

Steinhardt researchers create method for measuring park use

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Who visits city parks and when they are used are questions that have presented methodological challenges to researchers seeking to gauge the role these spaces play in urban life.

Now, researchers at NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and

Human Development have created a way to address these matters, which may provide a model for enhancing our understanding the significance of a resource that helps define New York City.

Their work appears in "Understanding Playground Utilization," a research brief conducted with New Yorkers for Parks, a non-profit organization that commissioned the study. The study, which originally appeared in the Journal of Community Health, may be downloaded [here](#).

"With tight budgets a near-certainty for the foreseeable future, we must ensure that we get the most out of the Parks Department's budget by allocating its resources as wisely as possible—and this can only be done if we understand how, where, and when New Yorkers use their open spaces," wrote Holly Leicht, executive director of New Yorkers for Parks, in the study's introduction.

The research team, led by Diana Silver, an assistant professor in NYU Steinhardt's Department of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health, examined use of 10 small parks and [playgrounds](#)—as small as 1/2 of an acre and no bigger than 1.5 acres. Their sample included two parks and/or playgrounds in each of the city's five boroughs.

The researchers, who also included Steinhardt doctoral student Maggie Giorgio and Tod Mijanovich, a research professor in NYU Steinhardt's Department of Humanities and Social Sciences in the Professions, observed park usage on one week day and on one weekend day during each of the four seasons in 2010-2011. The team also interviewed a sample (1,627) of observed adult park goers.

Their results showed that New York City playgrounds are heavily utilized—during the studied period, the research staff counted 37,412 users in the 10 playgrounds—approximately 53 percent of whom were children. Not surprisingly heaviest usage was in the spring: 47 percent of

all playground users did so during this season while only 2 percent went in the winter.

The results also pointed to the critical role these spaces play in the lives of lower-income households: Adults from households earning \$20,000 or less per year were more than twice as likely to report playground use than were those earning more than \$80,000 per year.

In addition, the researchers found differences in park usage between whites and other racial and ethnic groups. For instance, after controlling for season, playground location, and other variables, Blacks, Hispanics, and those identifying as Asian or "other" had higher odds of reporting that their local playground was the "main place" their child played, compared to whites.

"Measuring utilization of parks and playgrounds throughout the city is an important part of managing these public resources," said Silver. "This study demonstrates that it's possible to do this, and that such information could be used as part of performance benchmarks for the Parks Department and other agencies that manage open space. Asking users what concerns or issues they have with safety, maintenance, and programming as you measure utilization also gives the City vital information about how these resources can be improved."

Provided by New York University

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