ROOM TO ROAM

The Pandemic Has Underscored the Need for More Urban Parks. So What Comes Next?

By Kathleen McCormick

IN COMMUNITIES across the country, parks and open space have seen dramatic increases in use this year as people sought refuge and respite from the COVID-19 pandemic. With public health guidelines recommending staying close to home, urban residents have been using public spaces in unprecedented numbers as places to exercise, be closer to nature, and socialize, dine, or shop at social distances. They have used public spaces to access essential services and to hold protests and demonstrations. The pandemic has elevated the value of parks and open space and has underscored the benefits for cities of creating more public spaces and more equitable access to them. It also has highlighted significant challenges, including how to pay for parks in the face of a looming fiscal crisis.

In many cities, the pandemic prompted city leaders to implement workarounds in neighborhoods without access to parks. The success of adaptive projects like widening sidewalks and bike lanes or closing streets to traffic has encouraged cities to continue to think creatively for the long term. COVID has also prompted discussions about how reimagining public space and creating new collaborations between public agencies could help city leaders make progress toward key urban goals, such as encouraging safer active-mobility options, expanding access to opportunity in underserved neighborhoods, converting vacant or underused land for public use, and developing greater climate resilience. Underlying all of this, the push for creating and maintaining traditional parks—and ensuring equitable access to them—continues.

"The pandemic has proven that parks are essential infrastructure," says Adrian Benepe, who served until this fall as senior vice president and director of national programs for the Trust for Public Land (TPL) and was parks commissioner for the city of New York from 2002 to 2012. "It's a great paradox that parks have never been more used or appreciated than now. Everything else was shut down, and parks were a last refuge."

Even before COVID, parks and recreation had been identified as a growing priority for cities in every region of the United States. According to a 2019 analysis conducted by the National League of Cities, some 63 percent of mayors had outlined specific plans or goals related to parks and recreation in recent "state of the city" speeches, compared to just 28 percent in 2017 (Yadavalli 2019).

As the pandemic continues, many city leaders are asking themselves key questions:

- **What have we learned about public parks and open space during the pandemic?**
- **What are the best practices for providing access to and expansion of public spaces?**
- **How do we reach out and listen to all communities about their open space needs?**
- **How can we think differently about our city's spatial assets, and—perhaps most important—where do we find the land and financial resources to develop new ones?**

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Credit: portishead1/iStock.

Parks, Public Health, and Economic Recovery

Across the country, up to 30 percent of urban land typically is occupied by paved streets and parking lots. Parks and open space, by contrast, occupy only 15 percent of urban land. But a national survey conducted in May for the 10 Minute Walk coalition, which includes TPL, the Urban Land Institute, and the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA), confirmed the crucial role of local parks and green spaces in maintaining physical and mental health and helping communities navigate toward recovery. Some 81 percent of the 1,000 survey respondents said increasing access to local parks and green spaces would help people enjoy the outdoors safely as states reopened (10 Minute Walk 2020). Two-thirds agreed that parks were important in maintaining physical and mental health, that access to local parks had become more important during the crisis, and that their quality of life would improve with better access to a park or green space near home. Urban respondents were most likely to value nearby green space.

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These data points are backed up by years of research indicating that parks and open space provide many "cobenefits" for urban areas, where 80 percent of the U.S. population lives. Studies show that park use can lower the risk of stress, obesity, respiratory problems, cancer, and diabetes. Increased exposure to green space has also been linked to higher cognitive abilities, reductions in aggressive behaviors, and a stronger sense of community.

A cyclist rides through Central Park during the coronavirus lockdown in April. The park was famously dubbed "the lungs of the city" by its designer, Frederick Law Olmsted, and other 19th century parks advocates. Credit: Christine McCann/iStock.

Campus Martius Park, built in downtown Detroit in 2004, has provided residents and visitors with access to green space while helping to catalyze more than $1 billion in nearby real estate investments. Credit: Michigan Municipal League via Flickr CC BY 2.0.

"The data are clear: Parks and green space soothe and console us, relax and restore us, reduce our anxiety, depression, and stress," says physician and epidemiologist Dr. Howard Frumkin in *Parks and the Pandemic*, a TPL special report (TPL 2020b). Frumkin, a professor emeritus at the University of Washington School of Public Health, advised: "In this and in future pandemics, we'll want to combine physical distancing and other infection-control measures with universal access to parks and green space, to help everyone get through hard times as safely as possible."

In addition to public health benefits, parks and open space are highly valued as economic drivers. In a 2019 NRPA survey, 85 percent of respondents said they seek high-quality parks and recreation amenities when choosing a place to live (NRPA 2019). A March 2020 NRPA poll revealed that 94 percent of respondents recognize the importance of governments investing in infrastructure that promotes economic activity, including parks and trails (NRPA 2020).

Proximity to parks increases property values as much as 20 percent, which in turn increases local tax revenues. High-quality public parks and open space also draw new businesses and visitors to cities. In Detroit, the $19 million, 2.5-acre Campus Martius Park helped attract new companies and redevelopment to downtown after it opened in 2004. In recent years, it has attracted over 2 million visitors annually and has helped catalyze more than $1 billion in real estate investments around the park, with billions more development dollars projected in a pipeline that would also lead to thousands of jobs.

Urban areas also derive multiple environmental benefits from parks and green space. Trees absorb pollution, producing billions of dollars in savings from cleaner air; their shade helps reduce the heat island effect by lowering urban temperatures. The ability of parks to absorb water is increasingly valuable, not just in coastal areas and riverfront communities, but also in cities seeking to control stormwater through green infrastructure. As part of Philadelphia's $4.5 billion, 25-year Green City, Clean Waters program—a collaboration between the Parks and Recreation and Water departments that aims to capture 85 percent of the city's stormwater runoff—the city pledged to add 500 acres of parks and green spaces in underserved neighborhoods. Other local initiatives, including the School District of Philadelphia's GreenFutures plan, the Rebuild Initiative, and TPL's Parks for People Program, are contributing to the effort to expand access to public green space in the city.

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Ensuring Access for All

In recent years, cities have been exploring ways to create more urban parks and open space, but "what's unique at this moment is people are finally noticing inequities in park access and the urgent need for public parks close to where people live," says Alyia Gaskins, assistant director of health programs for the Center for Community Investment (CCI) at the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy. In the context of recent demonstrations and discussions about race and racism, she says, "people are noticing that Black and brown communities are not only at greater risk from COVID-19, but also frequently excluded from the very health benefits parks provide."

Across the country, more than 100 million people lack safe and easy access to parks within a half-mile of home, says TPL. That number represents about 28 percent of the U.S. population, including 28 million children. In the nation's 100 largest cities, 11.2 million people lack easy access. The organization says ensuring everyone in those cities has a nearby park would require adding 8,300 parks to the 23,000 that exist.

Even where parks are available, inequities exist. A TPL study released in August reported that across the United States, parks serving primarily nonwhite populations are half the size of parks that serve majority white populations and five times more crowded. Parks serving majority low-income households are, on average, a quarter the size of parks that serve majority high-income households, and four times more crowded (TPL 2020a).

During the pandemic, states and cities have varied widely in their approaches to parks and open space. Some cities closed waterfronts and limited park access. Others sought to manage crowds by implementing controls such as timed entries or one-way signs. At the popular Katy Trail in Dallas, where visitors at a single entrance increased from 22,834 in early March to 34,366 by late March, officials instituted a voluntary system that allowed access on alternate days based on the first letter of a visitor's last name. Some cities prohibited parking at packed parks, prompting

During the pandemic, cities have taken steps ranging from limiting access to parks and playgrounds to closing them entirely. Credit: ablokhin/iStock.

equity questions on behalf of people who did not have the proximity or ability to walk or bike there.

Other cities addressed the surge in demand for parks by converting streets into pedestrian-friendly spaces. During the initial months of the shutdown, "parks became the most valuable resource in the city," says J. Nicholas Williams, director of the Oakland Parks, Recreation, and Youth Development Department. To offer room for recreation in neighborhoods where parks were overcrowded or nonexistent, Oakland closed 74 miles of streets to all but emergency vehicles and local traffic in April. The city relied on a network of streets identified in a 2019 bicycle plan that had been developed with the participation of 3,500 residents.

The Slow Streets program—some version of which has been enacted in cities from Tucson, Arizona, to Providence, Rhode Island—was well received by many Oakland residents, but was also criticized for its initial focus on predominantly white neighborhoods. Working with residents and community groups in more racially and economically diverse areas such as East Oakland, Slow Streets expanded into new neighborhoods and launched "Slow Streets: Essential Places," which improved pedestrian safety along routes to essential services such as grocery stores, food distribution sites, and COVID-19 test sites.

The Slow Streets program continues, but Williams says Oakland, whose population grew 10 percent in the past decade to 433,000, faces a greater need: "Oakland continues to grow . . . we have to set aside more park land and more equitable access to parks and open space."

Equitable Park Planning

"City parks are at the center of resilient and equitable cities," says Catherine Nagel, executive director of City Parks Alliance (CPA), an independent nationwide organization that has worked with mayors to leverage more than $190 million to build urban parks in underserved communities. "Our research shows some of the ways cities can leverage the equity, health, and environmental benefits of parks are to identify new sources of funding, new cost-sharing partnerships, and new [sources of] support."

Cities are funding parks with adjacent sectors, drawing on or partnering with water, housing, and health departments, and "leveraging outside of the traditional park world," Nagel says. Property developers are building public parks, and cities are partnering with business improvement districts and nonprofit organizations for programming and management responsibilities. "Parks are more complex than people think," Nagel says. "They need intensive programming and maintenance, ongoing revenue streams, and the ability to interface with and reflect community user and local needs."

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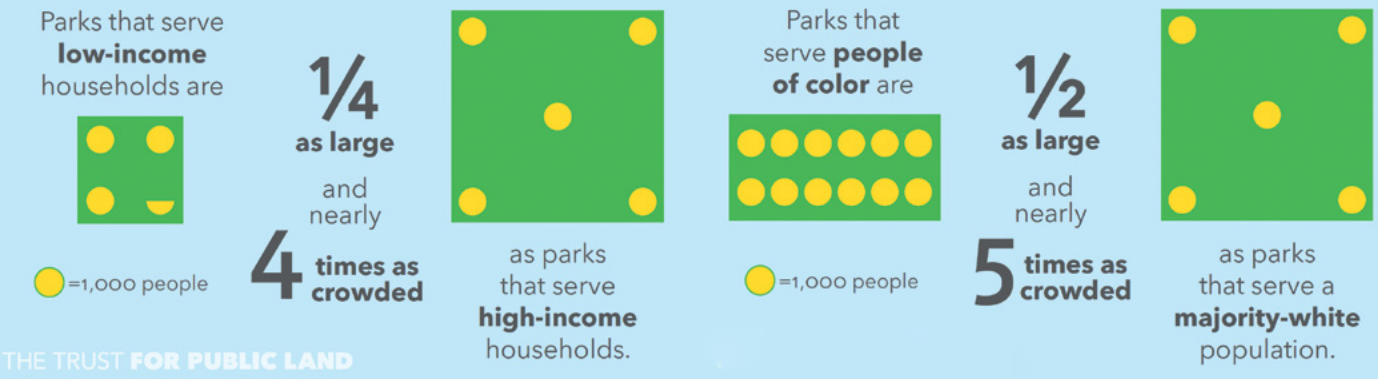
With support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, CPA has worked on initiatives that analyze how cities are reallocating money to address equity concerns, how they're leveraging funding from adjacent sectors, and how they're innovating for equity and sourcing funding. CPA's Equitable Park Funding Hub, an interactive online database set to launch this fall, will feature park funding opportunities related to brownfields, workforce development, community development, conservation, climate mitigation, and water and green infrastructure.



Credit: Trust for Public Land.

The community-led Platte Farm Open Space project repurposes 5.5 contaminated acres in a Denver neighborhood. Credit: Groundwork Denver.

Residents of the predominantly low-income Latinx neighborhood, which is surrounded by former industrial sites and bisected by interstates, led the [Platte Farm Open Space] project to restore native shortgrass prairie and install a pollinator garden and paved walking and biking trails.

The Groundwork USA Network shares examples of park and green infrastructure projects that focus on community ownership and health equity gains for long-term residents in *Reclaiming Brownfields* (Groundwork USA 2017). In one project, Groundwork Denver helped with visioning, planning, and fundraising to transform a 5.5-acre brownfield site into the Platte Farm Open Space for the Globeville neighborhood in North Denver. Residents of the predominantly low-income Latinx neighborhood, which is surrounded by former industrial sites and bisected by interstates, led the project to restore native shortgrass prairie and install a pollinator garden and paved walking and biking trails. A $550,000 grant from the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment paid for construction and maintenance, which will be completed by the City and County of Denver Departments of Parks and Recreation and Transportation and Infrastructure.

The Denver project illustrates how cities can reimagine current assets. While most don't have large tracts of vacant land, says Benepe of TPL, they could creatively retrofit brownfields, abandoned industrial sites, sanitary landfills, or railroad and utility rights of way, as high-profile projects like the High Line in New York and Millennium Park in Chicago have shown. Benepe says every city should analyze the equity of its park system and identify potential park and open space sites in underserved neighborhoods.

CCI's Gaskins says the first step in equitable park planning is to "be in conversation with communities to get their vision for what they want parks to be, whether that's building new parks or reimagining existing spaces." Proximity and access are important, she says, "but it's also the quality of the park and whether people feel welcomed and safe"—both in the park and en route to it.

Particularly in neighborhoods affected by gentrification, longtime residents often don't feel like amenities such as parks that are introduced with new development are intended for them, Gaskins says. With new development, planners and other city officials should ensure a robust community engagement process. "Parks are more than infrastructure," she says. "They offer access to programs and services, gathering spaces, and job opportunities that are also important for advancing health equity."

Paying for Parks in Lean Times

Following the 2008 financial collapse, parks budgets were cut early and were among the last municipal budget items to recover. From 2009 to 2013, park spending dropped 21.2 percent, says NRPA, and by 2013, parks and recreation represented only 1.9 percent of local government expenditures. Deferred park maintenance for many large cities has been estimated in the billions of dollars.

Will parks budgets meet the same fate in the age of COVID? A late-June NRPA survey of more than 400 parks and recreation leaders found that two-thirds of their agencies had been asked to reduce operations spending between 10 to 20 percent for the fiscal year in effect on July 1, and 57 percent were facing 50 to 59 percent median reductions in capital spending. One in five reported their capital budgets had been zeroed out (Roth 2020).

Park advocates warn that city park systems have reached a critical tipping point, with heavy use and COVID-related budget cuts risking irreversible damage in 2020 and beyond. Some say priority funding for maintenance is critical to ensure that parks and green spaces are safe, attractive, and used, while others say investments in new capital projects would do more to help stimulate the economy for COVID recovery.

Rachel Banner, NRPA director of park access, notes that park budgets that rely more on property taxes, which have been stable during the pandemic, may be in better shape than those that rely primarily on sales tax revenues. "Diversity in revenue streams is important," says Banner. "Think about what's important for resiliency in an economic downturn, like drawing from a variety of sources."

One successful strategy NRPA has seen is to allocate a standard proportion of the general fund to parks and open space, "especially now that they are absolutely essential." To address park equity in the capital budget, Banner says, some cities use prioritization criteria related to factors such as the quality of park space, age of equipment, ADA compliance, and neighborhood demographics including income, race, health outcomes, and car ownership.

In many cities and counties, dedicated tax campaigns have shown success in generating a significant portion of parks and open space funding. In March, Oakland voters passed Ballot Measure Q to create a 20-year tax, with 64 percent of the resulting revenues directed for parks, landscape maintenance, and recreational services beginning in FY 2020–2021. The success of Measure Q demonstrated that city residents have "turned a corner in recognizing the value of parks and open space," says Oakland parks director Williams. While Measure Q doesn't provide funding for new parks and open space, he says, it does address equity by providing funds to maintain and program smaller community and pocket parks. The measure was projected to bring in $13.4 million for parks in FY 20–21, a figure that hadn't changed as of the city's mid-cycle budget review this summer but will continue to be reviewed, Williams says.

Other successful ballot efforts include Denver's Measure 2A, passed in 2018 and known as the Parks Legacy Fund. Between 2012 and 2017, the city's population grew 11 percent, but park space increased by only 5 percent; the city also faced $130 million in deferred park maintenance. Combined with general funds, the Parks Legacy Fund was projected to produce $37.5 million a year to renovate parks, acquire land, and build new parks, trails, and open spaces, prioritizing high-need communities. The city expects to revise its budget to reflect COVID-related impacts this fall.

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Scissortail Park opened in Oklahoma City in late 2019. The park, which sits on a former brownfield, was funded in part through a voter-approved sales tax. Credit: Steve Johnson, courtesy of Scissortail Park Foundation.

Last year, a ballot measure in New Orleans created hundreds of millions of dollars for parks over 20 years, with a priority for lower-income areas, says Bill Lee, TPL senior vice president of policy, advocacy, and government relations. Despite COVID's impact on local economies, Lee is optimistic about other ballot-related funding prospects: "More than three-quarters of these measures pass in good and bad economic times, in red and blue states, because people see the value of parks and open space."

Oklahoma City can attest. In November 2019, the city opened a 36-acre portion of Scissortail Park in the downtown core, on brownfield land that formerly featured abandoned buildings and junkyards. This first phase of the $132 million project features amenities such as a playground, interactive fountains, roller rink, café, performance stage, lake with boathouse and boat rentals, demonstration gardens, farmers' market, lawn and promenade, and nearly 1,000 trees.

Scissortail Park is located next to the city's new convention center and near the downtown library, arena, ballpark, and streetcar, all of which received funding from the Metropolitan Area Projects (MAPS) tax, a voter-approved penny sales tax created in 1993 to pay debt-free for projects to revitalize downtown and improve the city's quality of life. A public-private partnership, the park also has benefitted from millions of dollars in donations, and it earns income from event and equipment rentals, sponsorships, food and beverage concessions, memberships, and grants. Ten years in planning and construction, the park by 2022 will include another 34 acres that will extend to the Oklahoma River with sports fields and natural areas, accessed by a bridge across Interstate 40.

Scissortail Park received a key allocation from the third round of MAPS funding; in December 2019, voters approved a fourth MAPS round, with $140 million dedicated to transforming the city's neighborhood and community parks and sports facilities, part of a $978 million neighborhood and human services ballot measure.

"Scissortail is our cultural commons for downtown," says Maureen Heffernan, CEO and president of the Scissortail Park Foundation, which manages the park and has kept it open with limited events and programming during the pandemic. Many people have expressed gratitude for Scissortail Park and the city's nearby Myriad Botanical Gardens, which Heffernan also manages. "More than ever, beautifully maintained green space in urban areas has been a

critical resource for people to enjoy and destress over the last few months," she says. Urban parks "are something everyone wants and wants to fund, and they're transformative," Heffernan notes, adding that Oklahoma City "does not normally like to raise taxes, but residents have approved this MAPS tax because these tangible projects make a dramatic difference in people's quality of life here."

Park advocates also are looking to federal legislation for funding. The Great American Outdoors Act, signed into law in August, includes permanent funding from offshore oil and gas fees for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF), making $900 million per year available for public lands, including city parks and trails. LWCF's Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership (ORLP) program is a source for annual grants for urban areas with more than 50,000 residents, providing $25 million last year in grants ranging from $300,000 to $1 million, with priority given to projects in low-income areas that lack outdoor recreation opportunities.

Parks advocates also have their eye on potential federal stimulus funds. In May, 100 organizations, including TPL, CPA, NRPA, the American Planning Association, and the U.S. Conference of Mayors, asked Congress to include $500 million for jobs related to building or renovating parks in low-income urban areas as part of a future coronavirus stimulus package.

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Public-Private Partnerships

In some cases, partnerships with nonprofits make the creation of parks possible. The Western Reserve Land Conservancy (WRLC), a Cleveland-based nonprofit, has conserved over 60,000 acres and created over 155 parks and preserves in the region since the late 1990s. WRLC has raised over $400 million to help land banks demolish 40,000 abandoned or vacant properties throughout Ohio, securing land for low-income communities until it can be redeveloped into parks, green spaces, or sites for affordable housing and other purposes.

Through its Reforest our City program, WRLC has planted more than 10,000 trees in Cleveland; WRLC bought a landfill on a linear site next to the zoo, cleaned up contamination, and developed the 25-acre Brighton Park with a walking/biking trail. Located in a densely populated area, the $1 million park, due to open in October, will be planted with 1,000 trees next year, and will be managed by the Metroparks District, says Jim Rokakis, WRLC vice president and coauthor of *The Land Bank Revolution* (Rokakis 2020). WRLC is also creating six neighborhood parks in Cleveland's Mount Pleasant neighborhood that it will own or manage.

Other cities rely on business and philanthropic support to fund parks. About 90 percent of the $19 million cost for Detroit's Campus Martius Park and surrounding infrastructure was funded by Detroit corporations and foundations. Owned by the city, the park is managed by the Downtown Detroit Partnership. The Indianapolis Cultural Trail, an eight-mile pedestrian and bike trail connecting eight cultural districts in downtown Indianapolis, is undergoing a $30 million expansion with $20 million from the Lilly Endowment, Inc., $5 million from the city, and $1 million from the Anthem Foundation.

Cities are also partnering with private developers to build and operate new parks and open space. Since 1993, New York City's waterfront zoning has required developers to provide public access to the waterfront. The zoning has led to the redevelopment of industrial sites into

The construction of Domino Park in Brooklyn, New York, opened this stretch of waterfront to the public for the first time in 160 years. Credit: Shinya Suzuki via Flickr CC BY 2.0.

multiple parks that provide public access and build climate resilience.

The six-acre Domino Park on Brooklyn's East River, opened in 2018, is part of an 11-acre site that will include the adaptive reuse of the historic Domino Sugar refinery and 3.3 million square feet of mixed-use development with 2,200 housing units, 700 of them affordable. Brooklyn-based developer Two Trees Management, which invested $50 million to build the park and spends $2 million annually on operations, worked closely with the community to identify needs such as a short access road to make the park feel truly public. The park, designed by James Corner Field Operations, includes a waterfront esplanade, recreation facilities, interactive fountains, a five-block artifact walk of salvaged factory machinery, and 175 trees. It provides public waterfront access for the first time in 160 years.

Another promising financing option is land value return, a mechanism through which cities recover the increases in property value triggered by rezoning or by investments in infrastructure. Also known as land value capture, this tool "will be an effective way for cities to convert underutilized spaces into parks and open space," says Enrique Silva, the Lincoln Institute's director of international initiatives.

Silva says cities could recover zoning-related increases in land value to secure land and pay for park development. Cities also can recover value through higher property tax assessments that lead to higher municipal tax revenues. City-owned vacant sites intended for buildings the cities can't currently afford to build could also become temporary or permanent parks and lead to additional land value capture opportunities, he says. Municipal planning tools such as special assessments and transferable development rights also can help fund parks, open space, and infrastructure improvements.

Parks and open space can increase value in the form of climate resilience and now, with COVID, will be viewed as adding social value, says Silva. "There's increasingly a sense that an investment in parks and open space as public infrastructure is an investment worth making, one that will have increased relevance as more public space is needed," says Silva. "To the extent that COVID is forcing everyone to rethink public space and there's a premium on open space in cities," he says, steps including converting streets for pedestrian use and establishing new parks and open spaces are "where planning is going to lead."

Kathleen McCormick, principal of Fountainhead Communications in Boulder, Colorado, writes frequently about healthy, sustainable, and resilient communities.

SURVEY ON PANDEMIC AND PUBLIC SPACES

A global survey conducted by Gehl, the Copenhagen-based design and planning firm that reimagined Times Square in New York City for pedestrians and bicyclists, reveals the importance of public space during the pandemic. Some 2,000 respondents from 40 U.S. states, 68 countries, and nearly every continent, about two-thirds of whom hailed from urban areas, shared views on the value of public space in their daily lives:

- 66 percent used nearby public spaces at least once a day, and 16 percent used them several times a day.
- Top public space destinations included the neighborhood street and sidewalk (87 percent), essential places like grocery stores (72 percent), neighborhood parks (67 percent), and stoops, yards, or courtyards (59 percent).
- Two thirds reported walking more during the pandemic; among car owners, that figure was 69 percent.

Gehl's suggestions for improving access and reducing overcrowding of parks and open spaces include:

- Reallocate space to allow for more physically distant walking, biking, and rolling through sidewalk extensions, parking lane closures, or street closures at the block or multiblock level.
- Prioritize space reallocation measures in neighborhoods without walkable (less than 15-minute) access to parks and essential services.
- Manage flow into more congested public spaces by expanding the number of entrances or by designating gateways as entry-only or exit-only.
- To support seniors and other vulnerable populations, ensure new public spaces create opportunities for sitting at safe distances, not just moving through.

Source: Gehl (https://gehlpeople.com/blog/public-space-plays-vital-role-in-pandemic).

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