

Denver's inequities in park access traced to segregation, funding policies

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Current inequities in access to Denver's parks among minorities and low-income residents are the legacies of segregationist land-use and housing policies, as well as funding mechanisms that prioritized investment in wealthy white neighborhoods, according to a new study led by University of Illinois recreation, sport and tourism professor Alessandro Rigolon. Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

Current inequities in access to Denver's parks that are found among the city's minorities and low-income residents are the legacy of exclusionary local and state zoning codes, and funding policies that favored investment in wealthy neighborhoods, a new study found.

Although these disparities have declined over time, these improvements were driven primarily by gentrification, with ethnic minorities' relocating into suburban areas with greater [park](#) acreage as whites returned to the urban core, rather than [city](#) officials' efforts to promote equity, said lead author Alessandro Rigolon, a professor of recreation, sport and tourism at the University of Illinois.

To determine why Denver parks don't adequately serve all city residents, Rigolon and co-author Jeremy Nemeth of the University of Colorado

conducted a comprehensive case study of the city's practices for establishing and funding its [urban parks](#) from 1902, when both the city and county of Denver were founded, through 2015. Their study appears in the *Journal of Education Planning and Research*.

The researchers examined both public and private initiatives associated with Denver parks, analyzed spatial data on the locations of the city's parks and parkways, and reviewed current and archival land use, park planning, funding and housing policies.

Rigolon and Nemeth also interviewed numerous current or retired park planners, several Denver historians and staff members of nonprofit organizations who work on green space issues in the area.

Rigolon said that much of Denver's well-regarded system of parks and parkways—ranked 20th among the 100 largest cities in the U.S. - was founded through early 20th century programs such as the City Beautiful movement.

Planners told the researchers that a pattern of inequitable distribution of city parks originated with the funding system that was implemented during the city's early years. Under that system, funding for the installation or improvement of parks and parkways was allocated to the wealthiest districts that collected the greatest property tax revenue, East Denver and South Denver.

These upscale, mostly white districts also benefited disproportionately from land donations by real estate developers, who often gifted park acreage to the city to enhance their housing developments' prestige and appeal to potential buyers.

But as with many U.S. cities, Rigolon said, affordability and segregationist policies such as exclusionary zoning regulations and restrictive homeowners association covenants prevented

many ethnic minorities from living in these areas.

"Our historical analysis shows that although Denver has moved past an era of overtly discriminatory policies or race-based redlining, the policies, plans and practices that were implemented by previous generations continue to impact ethnic minorities' and low-income residents' access to urban parks decades later," Rigolon said.

Establishing new parks in areas accessible to low-income people of color became even more difficult after World War II, the researchers wrote, when "white flight" to the Denver suburbs decreased property tax revenues and the parks department's budget shriveled after an administrative reorganization, both of which promoted disinvestment in the central city.

Exclusionary housing regulations in the city's 1925 housing regulations persisted when the codes were updated in 1956, a historian told the researchers.

Likewise, the city's R-0 district ordinance, which was adopted in 1956 and lasted until 1989, limited construction in upscale neighborhoods to single-family homes on spacious lots, and "prohibited unrelated people from 'living in sin'" to prevent unwanted people from residing in these areas.

Moreover, Colorado's adoption of the Poundstone Amendment to the state constitution in 1974 thwarted Denver's ability to establish large parks beyond the ones that already existed in affluent areas. The amendment, which was prompted by white suburban residents' opposition to racial integration of their schools, prevented city officials from annexing land from a nearby county unless a majority of that county's residents voted in favor of it, the researchers wrote.

"It's really hard to overturn the legacy of segregation," Rigolon said. "The racist politics that shaped policies during a city's formative years still determine who gets to live where. Neighborhoods are set in stone, and historical-preservation ordinances limit the kinds of changes that can be made to properties."

The master-planned "New Urbanist" communities

established in Denver over the last 20 years rarely included affordable housing, and many of the parks in these wealthier areas were privately owned and de facto inaccessible to residents of other neighborhoods, according to the study. Even when well-meaning park planners strove to make positive changes, they said their efforts were constrained by political systems that prioritized economic growth over social equity.

To improve park access for disadvantaged residents, the authors suggested that Denver's park planners work with equity-oriented nonprofits; capitalize on publicly owned, unused land such as large streets in residential neighborhoods; and partner with other departments such as transportation and public works that have reliable sources of public funding.

More information: Alessandro Rigolon et al, What Shapes Uneven Access to Urban Amenities? Thick Injustice and the Legacy of Racial Discrimination in Denver's Parks, *Journal of Planning Education and Research* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0739456X18789251](https://doi.org/10.1177/0739456X18789251)

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