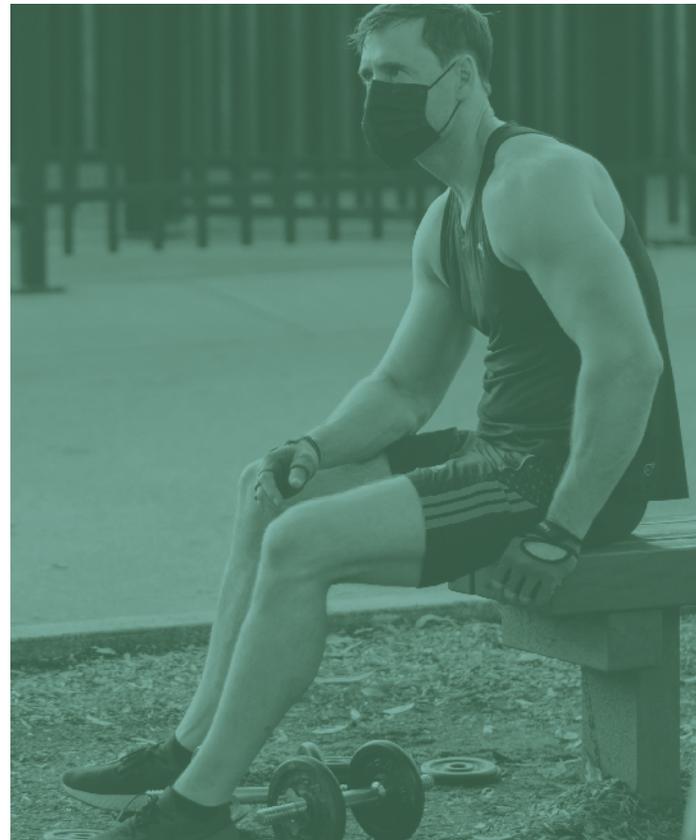


PUBLIC SPACE EVALUATION



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



OCTOBER 2020



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Our parks, trails, libraries, community centers, and playgrounds offer opportunities for making social connections and exercising free speech in our communities. They can also increase economic activity, lower temperatures, and enhance biodiversity. These public spaces provide room for physical activity, offer health programming, and provide shelter during storms or extreme heat events. Because of these overwhelmingly positive benefits, cities are increasingly prioritizing equity in their public space initiatives to ensure that all communities can have access to and make use of these spaces.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, larger numbers of people are relying on outdoor urban public spaces to bolster their physical, mental, and emotional health. Limited ability to travel during the pandemic has increased the need for high-quality public spaces in every urban neighborhood. The pandemic has also highlighted the benefits that are taken away due to limited resources for opening public pools during the summer or continuing library services when library buildings must remain closed. There is a serious need to better understand if our public spaces are adequately serving all urban communities and how changes in resources will impact who receives the benefits of public spaces.

The William Penn Foundation commissioned this report to further understand the scope, opportunities, and limitations of existing frameworks and methods used to evaluate urban public spaces. This report investigates whether commonly used evaluation frameworks address the many goals we have for these

important urban spaces. This synthesis is a companion report to the January 2020 report, *The Benefits and Costs of Urban Public Spaces*, commissioned by the William Penn Foundation, and follows a similar approach. We used a broad and multi-dimensional framework for public spaces that included spaces designed to be used by the public (e.g. parks, trails), natural public spaces (e.g. forests), public spaces that are accessed by the public as part of their daily transportation (e.g. streets), privately owned but publicly accessible spaces, and undefined spaces (e.g. vacant land). Our report synthesized prominent research on urban public space evaluation from multiple fields, focusing on American cities from 1990 to the present. We partnered with the Schuylkill Center to include a practitioner perspective on evaluation.

WHAT ARE THE KEY TAKE-AWAYS ABOUT URBAN PUBLIC SPACE EVALUATION?

Key Finding #1

Communities, practitioners, and policymakers hope their public spaces will provide many different types of benefits, yet public space evaluation tools have been honed to address specific, high-priority needs over time, such as improving literacy outcomes or increasing physical activity. There is a need for comprehensive — yet flexible — evaluation tools that capture the full value of public spaces, including the social, economic, health, and environmental benefits that they provide.

Key Finding #2

Basic statistics — like the numbers of public libraries or proximity to parks — are inadequate measures of the value of public spaces. Contextualizing this type of quantitative data with personal accounts or lived experiences of these numbers will provide a more accurate assessment of the impacts public spaces have on communities. Qualitative approaches may provide a better assessment of certain types of public space characteristics, such as quality of park infrastructure, but current business models rely heavily on quantitative evidence. There have been efforts to develop methods to quantify the contributions of public spaces — such as economic valuations of library services or the specific public health benefits of physical activity conducted in parks — and this information may be used to advocate for resources.

Key Finding #3

New directions in public space evaluation include frameworks that engage diverse users of parks, playgrounds, trails, and libraries; new technologies for capturing different aspects of public space; and new ways to engage the public in evaluation. These new directions hold promise for improving available data on public spaces to provide more timely and comprehensive information to managers and practitioners. These new directions may also provide avenues for the development of a more comprehensive assessment of the value of public spaces for urban neighborhoods that will help cities and communities advocate for their local spaces.

WHAT ARE THE KEY KNOWLEDGE GAPS IN PUBLIC SPACE EVALUATION?

Key Gap #1

There are few simple self-report measures to assess a public space's economic, health, or social benefits or costs. Such measures would provide communities with data and information on their local public spaces to show the value of these spaces and advocate for resources. There have been several recent efforts to engage the public in park evaluation, but these efforts require further development to advance a simple, self-report tool that can provide the same type of validity and reliability as research tools and can address the concerns of the public intended to use them. Certain technological innovations allow community members to engage in evaluations, and these technologies create opportunities for including the public evaluation efforts. However, many of these tools have a specific application, such as park access, and are primarily initiatives led by researchers or practitioners.

Key Gap #2

Additionally, most evaluation frameworks only focus on activities that occur within their physical spaces. Most urban public space evaluation research focuses on specific types of activities (e.g. physical activity) in specific types of public spaces — primarily parks and libraries. These audits target activities that are conducted within the boundaries of public spaces. Given the potential for far-reaching impacts of parks, libraries, playgrounds, and recreation



centers, there is also a need for frameworks that address how public spaces impact their neighborhoods over time. A broader framework would also reveal how public spaces may help cities address a suite of goals that may include economic development, public health, and climate resilience.

Key Gap #3

There is little research on practitioner experiences of conducting park assessments or how the results of evaluation activities are used to guide future decisions about park development. The evaluation literature synthesized for this study addressed the development and performance of evaluation tools, yet these tools require ongoing customization and adaptations in the field. Further research on the implementation of evaluations and how they are being used by different practitioners and community members will provide a more complete portrait on how well different evaluation frameworks function in different contexts and may uncover innovative and original ways that evaluations are implemented by different users.