, then they call the police and at the end one gets kicked out”* (Hispanic focus group member).

Differences in barriers by focus group type. Only minor differences were found across the various focus group types (Table 8). Lack of awareness was identified either as the first or second most frequently cited barrier across all the focus group types. Three of the focus group types identified time constraints among the top three park visitation barriers. Two of the focus group types identified lack of transportation options as one of the top three barriers. Similarly, two of the five focus group types noted fear or safety concerns as a top barrier. Weather, cost and cultural insensitivity/discrimination were among the top three barriers with only one focus group type.

Table 8. Most prominent barriers to regional park system visitation by focus group type.

	African American Focus Groups	African Immigrant Focus Groups	Asian Immigrant/ Asian American Focus Groups	Hispanic/ Latino/ Latina Focus Groups	Diverse Composition Focus Groups
1	Lack of Awareness	Time	Lack of Awareness	Lack of Awareness	Time
2	Transportation	Lack of Awareness	Language Barriers	Time	Lack of Awareness
3	Fear/Safety Map Challenges Cultural Insensitivity/ Discrimination	Transportation	Weather	Cost	Fear/Safety

Note: More than one theme listed per row is due to a tie in frequency.

Concerns related to Regional Parks and Trails. Focus group participants were asked to share their concerns or issues related to the regional park system, if any. Five major themes were identified: 1) safety, 2) behavior of others, 3) litter/uncleanliness, 4) lack of information and 5) dog waste. Among the concerns raised, safety was noted almost five times more than any of the other concerns raised. Behavior of others was an extension of safety, but was perceived somewhat differently. Some individuals were not necessarily concerned about their individual safety, but sought to protect their family from witnessing unfavorable behavior exhibited by others. For instance, individuals smoking or drinking were viewed unfavorably. One male participant noted, *“because [we’re] different nationalities—some people, we are not the same, so they look at us, and they’re using alcohol and like to give trouble to us”* (Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus group member). Some participants had concerns related to litter, while others spoke to concerns about site cleanliness. For instance, clean restrooms, picnic tables, and trash receptacles. One participant noted *“clean is very important”* (Female African Immigrant focus group member). Lack of information was also cited as an issue, most notably among participants who did not know about the Regional Parks System or had not visited a regional park in the past. The last major theme was concern over dog waste. Participants noted seeing dog owners not clean up their dog waste, as well as concern over their children playing at parks where dog waste was present.

Suggestions to enhance Regional Parks System visitation. Focus group sessions concluded with asking what recommendations participant’s had to increase regional park visitation. Several themes emerged across all groups (Table 9). The top five major themes were: 1) increase awareness, 2) address safety, 3) enhance capacity of gathering spaces and create an ambassador program (items tied), 4) increase and diversify programming and 5) provide more events. A description of each theme is provided in detail below.

Table 9. Suggestions to enhance regional park visitation among regional park usage focus group study participants.

1	Increase Awareness
2	Address Safety
3	Enhance Capacity of Gathering Spaces *
	Create Ambassador Program*
4	Increase and Diversify Programming
5	Provide More Events

*Items tied.

Increasing awareness. Increasing awareness was the most prominent theme across all focus groups. As one female participant noted, *“I think for a lot of people, if it’s not part of your culture—I mean, if you didn’t grow up going to the park with your family, you’re not going to necessarily think about going to the park yourself and you’re not going to teach your kids to go the park either, especially if there’s no opportunity to really understand like why would I go. I’ve never gone before, my family doesn’t go, and what would I do when I get there, you know”* (African American focus group member). While increasing awareness was the most potent suggestion put forward, the information cited as most helpful was quite varied (Table 10). Across all groups, the most widely cited suggestion to create interest and enhance awareness was to provide a thorough description of both the place and activities offered. One individual suggested the information provided use the following description: *“there is a big place and there is a place to do some activities for children and places to do picnics, and some seats”* (Female diverse composition focus group member). The second most prominent suggestion to enhance awareness was to provide comprehensive directions, not necessarily in map format, given some participants faced challenges reading maps. Directions included wayfinding signs on roadways, onsite signage, and directions available in written or oral formats that could be accessed. For instance, several participants suggested providing a phone number to call to get directions in their primary language. Another primary suggestion to increase awareness was to provide a way for individuals to locate which regional park in the system has the activities and amenities they desire. Equally noted was the desire to know what is happening in the parks, including the events occurring in the parks. A three way tie occurred for the fourth most common information need cited and included: notification of rules, better understanding of what a “regional park” is and location. Several participants noted confusion surrounding park rules and suggested that more awareness of park rules should be fostered. Participants also noted the need to create a greater understanding of the Regional Parks System in general. This was particularly salient in focus groups wherein several individuals had never heard of a “regional park”. By extension, another request was focused on creating awareness of where all the regional parks and trails are located within the region. Finally, the last major theme was providing the opportunity for individuals to identify the location of parks based on the activities that they like to pursue. Some individuals perceived that people would be more prone to go to regional parks if they knew which ones were the closest to them based upon the amenities and activities they desired. It is important to note that awareness of schedules and contact information was also frequently noted as highly important. For instance, many Hispanic participants suggested placing reservation schedules at picnic shelters.

Differences in increasing awareness by focus group type. The aspects identified to increase awareness differed across the various focus group types (Table 11). Most notably, some focus

groups preferred conveying more fact based information, while others preferred rich description. For instance, African American focus group members noted it was most important to convey directions and provide information on what is happening in the regional parks. On the other hand, African Immigrant focus group members and Hispanic focus group members noted the need to provide a rich description of regional parks and an illustration of the activities and amenities available within them. Directions were also highly preferred among all focus group types. The top suggestions among Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus group members were to create awareness of what a regional park is, followed by where they are located and how to get there. Notably, only Hispanic focus group members suggested the need to increase awareness of park hours and schedules, as well as contact information among their top three most important aspects. The diverse composition focus groups most frequently identified the desire to be aware of the parks that possess activities and amenities they prefer, as well as knowing what is going on within them.

Table 10. Suggested information to increase awareness among regional park usage focus group study participants.

1	Describe: places and what you can do
2	Directions
3	Which park has what they want*
	What is going on at parks/notification of events*
4	Notification of rules*
	Better understanding of what a “Regional Park” is*
	Location*
5	Locations based on activity

* Items tied.

Table 11. Suggested information to increase awareness by focus group type.

	African American Focus Groups	African Immigrant Focus Groups	Asian Immigrant/Asian American Focus Groups	Hispanic/ Latino/ Latina Focus Groups	Diverse Composition Focus Groups
1	Directions What's going on/Events	Describe places and what you can do	What a regional park is	Describe places and what you can do	Which park has what they want
2	Which park has what they want Describe places and what you can do	Directions	Location	Locations based on activity Directions	What is going on at parks/Events
3	What a regional park is	Which park has what they want Locations based on activity What's going on	Directions	Which park has what they want Schedules Locations Contact information	Location

Note: More than one theme listed per row is due to a tie in frequency.

In terms of the preferred mechanisms to increase awareness, several were identified (Table 12). The number one mechanism identified was to disseminate information at local organizations. Local organizations cited included churches, stores, Doctor’s offices, community based organizations, minority owned businesses and libraries. Next, participants suggested translating information into

different languages. For instance, one male participant asked “*could the parks give information for people in different languages?*” (diverse composition focus group member). Third, participants suggested the use of park ambassadors or tour guides. Importantly, however, the distinction was made that the ambassadors shouldn’t just be available onsite, but rather should engage in the community to raise awareness of the Regional Parks System. Word of mouth and flyers or brochures tied as the next most frequently noted information sources. Several participants noted that they got their information from friends or family, while other participants stated they prefer to garner their information from flyers or brochures. Participants also stated that flyers or brochures should include more pictures than words. The last major themes included minority and community newspapers, as well as mailings or leaflets delivered to residences. Participants identified various newspapers, either local community newspapers or language specific newspapers. Mailings included providing information in community education publications and community bulletins. Others suggested door leaflets placed at homes throughout the metropolitan area. Interestingly, typical information sources were not mentioned by focus group participants to any great degree. For instance, TV, internet, maps and radio were each only noted twice across all focus groups.

Table 12. Most frequently noted preferred information sources and format among regional park usage focus group study participants.

1	Provide information at local organizations
2	Translate information into different languages
3	Provide park ambassadors or tour guides
4	From my friends or family—word of mouth*
	Flyers or brochures*
5	Minority or community newspaper*
	Receive mailing or leaflet at residence*

* Items tied.

Differences in preferred information sources and format by focus group type. Preferences for both information sources and format differed across the various focus group types (Table 13). African American focus group members and Hispanic focus group members identified local organizations as their top way to access information. African Immigrant focus group members and diverse composition focus groups specified the desire to have the information translated into different languages, while Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus group members preferred to hear the information first hand from a park ambassador. Friends were important among African Immigrant focus group members and Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus group members.

Table 13. Most frequently noted preferred information sources and format by focus group type.

	African American Focus Groups	African Immigrant Focus Groups	Asian Immigrant/Asian American Focus Groups	Hispanic/ Latino/ Latina Focus Groups	Diverse Composition Focus Groups
1	Local organizations	Translated into different languages	Park ambassador or tour guide	Local organizations	Translated into different languages
2	Park Ambassador or tour guide	Friends	Friends	Targeted newspaper	Local organizations
3	Flyers/Community partnerships/targeted newspaper		Translated into different languages	Flyers/ Translated into different languages	Mail or door leaflet

Address safety. The second most recurrent suggestion to enhance visitation was focused on addressing safety concerns. For example, one male participant noted, “*security is important. If we don’t feel secure in the park, we will not visit the park. And nowadays we need a lot of security, and I believe*

that the environment is pleasant if you have security, and that would make me enjoy it better” (African American focus group member). Various suggestions to enhance safety were put forward. Predominately, participants noted enhancing security presence at regional parks. For instance one participant stated, “I want to know why I don’t see too much security for all the parks” (Female diverse composition focus group member). Among some focus groups, security presence included park rangers and bike cops, while others simply denoted the presence of security officers. Other notable differences across various focus groups also emerged (Table 14). Hispanic focus groups only denoted the desire to enhance lighting to feel safer. Similarly, while diverse composition focus group members and African American group members noted lighting, they also incorporated additional requirements to feel safe. Diverse composition focus group members suggested lighting, security officers, ambassadors and people around. People around was conveyed in multiple focus groups as being important. One female noted, “if there’s not a lot of people, it’s a little bit scary. But if there’s a lot of people, it’s not scary” (diverse composition focus group member). African American focus group members also noted the desire for other people around to feel safe, as well as suggested lighting, security officers, blue light call boxes and cameras to enhance safety. African Immigrant focus group members also suggested other people around, as well as security officers and cameras. Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus group members suggested security officers, as well as providing ambassadors or guides to enhance safety perceptions.

Table 14. Safety needs by focus group type.

	African American Focus Groups	African Immigrant Focus Groups	Asian Immigrant/Asian American Focus Groups	Hispanic/ Latino/Latina Focus Groups	Diverse Composition Focus Groups
Safety Needs	Security officers* Blue light callboxes Lighting Cameras People around	Security officers Cameras People around	Security officers Ambassadors/ Guides	Lighting	Security officers Lighting Ambassadors People around

* Including bike cops and park rangers

Enhance capacity of gathering spaces. The third most notable suggestion focused on park design and onsite amenities. The desire for spaces that accommodate large group gatherings or preferred modes of recreation was noted. Several participants spoke to how they like to recreate, with a particular emphasis on recreating with multigenerational family gatherings. In this vein, participants acknowledged the need for sites that provided activities and amenities that accommodated a wide age range. For instance, a female participant noted, “we need to locate a place first and eat the food, and after, we want to walk around and some people sit down” (Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus group member). Other participants noted the desire to have amenities within close proximity to one another, such that multigenerational families could be together, yet enjoy their respective recreational activity preferences. For example, clustering development was suggested, including playgrounds, picnic areas, ball fields, walking trails, restrooms and other features.

Additionally, participants focused on the need to enhance the capacity for large group gatherings. In this vein, participants most frequently identified the need to boost the ability to accommodate larger groups at picnic areas. A common critique is that picnic shelters, typically reserved ahead of time, were the only facilities that can accommodate more than a small group of people. Given this, several participants did not feel parks provided amenities to meet their needs. For instance, one participant bluntly suggested “accommodate more than one group of people” (Male African American focus group member). Other participants suggested adding more grills, picnic tables, benches and seating to meet the needs of larger groups.

Still yet, another suggestion put forward was to incorporate the capacity to accommodate different recreational preferences. For instance, many participants identified preferences for outdoor recreational activities that are not accommodated in the regional park system, including basketball, soccer, football, baseball and tennis. Several participants suggested that providing opportunities for games would enhance visitation. For instance, one participant said, *“kids are playing basketball, they’re playing soccer. I mean, just games and stuff that will attract that demographic will be huge, because we parents now, we’re working. When we come from work, we’re tired...but most of the times, the kids, if there was a basketball or a soccer field or football, something, they will be encouraged about, ‘hey, let’s go to—let’s go play.’ And like we all know, most parents accompany their kids, so we parents go there, we will then, ‘Okay, this is something new. This is good for my child.’ That would encourage my neighborhood, and you would find you have a lot more people coming to it”* (Male African American focus group member).

Create ambassador program. Another top suggestion was to create an ambassador program to serve as a resource to potential visitors, both on- and off-site. Several participants’ description was akin to an onsite tour guide, while others reflected a desire to have ambassadors within in the community who could provide them an orientation to the parks beforehand. For instance, one female stated, *“because we don’t have experience there, we need somebody who knows”* (Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus group member). Another participant wanted someone to guide them onsite, noting *“we are like a child. We are students here. We are like a child, so we see something and we want to ask”* (Female Asian Immigrant/Asian American focus group member). Importantly, she and others stated they did not want to go to a park without someone to guide them.

A continuum of described roles for an ambassador emerged. More often, the role of the ambassador was perceived to raise awareness of the regional park system, as well as expose park resources to new and potential park visitors. Other participants suggested the need to orientate new and potential visitors to recreational activities afforded in regional parks. The orientation to recreational activities included both creating the increased understanding of existing opportunities within regional parks, as well as providing an orientation to those types of activities. For instance, one male participant suggested, *“we need a trainer, somebody who trains the people how to skate, because culturally, we don’t do that stuff”* (African Immigrant focus group member).

Increase and diversify programming. The fourth most prominent suggestion to enhance regional park visitation among focus group participants was linked to programming. A few participants spoke to programming in a generalized sense of providing things to do onsite to attract visitors. For instance one participant said, *“programming, more programming, maybe, and trying to attract groups that wouldn’t normally go out”* (Male African American focus group member). Related to attracting new park visitors, one individual noted, *“I grew up in Minnesota and we played outside all the time and we were at parks. We loved being outside. We went skiing with the kids and stuff. But if you’re not accustomed to that, there has to be a hook to get you excited to go and then you might want to continue”* (Female African American focus group member). Numerous participants spoke to programming specifically geared for families, while a few spoke to organized activities for children. Most notably, programming for both families and children tended to focus on organized play. Interestingly, only on very rare occasions did participants suggest nature-based or environmental education based programming.

Provide more events. The last major theme that emerged to enhance regional park visitation was associated with events. Events, among focus group participants, were viewed as a mechanism to introduce regional parks to non-park users. Further, events were described to contribute to community building, which was seen as essential to enhancing the perception that regional parks are a welcoming destination. One young male participant stated, *“take steps in trying to house more events at the regional park, where you gather the community together at once...to expose them to the wonders of the*

park, and also have them meet and greet other people in the community so they also know other people [are] around, where they can go back to the park and have the same experience they had that day” (African American focus group member). Notably, a few participants were careful to impart the importance of the events being hosted by the park entity, as opposed to outside entities, in an effort to maximize exposure and showcase regional park resources.

Other prominent themes that emerged to enhance visitation include: a) add or enhance playgrounds, b) bolster nature quality, c) address pet and wildlife waste and d) clean restrooms and facilities.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore regional park usage among select communities of color. A total of 16 focus groups were conducted, with a total of 263 participants from diverse racial, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The study found that participants most preferred to walk, picnic or barbeque and use playgrounds when recreating outdoors. Half of participants had previously visited a regional park. Proximity and transportation were perceived to facilitate regional park usage the most. Eleven major barriers to regional park usage were identified. The top three were lack of awareness, time and fear or safety concerns. Safety was also identified as the most prominent concern, more than five times higher than any other concern identified. Most notable suggestions to increase regional park visitation included increasing awareness and addressing safety concerns. Other suggestions were focused on design and operations, incorporating preferences toward increasing the capacity of gathering spaces, providing park ambassadors, programming and events.

In sum, the findings suggest that the largest determinants of regional park visitation include awareness, safety and activity/amenity preferences (Figure 1). Visitation, based on the findings, largely depends on whether an individual is aware of the regional parks, whether they would feel safe at the regional parks and whether or not the regional parks provides the activity and amenity mix they prefer.

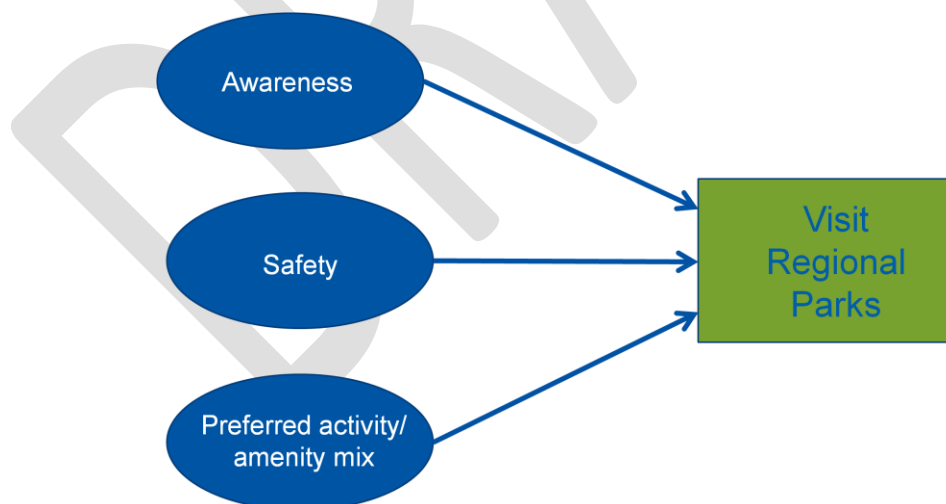


Figure 1. Major visitation determinants among regional park usage focus group study participants.

Notably, the three major determinants of park visitation were found to be important among all focus group types. However, differences did emerge across the three. For instance, the conceptualization and description of safety differed significantly across the focus group types. Therefore, it is important when addressing the three visitation determinants to consider them from a diversity perspective.

Appendix A

Focus Group Guide

Welcome:

We are going to talk about **regional parks** today (provide examples nearby). I want to know what we can do to make the parks a place people like to go. We will use the comments and suggestions you give us to improve our **Regional Parks** System. If you have any questions or don't understand something I say, you can raise your hand and stop me at any time to ask. Feel free to stop me at any point to ask any questions. I will be recording our conversation, so I can remember everything you say. We will write a report but your names won't be used.

Do you have any questions now?

I. Opening Question: Participants get acquainted and feel connected

a. Tell us your favorite outdoor activity (if any).

II. Introductory Questions—General outdoor activities

a. What kinds of outdoor activities do you like to do?

i. Follow up: When? How often? With whom?

b. What do you think is good about doing the outdoor activities?

III. Transition Questions

a. When you think about parks, what comes to mind?

IV. Regional Parks

- a. Have you been to a **regional park, trail, park preserve or special recreation feature** in the last year? (see maps; provide overview of system)
- b. What do you think are the things that make it easy to visit **regional parks**? (*Probes (if necessary): opportunities near my house, having my own equipment, having equipment available to use at a park,...*)
- c. What do you think are things that make it hard to visit **regional parks** (i.e. obstacles)? (*Probes (if necessary): expense, time, equipment, lack of interest, other interests, getting a license, transportation, lack of access, concerns ...*)
- d. Are there any other concerns or problems that come to mind when you think about visiting **regional parks** in the Twin Cities metropolitan area? (*Probes [if necessary]: crime, lack of places to go, pollution, racism...*)
- e. Why do you think people don't visit the **Regional Parks** System?

VI. Ending Questions

- a. Do you have any recommendations or suggestions to increase park visits?
 - a. Follow-up: What can the **regional parks** do to attract people from your community?
- b. What suggestions would you give to *promote* **regional parks** to people from your community?

VI. Closure

- a. You have been very helpful. If you wish, we could follow up with you by sending a brief summary of our conversation today. Would you like to receive a written summary or have me come back to talk about what I learned from all the people I talked to?
- b. If you would like to receive something in writing, could you please give us your address so that we can send/email it to you?

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