

EXPLORING THE QUALITY OF URBAN GREEN SPACES IN TORONTO: AN ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE EXPLORATION



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SSM 1100 Research Paper



INTRODUCTION

The wide range of ecosystem services provided through green spaces has been captured in numerous studies as being a mode of combating stress and overall mental health. In fact, some studies have revealed the importance that green spaces have had during the COVID-19 pandemic, noting how parks were increasingly utilized during the pandemic as a form of stress and anxiety relief.

Equitable access to green space, especially in urban communities, is a concern as fewer green spaces are found in low-income communities where a majority of residents are people of colour. As such, this equitable access has been categorized as an issue of environmental justice with clear linkages between a history of disinvestment in urban green spaces and structural racism.

It should be noted that the term 'urban green space' and 'parks' will both refer to "freely accessible public outdoor spaces, with significant natural or vegetative elements, that provide opportunities for leisure or recreation"

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

There are few studies that have focused on Canadian urban cities, which is where this present study aims to contribute to. This study builds on how concepts of quality, quantity and proximity are expressed in Toronto parks as factors of attractiveness, availability, and access and thereby determine if they render differences between low-socioeconomic communities and high-socioeconomic communities.

How do park characteristics compare between low and high socioeconomic Toronto neighborhoods based on metrics reflecting various aspects of park quality and access?

METHODOLOGY

The methodology for this qualitative research study was a field-based assessment of local parks. The systematic literature review provided the basis for the observational study and the features to be assessed:

- 6 Neighbourhoods in Toronto
- 12 parks assessed in total
- Low-Socioeconomic Status (N=6 parks)
- High-Socioeconomic Status (N=6 parks)

The Community Park Audit Tool (CPAT) was applied to field-based assessment of parks to observe and record metrics of park characteristics that are representative of quality



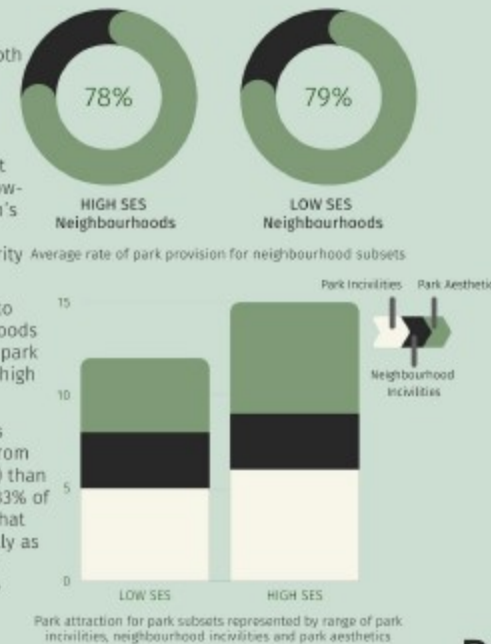
FINDINGS

Park Spatial Access

The availability of sampled parks for both high SES neighbourhoods and low SES neighbourhoods lacked significant variation and were therefore evenly available for both populations. This finding is consistent with literature that found lack of negative disparities for low-income, minority and ethnic population's quantity of and proximity to parks in comparison to high-income, non-minority populations.

A clear conclusion cannot be made as to whether parks from low SES neighborhoods present significant physical barriers to park proximity in comparison to parks from high SES neighborhoods

In difference, public transportation was found to be more prominent in parks from low SES neighbourhoods (67% of parks) than parks from high SES neighbourhoods (33% of parks). Therefore, it could be inferred that parks from high SES may not be spatially as accessible for low SES populations and therefore suggest a potential barrier to equitable park use.



DISCUSSION

As previous studies have suggested findings from this study are inclined to support the notion that high SES neighborhoods have access to parks with more amenities and activity areas than low SES neighborhoods.

One may infer that parks in low SES neighborhoods are fairing well since they had a higher proportion of community gardens, ovens and greenhouses, however, it is important to consider how these parks gained quality park resources to truly appreciate the park benefits and how it contributes to the equitable access to quality parks.

Literature on Urban Community Garden's as Spaces of Citizenship, caution that although community gardens may provide space for historically marginalized populations to develop citizen subjectivities and challenge power relations; it can also be a space for the reinforcement of pre-existing power hierarchies due to the neoliberal context

Park Quality Aspects

The quantity of activity areas reached higher maximums in parks from high SES neighbourhoods than low SES neighbourhoods which illicit further consideration for how parks that are evenly distributed could be accessed disparagingly based on structural differences- in regards to amenities and activity areas-between neighborhoods with low SES and high SES

This study also found that the range of quality ratings of park activity areas in high SES neighbourhoods were of a higher and shorter range (84%-100%) than low SES neighbourhood parks (69%-88%), with an average quality rating for both subsets at a difference of 10%.

The difference in park quality found between the two subsets would further support literature that calls for equitable amenity provision of parks to be representative of park quality.

Park Attraction

Park and amenity provision may seem spatially available, but the absence or lack of quality and safety would contradict that provision and the overall accessibility of parks. This deduction is further supported by the park aesthetic findings that demonstrated a wider range and larger amount of aesthetic features present in parks from high SES neighbourhoods in comparison to park from low SES neighbourhoods.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is essential that the city acknowledge the citizen participation of low SES communities that have advocated for quality parks as it is indicative of where and how the city is lacking in terms of equitable resource provision. This would prove to be advantageous considering the city is executing its 2019 Parkland Strategy to develop and improve park space across the city over the next decade.

This study recommends the city of Toronto engage in active consultation, research and development of their Community Garden Program to assess the weight and distribution of responsibility that grassroots community organizations are shouldering in the management of community gardens

Future research would benefit from pairing subjective and objective observations to assess park characteristics for a more well-rounded definition of quality parks

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