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Many studies show positive associations between parks/green space and physical activity, and consequently, physical and mental health. But these benefits are not provided equally to all. So how do innovative cities such as Sacramento address systemic environmental and social injustice in their park systems?

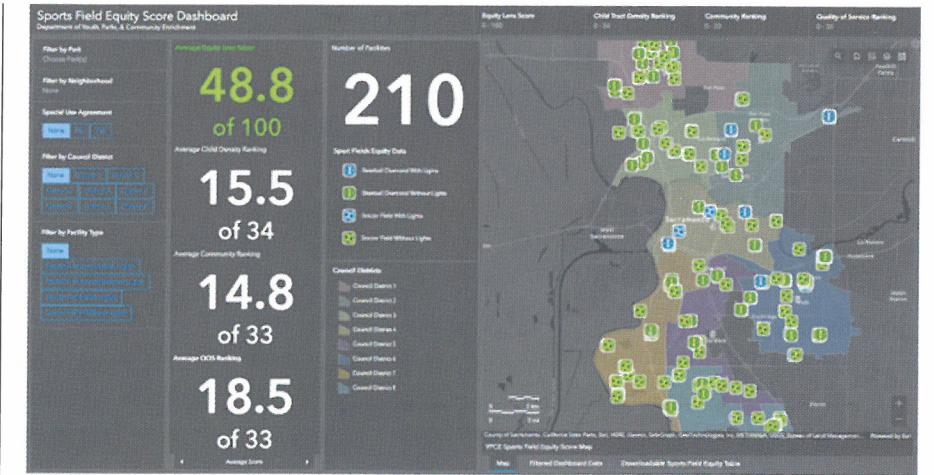
In *Parks and Recreation in Under-served Areas: A Public Health Perspective*, the National Recreation and Park Association reported that “disparities in park distribution and park access exist across our communities, particularly in neighborhoods that largely consist of low-income and racial/ethnic populations” (NRPA, n.d.). A lack of economic resources, racism in park spaces, and redlining practices are some of the reasons Black and Brown communities have had limited access to parks and other recreation facilities (Cohen et al., 2022).

The City of Sacramento is aware of inequities in their own park system, and City leaders have committed to ensuring that all residents have access to quality parks and facilities. Sacramento is California’s fastest growing city, outpacing San Francisco by 150% according to recent Census figures. Remarkably, nearly 70% of its residents identify as people of color. Diversity, median income, and the percentage of children and youth all vary dramatically across the city—as do the quality, amount, size, and types of parks and facilities.

The City is updating its parks system plan (Parks Plan 2040) and General Plan to be adopted later in 2023, and equity is at the forefront of both plans. YPCE’s Parks Plan 2040 maps vulnerable populations, racial and ethnic diversity, high density areas, and crime to understand the implications for park and facility access. Both plans provide a robust framework of policies to support equity and promote equitable decision-making. While developing these plans, the Department recognized that it needed a tool to measure inequities and evaluate investment needs for facility improvements.

The Sports Equity Dashboard

YPCE is piloting a data collection tool to help allocate resources to under-resourced and under-served communities. Its development was sparked by community concerns over the lack of access to sports fields in lower-income communities, especially after dark. YPCE staff collaborated across divisions (including Park Planning, Park Maintenance, GIS, and



Sacramento’s Sports Equity Dashboard

Reservations) to compile sourced and custom data into an ArcGIS tool that could be used to analyze and compare sports fields.

YPCE identified four data sets or factors that were used to calculate an “equity score” for each of the City’s 210 sports fields:

Quality of Service (QOS): This score evaluates the condition of each sports field based on the level of maintenance and available amenities for field users. Additional points are given to fields that have more amenities, such as parking lots, restrooms, and field lighting.

Child-Density Ranking: This score indicates the population density of children (ages 18 and under) in the census tract where the field is located.

Community Ranking: This score applies CalEnviroScreen (CES) 4.0 data to identify communities that are disproportionately disadvantaged, based on socioeconomic population characteristics and environmental pollution.

Sports Use Agreements: Sports fields that receive extra field preparation and maintenance through volunteer use agreements are awarded additional points.

Together these metrics are captured in a Sports Field Equity Dashboard that identifies disparities in Sacramento’s sports fields; creates a mapping tool to help staff better understand the overall

distribution of sports fields in relation to under-resourced and youth communities; and assigns an “equity score” to help prioritize funding and other resource allocation to facilities with the greatest potential to serve these communities. This innovative tool combines technology with community needs to prioritize field maintenance, improvements, and enhancements such as added field lighting, and field reservation allocations to under-resourced communities.

“The Sports Equity Dashboard is anticipated to be a real gamechanger for YPCE,” noted Jackie Beecham, YPCE’s Director. “It gives us the data and justification we need to advocate for increased funding and investment in sports fields to benefit youth across the city that need it the most. This is an important step in providing equitable healthy recreation opportunities for all our residents.”

A Tale of Two Parks

Across the park system the average “equity” score for sports fields is 48.8 out of 100. Fields with a lower equity score are fields that require more investment. A comparison of sports fields in two parks illustrates how the dashboard can support future decision-making.

Regency Park is a community park in North Natomas, a Council district with a resident-approved tax that supports higher quality recreation facilities and programs. This park has three sports fields,

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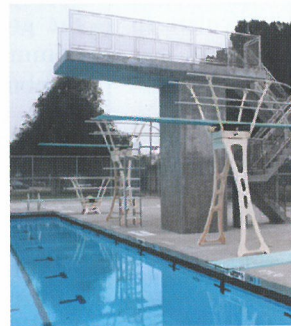
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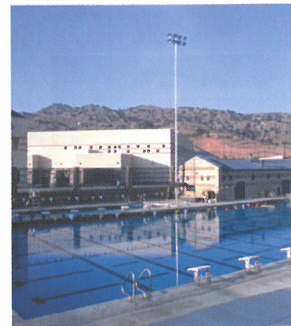
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including two with lighting. It has a QOS of 27, a Community Ranking of 26, a Child-Density Ranking of 27 and a Sports Use Agreement. Its “equity” score is 80.3—a high score signifying a lesser need for improvements even though it has a relatively high presence of youth. The scores for these fields are higher than average.

Meadowview Park is a neighborhood park in the South Area of Sacramento. It has one soccer field without lights. This field has a QOS of 13.6, a Community Ranking of 8, a Child-Density Ranking of 23.8 and no Sports Use Agreements. Its “equity” score is 45.3. While it serves fewer youth than the fields at Regency Community Park, it still has a greater need for improvements.

Based on these scores, the case can be made for funding and resources to be directed to Meadowview Park.



Regency Park ballfield



Meadowview Park soccer field

What We Learned

Creating the tool was valuable in many ways. Among other things, it led several realizations:

Maintenance Inequalities: Given budget constraints, maintenance staff have attempted to provide the same level of maintenance to sports fields citywide. As a result, Quality of Service scores for sports fields were all in the middle range (10 to 25). The exception was those fields that had volunteer use agreements, where sports groups provided a higher level of maintenance. This approach opens the door for disparities, where groups with stronger volunteerism, funding, and free time enjoy better quality fields. It also means that fewer under-resourced areas enjoyed excellent-quality, competition-caliber sports fields.

Sports Lighting Disparities: Given the need for positive, healthy activities for youth after dark, the dashboard distinguished between lighted fields and non-lighted fields. By doing so, YPCE discovered that lighted fields were not evenly distributed throughout the city. Older parts of town, including the Central City and established neighborhoods, had more lighted fields, while newer parts of town had fewer lighted fields. This might be attributed to different waves of park investment and changes in policies in lighting over time. However, the older parts of town—especially those that are under resourced or have higher concentrations of youth—are often the same places that could benefit from a greater investment.

All Ages and Inclusive Play: With budget cuts in the recession of 2008, and a Youth Campaign Plan developed in 2021, YPCE decided to prioritize youth activities and sports. However, all ages (including adults and seniors, particularly among different cultural groups) benefit from having quality sports fields. In time, the tool could be updated to factor in non-youth recreational groups with a high demand for field time, or potentially even ADA accessibility and universal, all-inclusive field access.

Dashboard Use

With continued testing and refinement, this tool will have broad applications for the equitable provision and delivery of other services, programs, and facilities. For now, YPCE staff will use the tool to:

Prioritize neighborhoods that have a low equity score and the most need for renovations to address deferred maintenance; and

Prioritize parks where funds can have the most impact by serving people with the greatest needs, including youth and under-resourced communities.

Long term, the dashboard can be expanded to include other park amenities, which may require the addition of new and different metrics over time. It also could be incorporated into YPCE’s Park Project Programming Guide to prioritize and sequence projects in annual work plans. This ensures that the residents who need improved fields the most—in part because they need inclusive, accessible, and healthy recreation options within walking and biking distance – receive these benefits.

“The Sports Field Equity Dashboard allows maintenance staff to make better decisions when allocating limited funding resources,” noted Shawn C. Aylesworth, Park Maintenance Division Manager. “As improvements are made within targeted parks, their scores will increase. Tracking these score improvements over time translates into the increased accuracy of measurable results and overall accountability.”

Sources:

Cohen, Mychal, et al., 2022. The Health Benefits of Parks and their Economic Impacts. Urban Institute.

National Recreation and Park Association, n.d. Parks & Recreation in Underserved Areas: A Public Health Perspective.

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