

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN OUR PARKS?

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Abstract: Facilities allow children and adults to adapt, improvise, create, and contribute significantly to the mental and physical well-being of the park users. Parks across the continent contain facilities designed for the enjoyment of the consumer. However, are facilities really used as designed and used to the intended level making them worth the cost of development? An observational study was performed on various urban, suburban, and rural park settings to examine the usage of facilities provided.

Facilities allow children and adults to adapt, improvise, and create, contribute significantly to the mental and physical well-being of the park users. What is the prevailing attitude if, as an example, a tennis court was used for dancing or crafts, the baseball field for bocce ball or soccer, and the playground for adult socialization? Can tennis nets be easily removed, is there a place where bocce ball can be played, are their benches in or adjacent to playgrounds that foster conversation among parents? Do park administrators condone or encourage non-traditional use of facilities?

During the summer months extensive research was conducted in Indianapolis and Bloomington Indiana area as well as in Angling Lake Ontario, a remote Native American village in the northern part of the Province. The purpose was to observe how parks were used, specifically, if the park facilities were used in a manner consistent with the purposes they were designed. Parks across the continent contain facilities designed for the enjoyment of the consumer. These facilities can include costly accommodations such as ball fields, tennis courts, basketball courts, and pools to relatively costly facilities such as picnic shelters and playgrounds. In addition, parks often contain picnic tables and benches in the open areas for purposes of relaxation. Most recreation planners and designers believe that increasing the amount of facilities will increase the enjoyment of the consumer. Are specially designed facilities, specifically aimed at a single activity, really worth the money spent to provide that leisure experience? In other words, are facilities really used as designed and used to the intended level making them worth the cost of development?

The observation areas were classified into three categories for sake of comparison. Angling Lake represents a rural park experience, Bryan Park (Bloomington), Ellenberger (Indianapolis) and Broad Ripple (Indianapolis) represent suburban Parks and three Indianapolis parks (Brookside, Christian and Riverside) represent Urban Parks. The distinction of suburban and urban was based on the number of residents in the Zip Code area of the park. Those less than 40,000 were classified as suburban and those more than

40,000 were classified as urban. In addition the urban parks represent those parks which are closer in proximity to the city center of a major metropolitan area. These parks were chosen for comparisons because they were similar in size (medium sized City Park) and contained similar facilities. Facilities, observed in the various parks, included playgrounds, picnic tables in the open areas, picnic shelters, sports fields, tennis courts, pools, jogging trails, and basketball courts.

A playground area that includes swings and other play apparatus is designed to be used for child play and exercise and thus, enhances a child's physical and mental health. Parents usually accompany their younger children to playgrounds to insure their safety. In this observation, playgrounds (with equipment such as swings and slides) were used as designed by the children under the age of seven who made up sixty-three percent (63%) of the users¹. Parents and/or guardians also used the playground area for socialization as their children were playing on the equipment. Adults generally would spend a moment socializing with friends or reading a book as their child played on the equipment provided. The social contact among adults may be as important to parents as the physical activity and play is to the child.

Data Application: the substantial number of supervising adults, particularly, in the urban and suburban parks and denotes a need by park officials to provide seating areas in the playground areas for the adults to use.

All surveyed suburban and urban parks had picnic tables that were designed for outdoor picnics (eating.) Seventy-one percent (71%) of the people in the urban areas used the picnic tables for meals while only fifty-six (56%) of the suburban table users were picnicking². The non-picnic use of the tables (defined as not involving food) included relaxation, work breaks, socializing, reading, and working outdoors. The "working outdoors" category comprised of activities such as student homework, knitting, board games and other activities where people are seeking an outdoor setting to some work that would normally be done at home.

Data Application: In the suburban area many of the picnic tables in the open could be replaced with less costly benches and provide the same usage. Picnic shelters were in high demand, especially in the urban parks, on the weekends. In addition, picnic shelters were highly used in the weekday evenings in the urban parks. The increase in demand for picnic shelters in the urban areas could be the result of

¹ There was no significant difference between people using the playground as designed and people using the playground as non-designed [$\chi^2(2, N=3)=1.56, p < .05$]

² There was a significant difference between urban and suburban usage of the picnic tables in the open space [$\chi^2(1, N=2)=10.7, p < .05$] and in picnic shelters [$\chi^2(1, N=2)=4.39, p < .05$].

cultural differences between the urban and suburban communities and should be a need that is addressed by park officials, particularly in the urban settings.

Parks included a number of baseball/softball fields. Seventy-two percent (72%) of those using the ball fields in suburban parks were playing softball or baseball while only forty-nine percent (49%) of those in the urban parks were using the field for baseball or softball³. There were a large number of people attending the ball games in the urban parks as observers and non-players. Males were dominant as players and females were dominant as spectators. There was no usage of the baseball/softball field in the rural community during the two-week period of observation.

Data Application: The observers created a substantial need for seating at the facilities, but very few of the parks had accommodations for spectators. Many spectators improvised by bringing their own lawn chairs or blankets to sit on.

Suburban and Urban parks contained a number of tennis courts. In the urban parks seventy-two percent (72%) of those near the tennis courts were playing tennis compared to ninety-seven percent (97%) in the suburban parks (the rural park had no tennis courts)⁴. The difference in usage was largely due to the urban park tennis courts being used for tournaments during a couple of the observations. The tournament situation increased the number of observers. Approximately seventy-seven percent (77%) of tennis courts users were male. There was very little non-tennis play in the tennis courts with only one observation noting a couple children playing with a ball. In the forty-eight observations there were 196 people playing tennis compared to 794 using playgrounds and 1770 using ball fields.

Data Application: The question arises whether the cost of putting in tennis courts is cost-effective. During a number of observations the tennis courts remained empty and did not appear to be economically viable.

On the other hand, swimming appeared to be a popular activity. While some of the parks included pools, the rural community used a lake for their swimming enjoyment. Seventy percent (70%) of the pool users in the suburban and rural settings used the pool for swimming while eighty-five percent (85%) of the urban pool users were swimming⁵. The

remainder of the people used the pool area for socializing, relaxing, and sunbathing and in the case of the rural community for fishing and playing. The increase in non-swimmers in the suburban area could be explained partially due to the ethnic make up of the communities (for example: sunbathing being primarily an Euro-American activity). The suburban parks were eighty-three percent (83%) Euro-American and the urban parks were seventy-seven percent (77%) African American. In the twenty-five observations at suburban parks there were 640 people using the pool area for activities other than swimming.

Data Application: the areas open to those wishing to socialize, relax, or sunbathe was inadequate at the suburban parks. The number of people using the pool area for non-swimming leisure demonstrates a considerable need for space for those wishing to relax and enjoy the pool area.

Walking and Jogging is becoming a highly desired activity in our communities. Suburban parks noted 5.12 walkers and joggers using the trails provided per observation. In the urban park there were 1.52 walkers and joggers per observation. Further study would be needed to understand the reason for the increase in popularity among suburban parks over urban parks. The reason could be a perceived sense of safety as well as cultural with half of the walkers in the urban parks being Euro-American in parks predominately used by African Americans. In the suburban parks ninety-two percent (92%) of walkers and joggers were Euro-American. In urban parks the activity seems to be more of a family social activity with fifty-seven percent (57%) being adults and the remainder being predominately children with their parents. In contrast, walking and jogging in the suburban park seemed to be an individual fitness or peer related activity with seventy-four percent (74%) of suburban users being more than twenty-one.

Data Application: Trail use is an attractive and favorite pastimes for those using the parks, especially in the suburban setting where there may be a greater sense of safety. Parks should monitor usage of the trails to determine if trails need to be expanded. There was not enough usage of trails by bicycles to warrant development of bike trails in the parks observed.

Basketball is an activity common in all parks observed. Those not using the basketball area for basketball were observers and others waiting for a chance to participate. In the suburban and urban parks ninety-three percent (93%) of users were male with only difference being ethnic background of users. The largest age group represented in the suburban parks were those between the ages of fifteen and twenty-one (79%) probably due to the number of Indiana University students who use Bryant Park. The same age group in the urban parks represented forty-five (45%) percent of users with the more than twenty-one age group representing 35 percent of users. **Data Application:** In the urban and suburban parks the courts were actively used and seem to be a positive usage of

³ There was shown to be a significant difference in the usage of ball fields between the urban and suburban areas [χ^2 (1, $N=2$) = 36.06, $p < .05$].

⁴ There was a significant difference in tennis court usage between urban and suburban parks [χ^2 (1, $N=2$) = 13.4, $p < .05$].

⁵ There was a significant difference between the urban parks and the suburban parks [χ^2 (1, $N=2$) = 54.7 $p < .05$], between the urban parks and Angling Lake [χ^2 (1, $N=2$) = 11.09 $p < .05$], but not between the suburban parks and Angling lake [χ^2

(1, $N=2$) = .412, $p < .05$] in the use of the swimming area.

recreation funds. In the Native American community there was no usage of the basketball court for basketball largely due to the activity of choice in this community being volleyball (court serves a dual purpose).

The urban parks were the only parks observed containing soccer fields. This was an interesting finding with the popularity of soccer today. However, soccer fields are located outside the observed parks in the suburban communities. In the urban parks only four percent (4%) of those using the soccer fields used them for soccer. The soccer fields at Riverside were predominately used for playing and observing rugby (92%), which was interesting as the majority of rugby players were Euro-American (88%) in a predominately African American community. The remaining four percent (4%) of those using the soccer fields at Riverside were preparing for a softball game. At Christian Park the soccer field was used for playing and observing baseball. Baseball fields are in high demand at Christian Park forcing the usage of the soccer field for baseball.

There was a strong sense of encouragement gleamed from the observations in that the facilities were appropriate and used for positive recreation opportunities. There was no 'purple recreation' (recreation of a destructive nature) observed in the observations of urban and suburban parks. The need for park officials is to occasionally assess the park facilities and to plan for changes in recreational activities. For example, if there is a growth in the number of people who enjoy socializing and sunbathing near a pool then space needs to be added or planned for in future construction. If the community that the park services is not one that shows interest in tennis then perhaps the space should be used for other activities or left as open space. In addition, if there is a trend in the decrease in boys baseball, an increase in girls softball, and an increase in the interest in soccer, perhaps the space designated for one activity needs to be redesigned for another activity. In general, these communities seem to enjoy the park and the facilities available and with some alterations there will continue to be full and complete enjoyment of the various parks observed and in other parks across the country.