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Observing Park Environments in Nevada (OPEN)

Monica A.F. Lounsbery

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UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA LAS VEGAS

Physical Activity Policy Research Program

Department of Kinesiology and Nutrition Sciences

4505 Maryland Parkway · Box 453034 · Las Vegas NV 89154-3034

www.unlv.edu

NARRATIVE REPORT November 2011

Title of the Project: Observing Park Environments (OPEN)

Total Grant Amount: \$18,500

Park and trail environments are important locations for physical activity promotion yet, very little is known about how much these environments get used, who uses them, and how physically active people are when they are there.

These questions led to the development of the Observing Park Environments in Nevada (OPEN) project. This study was developed in partnership with the UNLV Physical Activity Policy Research Program, the City of Las Vegas Leisure Services, and the Clark County Comprehensive Planning Department.

OPEN was made possible by the generous donations of all of the collaborators and funding from the UNLV College of Education and the UNLV Lincy Institute.



Project Summary

Background: Park and trail environments are important community resources for supporting physical activity (PA), especially for low-income individuals. Our purpose was to assess park and trail use and PA in low socio-economic areas of Las Vegas Nevada.

Methods: Trained observers used the System for Observing Physical Activity and Recreation in Communities (SOPARC) to assess the use and PA of 238 activity areas in 6 parks 4 times per day for 12 days each over 3 temperature seasons. We also trained observers to use SOPARC to assess the use and PA of 4 trails 4 times a day for 12 days each over 3 temperature seasons. Focus group meetings, residential surveys, and intercept interviews with adults were also conducted to gain insight into interests, park/trail perceptions, and barriers to use.

Results: We observed 33,362 park users, including children (26%), adolescents (21%), adults (47%), and seniors (6%). More males (61%) than females were observed at all age group levels. Overall, park users were observed being sedentary (i.e., lying down, sitting, standing) 51% of the time, compared to walking and vigorous activity, 32% and 17% respectively. Males were also more likely to engage in vigorous PA (19 vs. 13%). During focus group meetings, adults identified parks as important locations for PA and for developing a sense of community. Focus group members identified that the greatest barrier to park use was lack of time, and the most preferred activity was walking. Most people learned about parks by driving around.

For trails, we observed 817 trail users, including children (13%), adolescents (16%), adults (60%), and seniors (11%). More males (63%) than females were observed at all age level groups. Overall, trail users were observed being active (i.e., walking and vigorous) 65% and 30% respectively compared to sedentary 5% of the time. Males were also more likely to engage in vigorous PA (35 vs. 22%). During focus group meetings, participants identified that trail connectivity and knowledge about trails were barriers to use.

Conclusions: In parks, females and seniors were relatively underserved. Women emphasized time challenges as primary barriers while, seniors felt unsafe being in the park with other age groups. It appears that strategies for increasing PA in parks for busy adults, especially women, should focus on creating time efficiencies. For those coming to parks to supervise (children or dogs) or to be spectators, some time inefficiencies could be addressed by the redesign of park facilities to include walking paths around the perimeters of park spaces. Strategic programming scheduling that offered programs for kids and parents in adjacent park spaces during the same frame may also help address time barriers. Strategies for increasing park use and PA among seniors should focus offering low cost, age-specific program opportunities.

Trail use is very low. We speculate this may be primarily due to the newness of the I-215 all of the trails in this study, and their lack of promotion to the general public. Cycling enthusiasts are likely to be the most informed about trails in Las Vegas and in order for trails to engender mainstream use across age levels, more community events such as farmers' markets, health fairs, or artisan booths should be planned on trails.

Outcomes

Both City and County officials remain highly engaged in OPEN. Collectively, we (City and County officials and UNLV researchers) determined that holding a community forum meeting on the results of OPEN with the involvement of key policy makers, could help lay the groundwork for actions in response to OPEN data. A key goal of the OPEN Community Forum is to identify and agree to pursue actionable steps to increase park/trail use and physical activity through strategic partnerships across stakeholder groups.

The community forum on OPEN will be held on January 25, 2012 from 10-11:30 a.m. at the 5th Street School. The forum will provide a community preface by Senator Valerie Wiener and a research preface by Dr. Thom McKenzie. Study results will be responded to by Mayor, Carolyn Goodman and by Commissioner, Susan Brager. Plans also include strategic involvement of the media and press releases to inform the public.

We expect that as a result of the OPEN Community Forum, major outcomes may be the implementation of (a) strategic park programming, (b) redesign of some park areas, and (c) strategic promotional efforts.

Effectiveness of the work in support of the mission of The Lincy Institute

Physical activity is important to the health of both children and adults and is one of the leading risk factors for mortality and morbidity. Given Lincy's interest in improving health in Southern Nevada, building the capacity of parks and trails to address health outcomes, is directly aligned with the mission of the Lincy Institute. Based on our results, we have made feasible action-based recommendations that, we believe will increase park/trail use and PA levels. OPEN results and recommendations from our findings have been translated to community stakeholders and policy makers.

Benefits to the community

Park and trail environments are important community resources for supporting physical activity (PA), especially for low-income individuals. Our purpose was to assess park/trail use and PA in low socio-economic areas of Las Vegas Nevada. OPEN provided valuable information that can be used to promote, redesign, and program OPEN spaces to better serve the public for health related purposes.

Presentations

Lounsbery, M. (October, 2011). Observing Park Environments in Nevada: Summary of findings given to the Statewide Council on Fitness and Wellness, Las Vegas.

Lounsbery, M. (2011, Invited Plenary Keynote). *Supporting active living through policy, environment, and system change*. Paper given at the 2nd Annual Washoe County Obesity Forum, Reno, NV.

Lounsbery M., McKenzie, T. L, Handzus, K., & Holt, K. (2011). *Observing park environments in Nevada*. Paper given at the annual meeting of the American Alliance for Health, Physical

Education, Recreation and Dance.

Lounsbery, M., Handzus, K., & Holt, K. (2011). *Engaging park staff in research using SOPARC*. Paper given at the annual meeting of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance. San Diego, CA.

Lounsbery, M.A. F. (2010, April/May). Observing Park Environments in Nevada: A Preliminary Report. Invited presentation given to the Nevada Legislative Committee on Health and Health Care (April 21) and to the Nevada state Council on Fitness and Wellness (May 10), Las Vegas, NV.