

Health Impact Assessments: A Tool to Focus on the Health Effects of Park Access



Photo credit: Taos Land Trust

Health impact assessments are a useful tool to help make the case for the many benefits of Safe Routes to Parks. While the positive health impacts of parks and green space may seem obvious, often decisionmakers want data to help weigh costs and benefits of a change or to select among different strategies to benefit health. This factsheet offers a snapshot of a tool to help park advocates engage stakeholders and gather data in support of safe, equitable park access: Health Impact Assessments.

What are Health Impact Assessments?

According to The Pew Charitable Trust's Health Impact Project, an organization at the helm of the Health impact assessment movement, a Health impact assessment (HIA) is a process that engages stakeholders to help communities and decision-makers identify the potential health effects of decisions.¹ The findings from an HIA inform decisions, making it possible to improve health benefits and mitigate negative health impacts of a particular decision. It is important to note that HIAs are a decision making tool, so they are only conducted when a decision is being made, for example, whether to pass a particular policy, construct a new park or community asset, or develop a planning document, etc. HIAs only occur where intervention to improve health effects is still possible.

Health impact assessments follow a standard process of screening, scoping, assessment, recommendations, reporting, and monitoring, and can take upwards of six months to complete.² They quantify the health impacts of specific decisions (or a range of options), and HIA reports average around 100 pages in length. Rapid HIAs, which can be conducted in around three months, are an option for considering the health effects of decisions with shorter timelines. [Find more information on rapid HIAs here.](#)

How can Health Impact Assessment support park access?

While the health impacts of parks are widely agreed upon, there are many reasons to conduct health impact assessments of policies and plans aimed at improving park access:

- **Infuse a health lens into planning and policy documents:** The development of policies and plans requires countless decision points, and HIAs provide data to justify that decisions are made on the basis of promoting health. HIAs quantify how much a particular intervention supports or hinders health. While park access plans and policies may implicitly influence health, HIAs help make those health impacts clearer so that decisionmakers can make informed choices about which strategy to pursue or how to prioritize a particular project.
- **Engage community residents and stakeholders to influence decisions:** Strong HIAs involve community members and stakeholders, obtaining their perspectives on how a particular decision will affect their health and well-being. While decisionmakers can theorize about how a decision may impact people, hearing directly from people who will be affected by a decision can provide a more robust understanding of potential impacts.
- **Zoom in the equity lens:** HIAs provide an opportunity to focus on the health impacts to priority populations, including youth, older adults, people with disabilities, lower income people, and people of color.
- **Draw attention to multiple facets of health:** Many people are familiar with the positive impacts parks have on physical activity and recreation, but parks help us in many more ways! In addition to benefits to physical health,³ parks offer social⁴ and mental^{5,6} health benefits, whether people are playing, socializing, exercising, or otherwise spending time in them. HIAs offer an opportunity to broaden the definition of health beyond physical activity and recreation.



Photo credit: United Neighborhood Association of South Wenatchee

What is Safe Routes to Parks?

Safe Routes to Parks aims to make parks more accessible for people walking, bicycling, and taking public transportation. This occurs by creating routes that are safe from traffic and personal danger for people of all ages and abilities, and ensuring that well-maintained and well-programmed parks are conveniently located within a 10-minute walk (approximately one half mile) from where people live.⁷ Safe Routes to Parks provides advocates with the tools to champion safe and equitable access during consideration of park siting, community engagement, allocation of funds, planning, and implementation of traffic and public safety initiatives, as well as park improvements. Over the long term, with increased safety and accessibility, Safe Routes to Parks seeks to increase park usage and improve health and wellbeing for people of all ages, races, abilities, and income levels. To learn more, visit [Safe Routes to Parks](#).

Assessing Health Impacts of a Local Greenway in New Jersey

To inform the development of the Middlesex Greenway Access Plan, a guiding document to increase usage of a 3.5 mile greenway in northern New Jersey, the New Jersey Health Impact Collaborative conducted a health impact assessment of the public health impacts of various strategies to increase Greenway usage. Project leads and stakeholders recognized that lack of access for people walking, bicycling, and taking transit was a significant impediment to Greenway usage, as was the lack of wayfinding signage indicating how to access the Greenway. Through the HIA, the team focused on the health impacts and accessibility to the Greenway for people of color, older adults, people with existing health conditions, low-income people, linguistically isolated people, and people with disabilities, especially those living within one-mile of the Greenway.⁸ The project team shared several recommendations with the Middlesex County Parks and Recreation Department as it developed the Middlesex Greenway Access Plan. These recommendations included, “improving access and use for bicycles, considering bicycle and rollerblade rental stations, strategic siting of benches and picnic tables, added signage and connectivity, and improved lighting and fences, among others.”⁹

Conclusion

Health Impact Assessments are a valuable tool for park access advocates to assess the potential health effects of different approaches to improving park access. To learn more about HIAs, including what the process looks like and additional examples of how they can be used to improve park access:

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's [Health Impact Assessment for Parks and Trails Toolkit](#) and [Health Impact Assessment](#) page
- The Pew Charitable Trust's [Health Impact Project](#)
- [Human Impact Partner's Health Impact Assessment Publications and Resources](#)

References

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9. Ibid.



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