

## **“A unifying force in the community”: Perceptions of a neighborhood park renovation**

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### **Abstract:**

Although the benefits of community parks are well established, evidence supporting the impact of park capital renovations is valuable for organizations seeking funding for such projects. This study assessed stakeholders’ perceived impacts as a result of a major park renovation. Separate, semi-structured focus groups were conducted with three stakeholder groups (emerging adults, parents, and older adults). Transcripts were thematically coded using a constant comparison method by multiple team members. Respondents perceived the renovations created a more inclusive and diverse atmosphere, generated social capital, and transformed the park into a “unifying force in the community.” Perceived negative impacts included increased usage by certain groups, and crowding in specific locations. This study adds to the body of evidence supporting the impacts of changes to the physical park environment on user behaviors, perceptions, and the social environment within the park and the broader community. Implications for future renovations and interventions are discussed.

**Keywords:** Parks | recreation | leisure | qualitative research methodology | social capital

### **Article:**

#### **Introduction and study purpose**

For many urban and suburban residents, community parks represent a rare opportunity to recreate in a natural or semi-natural setting, and provide a context for both formal and informal social interaction. Parks have been linked to a wide variety of positive societal outcomes including reduced youth crime (Outley, Bocarro, & Boleman, 2011; Witt & Crompton, 1996), and increased property values (Crompton, 2005). At the individual level, park use and proximity are associated with increased physical activity and other healthy behaviors (Bedimo-Rung, Mowen, & Cohen, 2005; Kaczynski & Henderson, 2007; Sallis, Floyd, Rodriguez, & Saelens, 2012), as well as more positive mental health outcomes (Sturm & Cohen, 2014). Park use and program participation have also been linked to greater overall self-rated health, an

association which has grown over time in the US (Pitas et al., 2017a). The benefits of community parks are accessible to a broad swath of the population, as they are often available to community residents at no direct cost (Godbey & Mowen, 2010).

Community parks are typically supported by tax-based general funds, with a smaller proportion of operating costs covered by sources such as user fees and other revenue sources. However, operational and capital budgets often compete directly with other community priorities and, in recent years, the amount of public funding for parks has steadily declined (Pitas, Barrett, & Mowen, in press). Parks receive among the lowest proportion of operational and capital public funding relative to other services (Barrett, Pitas, & Mowen, in press). The Great Recession of 2008–2009 has only exacerbated this issue, placing additional financial strain on local government services. Given limited resources, community decision-makers are now seeking evidence from which to evaluate the merits of investing in parks (Mowen, Hickerson, & Kaczynski, 2013).

Several studies have begun to explicitly assess outcomes realized from community park renovation projects. Pre- and post-renovation survey designs, which often include test and control parks, as well as observational data collection, have been the basis of this body of work. Results indicate that renovations generally, although not categorically, result in increased visitation and physical activity. A 2015 state-of-knowledge synthesis by Hunter and colleagues conducted a systematic review summarizing 12 park renovation studies and concluded that 44% of built environment interventions examined resulted in significantly increased physical activity and park use. Cohen and colleagues cautioned that renovations do not always result in increased use or physical activity, which is also determined by a “complex mix of factors that includes not only higher quality recreation facilities but also programming, staffing, fees, hours of operation, marketing, outreach, and perhaps a host of other human factors” (Cohen et al., 2009b; p. S257). More recent research conducted by Cohen and colleagues on city parks across the US reaffirms the role of programming and marketing in promoting physical activity and healthy behaviors among park users (Cohen et al., 2016).

Cohen and colleague’s work in Los Angeles, California (2009a, 2009b), and nationally in US city parks (2016) illustrates how complex park renovations are, and underscores the need for a more complete understanding of how park renovation projects impact various user groups. To this point, park renovation studies have largely focused on researcher-defined outcomes such as visitation levels and user physical activity. However, it is possible that park renovations result in a broader range of outcomes (e.g. social interaction, economic development). For example, Mowen and colleagues’ (2013) Allentown park visitor study documented enhanced visitor experiences, enjoyment, and perceived facility quality as a result of park renovations. As park user experiences and outcomes are individual and may differ significantly from one another, an inductive approach to data collection and analysis may add significantly to the understanding of the impacts of park renovations.

Whereas prior research emphasizes quantitative methods to evaluate park renovations, it is possible that such projects produce outcomes or meanings that may not be captured sufficiently with researcher-defined metrics. This study responds to this issue by applying qualitative

methods to explore the impact of a community park renovation project from the perspective of local stakeholders. Allowing multiple park user groups to express their attitudes, opinions, and perspective regarding a community park renovation may provide more nuanced information regarding the impact of these renovations at both the individual and community level. Such information may be used to inform future research in this area, assist park managers and advocates in garnering support for such projects, and help in the planning and implementation of future renovations.

## **Methods**

### **Study setting**

This study assessed stakeholder perceptions of capital renovations at Cedar Creek Parkway (Cedar Creek). Cedar Creek is a large (approximately 110 acres) regional park located in Allentown, Pennsylvania. The park features a variety of recreational facilities, including swimming pool, basketball courts, picnic pavilions, trails, exercise stations, gardens, ponds, and sculptures. Cedar Creek is the main location for many of Allentown's special events and annually hosts thousands of visitors in this capacity. The park is centrally located in the city and connects the east and west side through a linear design. The east and west side of the park is divided by a busy traffic arterial (Ott Street). The popularity of the park had caused the facilities and features to become degraded in the course of the past two decades. A 2007 Master Plan identified significant defects, such as insufficient sewage/electrical systems; degradation of the ponds and streambed; a lack of support facilities such as restrooms, drinking fountains, and parking; noncompliance with ADA standards; and park features and facilities that no longer met the growing and changing demands presented.

In order to address these issues, Allentown used local funding (\$2.3 million), dedicated state grant funds (\$375,000), and solicited support from local community and non-profit groups to finance a major renovation at Cedar Creek. Renovations occurred between 2009 and 2010 and included paving park trails; new fitness equipment along the trails; and new infrastructure/facilities such as foot bridges, picnic pavilions, water fountains, trash receptacles, and restrooms. Other upgrades included a formalized crosswalk connecting the east and west sides of the park, cleaning/refurbishment of sculptures and gardens, and restoration of the ponds and streams. Because of a lack of play equipment for children at Cedar Creek, a new destination playground totaling 25,000 square feet was installed. The playground was designed to be ADA accessible and included climbing features, swings, slides, and electronic games. Features such as benches, restrooms, a picnic pavilion, and water fountains were also installed. Cedar Creek remained open to visitors throughout the renovations.

The park renovation process was guided by community input at multiple points. Community and non-profit groups as well as individual citizens helped shape the master plan through a series of community meetings and by working directly with Allentown officials. A public meeting was held in the months preceding the grand opening to update residents on the renovation progress and to provide a forum for citizen concerns and questions. Cedar Creek renovations were highlighted in the agency's annual program guide, on the agency website, and through agency

social media. As construction progressed, citizen groups representing children and other persons with disabilities brought attention to the lack of inclusive play equipment and successfully lobbied for the new destination playground to be constructed according to principles of inclusive design.

**Data collection**

Focus group discussions were conducted with park users residing in Allentown, Pennsylvania, in November 2011. Focus group discussions were used for two primary reasons. First, they create a permissive group environment that provides participants with the opportunity to listen to and build off the opinions of others, and "... to comment, to explain, and to share [their] experiences and attitudes ..." (Krueger, 1994, p. 6). Second, researchers can follow up on (i.e. probe) responses to questions in order to gain further insight to the issue being discussed. The moderator asked focus group participants a series of questions regarding topics such as awareness of the renovations, perceived impacts of the renovation, perceived benefits/negatives, and motivations for using the park. Two additional researchers assisted by taking contextual notes, writing on easels, and facilitating the discussions.

To minimize bias and to capture the impacts of the park renovations on various user groups, the researchers purposively sampled and conducted separate focus group discussions with three separate stakeholder groups: emerging adults under 30 years of age, parents of school age children, and adults 55 years of age and older. Across the three focus groups, a total of 26 individuals participated. To be eligible, participants must have been aware that the park was recently renovated. This sampling approach accounted for the varying experiences and perceptions of individuals living in Allentown. Participants were recruited through invitation letters and signage posted throughout Cedar Creek Parkway. Invitation letters were sent to local universities and community groups with an interest in the local parks. Signs were posted throughout the park, specifically targeted at parents with children who were visiting the destination playground. Respondent demographic information is included in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic characteristics of focus group participants in Allentown, PA.

	<b>Emerging adults (n = 4)</b>	<b>Parents (n = 13)</b>	<b>Older adults (n = 9)</b>
Average age (years)	22.3	42.6	68.8
Average length of residence (years)	2.75	20.4	46.2
Gender			

Female	4	8	6
Male	–	5	3
Race/ethnicity			
White	4	10	9
Black	–	1	–
Hispanic or Latino	–	2	–
Education			
High School or less	2	1	6
Associate	–	3	–
BA/BS	1	5	2
Postgraduate	1	4	1

### Data analysis

Following the focus groups, data were transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using a constant comparison method (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Responses from focus group interview participants ranged in length from a few words to a half-page of comments. First, three members of the research team individually open-coded the responses to 6 of the 13 open-ended focus group questions. The independent reviews and codes were reviewed a second time by all three researchers. When the researchers reached at least 80% agreement on the codes, they discussed whether similar codes could be combined to create more inclusive themes. This level of agreement is considered to be “almost perfect” (Landis & Koch, 1977) or “excellent” (Cicchetti, 1994). Re-examining the text to define the breadth and depth of these themes comprised focused coding (Charmaz, 2002). This final codebook was used to analyze the data and produce the results discussed below.

### Findings

Data provided by focus group participants fell into three main categories: (1) inclusive and diverse, (2) social capital, and (3) perceived negative impacts of the renovations. Although a variety of questions were asked regarding the awareness, impact, benefits, and negatives of the renovations, key themes naturally developed in these three categories. The three main categories as well as sub-themes will be discussed below in this order, with the three separate stakeholder groups indicated as EA (emerging adult), PC (parents with children), and OA (older adults).

## **Inclusive and diverse**

Themes in this category involved the impact of the renovations on the diversity of users within the park. Three distinct sub-themes emerged, highlighting specific impacts: a greater diversity among user groups represented in the park, atmospheric inclusiveness for users with special needs, and physical inclusiveness for users with special needs.

### **Greater diversity among user groups**

Focus group participants identified a greater diversity among park users as a primary benefit of the renovations. Specifically, artists, family groups, caretakers with children, senior citizens, and diverse racial groups were identified as utilizing the park with greater frequency. One respondent noted that they see more “people doing yoga down there and I’ve seen more artists around (OA).” The large new playground was seen as especially influential in attracting more families and caretakers with children. One parent stated, “I go for the playground (PC),” while another participant noted that they had “never seen so many children in this park before the playground (PC).” Increased usage by families also translated into a larger group of seniors: “By having more kid friendly, it’s bringing the older people into the park because we’re discovering, hey there’s more here than we thought (PC).”

The playground was also identified as a factor in attracting diverse racial groups to the park and was unsurprisingly of particular significance to the parents with children stakeholder group. One participant spoke of how they were shocked at the racial diversity in the playground area, saying that, “you don’t see discrimination. Black, white ... that’s the awesomeness of the playground to me (PC),” while another observed that they saw “different cultures in the playground playing side by side, having fun, and enjoying the playground that you didn’t see before (PC).” Speaking of the park in general, another participant noted, “I see a lot more Latino people ... I see a lot more Spanish people in the park. Where you know five or six years ago, there was none (OA).” Referring to an increased sense of connection between different areas within the park, the different neighborhoods they serve, and the increasing diversity, one Hispanic participant said, “I want to be the first Latina on that side (PC).”

### **Atmosphere of inclusiveness for all special needs users**

Another benefit of the renovation was the increased inclusiveness of the park from an atmospheric standpoint. Multiple users identified a change in atmosphere within the park as a result of the renovations, which made it more comfortable for individuals with special needs of all kinds to use the park. This was of special significance to parents with children with special needs. One parent of an autistic child said that despite their initial misgivings, they were pleasantly surprised by what they found at the playground: “I have not felt more welcomed ... (PC).” The same parent went on to say that their “autistic son can actually play and not feel out of sorts with the other kids and he’s not being looked at differently ... (PC).” Another parent noted that for their wheelchair-using child, the playground area and the other users were

... just warm and inviting. No one was staring at him or going like that ... No one was looking. It was like regular kids was playing side by side and everything like that. And so it was just

awesome to see that and stuff ... When you have a child with disability, you want kids to know that it's okay. It's okay. And I think that's why that park helps. (PC)

#### Physical inclusiveness for all special needs users

From a physical standpoint, the accessible design of the playground was again identified as a positive change. Said one parent, "That playground was built so that our children that were in wheelchairs and were not able to play somewhere could play there ... (PC)" Beyond the playground, paving the trail area provided for more inclusivity. One older adult participant noted that the paving "opened up the park for people in wheelchairs ... senior citizens who don't have the stability (OA)." In addition, the paved loop also opened the park to "people with strollers that you wouldn't really be able to go around there (PC)."

#### **Social capital**

Themes in this category involved the impact of the renovations on the social environment within the park. Three distinct themes emerged in this category: greater cohesion and interaction among users, an atmosphere of safety, and a feeling of town unity and pride.

#### Cohesion among users

Respondents identified a greater feeling of cohesion and more interaction between users in the park as a result of the renovation. Once again, the playground was identified as a specific area of improvement, specifically for parents. One parent of a child with a disability stated that the playground helped their children to "have [a] social life, interact with other children (PC)." The same parent said that as a caretaker they also appreciated the chance to socialize with other adults at the playground, saying that usually parents of children with disabilities "can't get away. If you're the parent of one of that, you can't get a break. It's 24-27, the caregiver (PC)."

The renovated park was seen as a more conducive place to social interaction and cohesion. One emerging adult respondent noted that the park was "more of a community space that people bump into each other and interact with their neighbors and get to know people." Another stated, people talk to each other in the parks that if they were passing each other on the street, they wouldn't ... [people] mix in a peaceful, friendly and safe environment and maybe get to know each other a little better. (OA)

Another respondent felt that the park filled a niche that had been missing in the community for adult residents:

Now we're all going out to this general, specific area, a park, and we're holding conversations with our neighbors. While our children are playing with each other, that's getting us as adults to be playing with other adults even more, which I think is a very good thing ... I mean at work, I meet a lot of people, but where as an adult you need other adults. We're beyond the age where we go to bars to hang out. (PC)

#### Atmosphere of safety

Respondents felt that the renovations brought a greater feeling of safety and security to the park. A primary reason for this was an increase in utilization. Respondents felt that there was a feeling of “safety in numbers (PC)” at the new park, and that the presence of additional users discouraged anti-social or unsafe behavior. Another respondent stated that with the increased utilization, “You feel safe because you’re among a bunch of people there having a good time (PC).” A female user who had been unsure about running alone in the park prior to the renovation said:

I’ve noticed that it [renovation] attracted more people to the park, which I appreciate because like when I run, I usually run in the morning and a lot of times there were no people in the park. So sometimes I kind of felt like hmm is that safe to be in the park by yourself, but I feel safer being in the park when there are more people around. (EA)

In addition, respondents identified a more noticeable, constructive police presence in the park: “It’s nice to have them get out the car, go in the park, say hello to the kids. The kids actually get a kick out of seeing the police officer (PC).”

The renovated Cedar Creek Park was also compared favorably to other local parks by a number of respondents. Multiple respondents stated that they traveled to Cedar Creek instead of utilizing closer parks. One respondent said, “The reason I’m here is because Steven’s Park is [a] dangerous park (PC).” Another stated, “The closest park to where I live is the 14th Street Park. I don’t ever want to take my daughter there again. There’s broken glass. There’s drug bags (PC).” Perhaps because of the lack of other safe spaces to play, one parent noted: “There’s always somebody to play with and that’s a good thing. Where Lone Lane [Park], there have been times where we’ve been the only people in that park (PC).”

Further contributing to the atmosphere of safety in the park was a sense that the renovations encouraged pro-social behavior among park users. One respondent noted that they felt the renovated park

encourages good behavior ... If you have a place to go and do these kinds of things. Like a place for people to recreate, I would hope that it would diminish any criminal activity or something if people are bored. (EA)

Other pro-social behaviors such as picking up dog waste were also observed by respondents. One reason for the improved behavior was a greater sense of community ownership of and collective accountability for the newly renovated area: “I feel as if there’s a more esthetic appeal, that they’re not going to, I guess, destroy that (EA).”

#### Town unity and pride

Respondents felt that the impact of the renovations extended beyond the park to the community of Allentown as a whole, increasing “pride for Allentown (PC)” among residents. Another respondent stated, “I hope that it would help with the reputation of the city too ... a lot of people outside of the city are afraid to come into the city (PC).” Another respondent stated that they felt the renovations were “bringing a community to Allentown where many of us would be in our homes, our backyards, or being separate from each other,” while another felt that “The park has



really become a unifying force in the community (OA).” The newly renovated park was seen as a much needed community asset, and a social space that operated differently than the rest of life:

But in a park setting, it’s somehow, we’re all one and it’s really nice to see because Allentown needs unifying forces and the way it is now is going to be the way it is going to be for the foreseeable future. (OA)

### **Perceived negative impacts of the renovation**

Although respondents identified a greater number of positives, there were also perceived negative impacts of the renovation. Specific themes in this category included issues with playground safety, undesirable congregating of teenagers, and safety issues on the path.

#### **Playground safety**

Although the playground was generally acknowledged as a significant positive aspect of the renovation, respondents identified the presence of two entrances/exits to the playground as a potential safety hazard. Because of the large size of the playground, the number of children playing, and visual obstructions by playground equipment, parents were worried their children could leave without their knowing. As one respondent stated, “There’s two openings [in the fence] and they’re really large and you cannot see ... Unless I’ve got two people, I don’t know what’s going on (PC).”

#### **Undesirable congregating of teenagers**

The congregating of teenagers in the park was also alarming to some older adult respondents, many of whom identified an existential feeling of fear at their very presence. One respondent stated that the renovations had created an appealing place for teenagers: “The only downside is that now the teenagers found a place to congregate, and unfortunately it’s sometimes with the little kids (OA).” The playground was identified in particular as a place where teenagers would gather. As another respondent noted, “Before this playground and if we walked around there, you wouldn’t see kids congregating the way they do now. And I’m not saying in a good way (OA).”

#### **Safety issues on the path**

Although the increased utilization of the park as a result of the renovations was largely perceived as a positive, the newly paved path was an area of potential crowding and conflict. Organized groups were specifically mentioned as a source of crowding on the path: “Some of the organized groups who use the park can make the trail a little bit crowded because they tend to use the park in peak hours (EA).” Another respondent stated that although they appreciated the newly accessible nature of the paved path, they were uncomfortable on it: “I still don’t like walking on it partially because of bicycles. I don’t like to be run over by bicycles and so I stay off (OA).”

Another respondent supported this, stating that, “if you’re walking sometimes you have people passing you at a pretty high speed or yelling at you to get out of the way. So it can be a little chaotic (EA).”

## **Discussion and implications**

Prior park renovation studies have largely relied upon researcher-defined metrics, using quantitative analytic methods. To date, few studies have used qualitative interpretive methods to investigate these meanings as expressed by participants themselves. Such an approach recognizes the complex nature of a park renovation, allows park users to voice their opinions in their own words, and allows participants to define the impacts of a park renovation for themselves. Whereas quantitative measures provide certain information on the impacts of park renovation projects, their exclusive use paints an incomplete picture. Because parks function as settings where individuals create and define their own leisure experiences, their own words are necessary to sufficiently capture the breadth of the phenomenon.

## **Serving multiple stakeholders**

Whereas private leisure or not-for-profit leisure services may be targeted at specific populations, public parks and recreation are accountable to users and non-users alike. Because public parks and recreation depend on public dollars for a large portion of their operating budget, the opinions and input of all who pay taxes are of value, not only those who actively participate in a given service or utilize a particular facility. For that reason, this study purposively identified and sampled multiple age cohorts, representing distinct potential user groups.

Respondents in this study identified aspects of the renovation that indicate agency dedication to multiple stakeholder groups. Although the renovations were contained to a relatively small area (the park) within a larger community (the city and surrounding area), the impacts were perceived as widespread. For example, respondents identified concepts such as town pride and unity that function outside the boundaries of the park. From the perspective of respondents, the renovated park serves as a node or pole around which positive community development and change is centered. Positive changes rippled outward into the general community, with renovations to the physical park environment causing positive changes to the social environment of the community. The presence of such perceived community impacts may be of significant value to advocates arguing in favor of increased investment in these public spaces.

The perception of investment on the part of the municipality may potentially spur a similar investment on the part of park users and other community members. According to the property of inertia in physics, objects are liable to continue on in their current path, resistant to any change of direction (Newton, 1999). Like the Newtonian object, a neglected park may simply continue to be neglected, as constituents perceive a lack of investment from the agency in charge. Renovations however symbolize a renewed investment and signify a change in direction. When community members perceive that a park is important to the municipality, it becomes important to them. Referring to the newly renovated park, one respondent supported this notion, saying that, "Now I feel as if there's a more aesthetic appeal, that they're [other users] not going to, I guess, destroy that." Key to the sustained success of this and future renovations will be effectively fostering investment and accountability among a broad coalition of user and community groups. Just as a park is a community asset, its upkeep and the promotion of positive behavior within the park must be a community responsibility. To this end, collective governance,

actively engaging members of the public, the private sector, and various levels of government (Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2011) should be a focus of future renovation projects.

### **Strengthening the park's role as a third place**

Oldenburg (2001) popularized the term “third place” to refer to “public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work” (p. 16). At their core, parks seek to act as a third place in the neighborhoods and communities that they serve. Gustafson (2001) supports this notion, arguing that parks are meaningful because of the opportunities that they provide for social interaction between people. Participants in this study felt that park renovations impacted the park positively in this area, as the changes facilitated social interactions between users. A greater sense of inclusion in the renovated park further added to the third place potential. When diverse groups perceive a park to be welcoming and inclusive, there is a greater chance they will feel free to utilize it and make that place their own. In a sense, the renovation may have had the effect of changing Cedar Creek from a *space* (“a realm without meaning,” Cresswell, 2013, p. 10), to a *place* where individuals can develop emotional and functional dependencies.

The renovations impacted perceptions of safety, specifically through the increased utilization of the park that occurred. Respondents spoke of a feeling of “safety in numbers,” wherein the presence of additional users discouraged anti-social or unsafe behavior. Although crowding has long been studied in the context of outdoor recreation and has been defined as a negative assessment of visitor density (e.g. Graefe, Vaske, & Kuss, 1984; Shelby, Vaske, & Heberlein, 1989; Tarrant & English, 1996), crowding in certain situations is evaluated positively. Eroglu and Harrel (1986) refer to this phenomenon as “functional density,” the crowding that adds to a visitor's experience. In this way, community parks may function differently than outdoor recreation settings and share similarities with settings such as retail (Foxall & Goldsmith, 1994) and special recreation events (Mowen, Vogel song, & Graefe, 2003).

The perception of safety in parks has long been cited as an important factor for users, across geographic locations and cultures (Kerstetter et al., 2010). Some respondents even reported that they were using the renovated park because other local parks were perceived as unsafe. This is an example of geographic displacement, which has been employed in many studies of outdoor recreation, usually in undeveloped or wild settings (e.g. Shelby, Bregenzer, & Johnson, 1988). The theme of personal safety was especially salient to emerging adult participants. This emphasis on personal safety and the self was in contrast to parents and older adults, who were more likely to focus on the benefits to others (e.g. children with disabilities), or who else was using the park (e.g. groups of teenagers).

### **Bridging and linking in the park**

A significant body of research has sought to test the connection between social capital and individual and community health outcomes (e.g. Carpiano, 2006; Poortinga, 2012; Wakefield & Poland, 2005). There has been significant interest in the concept in terms of its potential to promote positive health outcomes, partially owing to the popular work of sociologist Robert Putnam (2000). Putnam puts forth the idea that declining social capital in the US can be traced to

a number of cultural phenomena, and has had distinct negative impacts on our society as a whole. Evidence supporting the contributions of social capital to health outcomes since that time has been mixed, leading to a more nuanced view of the role of social capital. A consistent theme that has emerged is that social capital must be considered as a multifaceted concept, and that while some of the various aspects of social capital may be beneficial to health, others may have a negligible, or even negative outcome (e.g. Carpiano, 2006; Moore, Daniel, Gauvin, & Dubé, 2009).

Past research in a park-specific setting has supported the idea that park-based social capital is a measurable feature of the park environment (Broyles, Mowen, Theall, Gustat, & Rung, 2011), and that parks may contribute to social interaction in public spaces (Gibson & Canfield, 2016). In their 2011 study, Broyles and colleagues found that in parks with higher levels of social capital, visitation and physical activity were greater. Parks that had greater than the mean level of social capital had greater than 3.5 times more park users observed and yielded more than four times the level of physical activity. The present study supports the conclusions reached by Broyles and colleagues that the physical park environment plays a role in shaping the social environment within a park and Gibson and Canfield's findings that parks foster community interaction. Increases in social capital were noted in terms of perceived safety, an atmosphere of inclusion, social support, and social interactions between diverse groups. The fact residents reported an increase in positive social capital within the park as a result of the renovations may indicate that not only is the park likely to precipitate healthy physical activity, but it may also foster a healthy social environment.

Many respondents identified the impact of the renovations on user diversity as a major benefit. Because of the renovations, users such as artists, family groups, children, older adults, and different racial groups were identified as visiting the park in greater numbers and with greater frequency. Increasing diversity among users in such a public place may be identified as a positive because of the potential for incidental social contact and the benefits that accrue from those contacts. *Bridging* social capital is conceptualized as developing between dissimilar people at the same level of the social hierarchy, while *linking* social capital connects persons across different levels of the social hierarchy (Putnam, 2000; Szreter & Woolcock, 2004).

The diversity fostered by bridging and linking social capital has been associated with a number of positive outcomes. Erickson (2003) found that those with more diverse social networks are healthier emotionally than their peers with more homogeneous networks. Others have argued for the importance of such diverse relationships with members of different groups in helping individuals integrate into society (Granovetter, 1973). Szreter and Woolcock (2004) also point to the role of bridging social capital in promoting community solidarity, respect, and understanding. The comments of respondents in the present study supported this notion, with their emphasis on how diversity within the park has led to "different cultures in the playground playing side by side," as well as an atmosphere of inclusion and respect among park users. Without the physical renovation to the park, such interactions may never have taken place, and the benefits accrued may have remained unrealized. Specific aspects of the renovation (e.g. the playground) literally

brought different groups together physically and facilitated the creation of bridging social capital.

Despite the theorized connection between bridging and linking social capital and health, the evidence is still mixed, with some research finding support for the benefits of such relationships (e.g. Kim, Subramanian, & Kawachi, 2006), and others reporting no benefits (Poortinga, 2012). Just as park renovations are influenced by a number of confounding variables, the benefits of social capital may to some degree be contingent upon outside conditions and factors. As the nature of these potential connections is clarified through ongoing research, renovations must focus on the potential of parks to facilitate positive social outcomes, while minimizing any potential negatives.

### **Bonding in the park**

Respondents also identified aspects of *bonding* social capital within the park, and identified it as a potential negative outcome of the renovation. In contrast to the heterogeneity promoted by bridging and linking social capital, bonding social capital involves the formation of relationships between similar persons (Putnam, 2000). Although bonding social capital may be viewed positively in its capacity to create strong ties between individuals, there is also an element of risk associated with such relationships. For example, McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook (2001) argue that homophily, the tendency for people to bond and associate with similar people, can restrict a person's view of the world. Homogenous and tight knit social networks may limit member's ability to receive new and novel information from outside the group, and also reinforce dominant social norms present within the group (Granovetter, 1973).

A few participants in the current study pointed to the congregation of teenagers in the park as a negative outcome of the renovation. For these individuals, all older adults, the concentrated presence of groups of teenagers was perceived as threatening. Certain evidence suggests that tight neighborhood social networks may lead to unhealthy outcomes when negative social norms are present and dominant (Friedrichs & Blasius, 2003). Other research suggests that both the outward looking relationships of bridging social capital, as well as the more inward looking relationships of bonding capital are necessary components in promoting individual and community wellbeing (Szreter & Woolcock, 2004). Instead of communicating between groups and forming intergenerational relationships (i.e. bridging and linking social capital), the older adults and teenagers created strong intergroup ties, forming homogenous groups of like individuals (i.e. bonding social capital).

This may illustrate a shortcoming of this phase of the renovation. In this instance, the renovation did not successfully foster intergenerational bridging/linking between the two groups. Not only did these respondents report a gap between themselves (older adults) and the teens, they also identified a gap between children using the playground and teenagers ("The only downside is that now the teenagers found a place to congregate, and unfortunately it's sometimes with the little kids"). Instead of seeing the interaction between the teenagers and the children as a positive instance of intergenerational bridging, these respondents felt threatened by this occurrence. In

this instance it would appear that the increased bonding among the teenagers limited the ability for the older adult respondents to accept them as a legitimate, positive presence in the park.

Whereas the playground brought together children with disabilities and able-bodied children, the overall renovation appears to have had less success bridging intergenerational gaps. The results appear to suggest that the needs of teenagers may not have been adequately addressed in this phase of the renovation. It is possible that physical renovations are not sufficient to effectively and equitably serve all ages and user groups and to facilitate positive intergenerational bridging. Special events, community outreach, or ongoing and purposive programming may be necessary to facilitate these particular relationships. This supports the idea that to be considered truly comprehensive, park renovations must take into account “programming, staffing, fees, hours of operation, marketing, outreach, and perhaps a host of other human factors” (Cohen et al., 2009b, p. S257).

### **Concluding remarks and future directions**

In the wake of the Great Recession and the subsequent ongoing recovery, local government agencies such as parks and recreation are experiencing increased pressure to deliver services with fewer relative resources. Because of the significant capital outlay they require, large-scale park renovations may receive additional scrutiny from agency managers and municipal decision-makers. For this reason, evidence to support the benefits of such renovations is now more critical than ever. This study strengthens the evidence that park renovations may impact individuals and the communities in which they live. Further, it adds to this growing body of literature using qualitative methods, an approach that has not been frequently applied in such analyses. The results provide further evidence for the complex nature of such renovations, which may not be sufficiently captured without allowing participants to respond in their own words.

Whereas past research has focused largely on physical activity and visitation, this study provides evidence that park renovations can alter and contribute to the social environment and atmosphere within a park, as well as in the broader community. Respondents highlighted positive changes in the atmosphere of the park brought about by alterations to the physical environment. Adding elements such as an accessible destination playground and paved loop provided opportunities for a diverse set of users and contributed to a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere. Such inclusive design facilitated greater usage by a diverse range of community groups, contributing to social capital generation. The increased usage also helped create an atmosphere and perception of safety, critical elements in creating popular and successful public spaces. For park managers who wish to serve their constituents faithfully, fostering an inclusive, welcoming, and safe atmosphere is of the utmost concern.

Future park renovation evaluations may be strengthened through the use of a mixed-methods design utilizing both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Such an approach may be the most appropriate and comprehensive means of evaluating park renovations, as the impacts may be best assessed through a variety of tools. A comprehensive set of metrics for evaluating park renovations will better capture the impacts of these projects. With potential impacts in areas as varied as physical activity, mental wellbeing, environmental health, and chronic disease

prevention, assessment techniques must be equally diverse. Longitudinal analysis, although difficult and resource intensive, would also strengthen future park evaluations. Understanding the long-term impacts of park renovations may provide evidence to support maintenance and ongoing operations, which are critical to the consistent delivery of park and recreation services. In the face of decreasing public funding support for parks and recreation (Barrett et al., in press; Pitas et al., in press), any and all evidence supporting the contributions of parks and recreation will become increasingly necessary to decision-makers, practitioners, advocates, and researchers.

Researchers should also make efforts to encourage a diverse respondent pool. Children, adolescents, and emerging adults (as was the case in this study) may represent particularly under-represented groups in park renovation studies. Purposively incorporating their perspectives may provide unique insight into the renovation process and the effects it may have. The results of this study indicate that teenagers in particular were underserved in the renovation process, and that additional emphasis must be placed on bridging intergenerational gaps. Future research must consider the impact of similar renovation projects on issues of access and social and economic equity. This study also illustrates the need to explicitly include persons with disabilities in the data collection process. Although many respondents spoke specifically about the benefits of greater inclusion precipitated by this renovation, persons with disabilities were not included as a distinct user group in the focus group process. For parks to realize their potential in addressing issues of social justice, such purposive sampling will be necessary.

### **Disclosure statement**

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