

ADOLESCENT MATTERS

Issues Focus



SPRING 2008



BALTIMORE CITY'S PARKS AND RECREATION CENTERS: AN UNDERUTILIZED RESOURCE FOR URBAN TEENS

Baltimore City's system of more than 300 city parks and 45 recreation centers offers urban youth 6,000 acres of green space and plentiful ways to exercise their bodies and minds.

The opportunities for physical activity found at parks and recreation centers are more important than ever. Obesity rates in the city are rising, especially among adolescents. Eighteen percent are overweight, according to the 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey. Green spaces may help young people think more clearly and cope more effectively with life's stresses.

Baltimore City youth are not using indoor and outdoor public spaces for physical activity as much as they could. Only 35 percent of adolescent girls in the BALTS study report they frequent recreation centers, as opposed to 52 percent of boys. Park usage is 54 percent for the girls and 66 percent for the boys surveyed.

The BALTS study of 350 high school students in Baltimore documented what draws teens to Baltimore's parks and recreation centers and what drives them away.

ABOUT THIS STUDY

Material for this Issues Focus comes from a survey of 350 youth ages 14 to 18 from two Baltimore City public high schools, 48 in-depth interviews with these youth, and observations of recreational facilities. The study, conducted by Amy Vastine Ries, was part of the Baltimore Active Living Teens Study (BALTS), led by Carolyn Voorhees of the University of Maryland.

"There's a lot of glass. There's trash and needles and things. You have to have somebody clean up and walk the entire field before you can do anything. It's really more trouble than it's worth," —*Young man, 15*

TEENS SAY PARKS ARE NOT SAFE, PRETTY, OR CLEAN

	% agree
Parks are not safe.*	38
There are unsafe people at parks.	49
Parks are not pretty.*	38
Parks are not clean.*	50
Parks have the facilities that I like to use.	45
Parks are poorly maintained.	45
Parks get a lot of use*	44

*Item has been reversed



ALMOST HALF OF TEENS HAVE USED PUBLIC RECREATION CENTERS

	% agree
I use recreation centers for physical activity.	42
Recreation centers are open when I want to use them.	40
It is too expensive to use recreation centers.	15
Recreation centers have facilities I like to use.	60

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FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS



Photo by Sol One (2nd photo from left)

1. Finding: Young men seek camaraderie and competition with other young men at parks and recreation centers.

Recommendation: Expand recreation league programs and facilities (workout rooms with weight-lifting equipment, multiple basketball courts) to provide safe and constructive opportunities for healthy rivalry and companionship among adolescent males.

2. Finding: Young women are less likely than young men to use recreational facilities.

Recommendation: Ways to attract adolescent girls include indoor tracks and basketball courts, gyms with exercise machines, and unsecluded walking paths. “I’ve never been to a rec center that had a workout center. That’s something we would be interested in.”—Young woman, age 17

3. Finding: Teens perceive facilities and organized activities as catering to young children. “When you’re tired on the slide, you go to the swings. You get tired on the swings, you do the little monkey bars. But when you get tired of that, what do you do? You’re just there!”—Young woman, age 16

Recommendation: Offer affordable field trips, swimming pools, tennis courts, open fields, tracks, basketball courts, and low cost activities and programs.

4. Finding: Many parks are not viewed as safe. This is especially true for girls, who fear sexual assault in parks. Both young men and women say they worry about encountering gangs and drugs. “The park I was talking about...there’s a lot of drug activity. You have to make sure you’re careful about where you go.”—Young man, age 15

Recommendation: Increase safety through community watch efforts, beefed up security, and ridding parks of drug dealers and gang activity. Make teens feel secure and protected with facilities that are well-regulated and do not tolerate drugs, alcohol, or fights.

5. Finding: Trash, broken equipment, dirty bathrooms and public areas, and busted outdoor lights deter adolescents. “There’s a lot of glass. There’s trash and needles and things. You have to have somebody clean up and walk the entire field before you can do anything. It’s really more trouble than it’s worth.”—Young man, age 15

Recommendation: Upgrade maintenance of indoor and outdoor facilities and improve aesthetics through community clean-up projects. Ensure that bathrooms and water fountains are clean and in good working order.

6. Finding: Adolescents feel safer and more comfortable at parks and recreation centers that are familiar to them, and where they know the staff and fellow patrons.

Recommendation: Increase familiarity through open houses and encourage trusted adults and family members to accompany adolescents to the facility. Train staff on how to treat adolescents with care and respect. Increase visibility with well-marked signs and maps to parks and recreation centers.

7. Finding: Early-closing facilities (8 p.m. versus 10 p.m.) are a deterrent for older adolescents. Park use is also limited because facilities often lack lights and close at dusk.

Recommendation: Maintain flexible operating times so adolescents who are on school sports teams and those with other constraints can frequent public facilities. Install lights to increase park safety and usage.

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