

Safe Routes to Parks Evaluation Guide: Steps and Tips to Assess and Inform Efforts to Improve Park Access



As you work to improve park access in your community, the question of whether the interventions you put in place to improve park access are meeting your goal may arise. To help answer the question, we recommend that you evaluate your efforts.

The Evaluation stage of the Safe Routes to Parks Action Framework helps you assess the impact and effectiveness of your efforts to improve safe and equitable access to parks. The information gathered can be used to inform program planning, make continuous program improvements, show impact, make the case to local governments and funders for future investments, and generate further interest in advancing Safe Routes to Parks. This fact sheet will set out necessary steps and provide tips for using evaluation to improve park access in your community.

Although evaluation is typically finalized at the end of a project, it is important to start thinking about evaluation shortly after Safe Routes to Parks efforts get underway. Advocates should identify what they want to learn, select a data collection process, and collect baseline data early on in program planning.

Why is it important to engage residents in efforts to create community change?

Evaluation is related to the Assessment stage. An initial step in creating safe and equitable access to parks is to identify one or more parks or neighborhoods of focus based on an assessment of data identifying community needs. A range of methods can be used to determine community-identified needs, such as walk audits, focus groups, surveys, etc. CAN DO Houston, a 2018 grantee of the Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities program used surveys and walk audits to assess park access. This non-profit organization working to advance healthy living through community-driven solutions in Texas developed and conducted the Near Northside Park Safety Survey to understand the barriers to accessing parks and potential solutions to overcome those challenges and complemented it with [Safe Routes to Parks walk audits](#). Baseline data collected during assessment can be compared to data collected throughout and at the end to evaluate the short-term and long-term impacts of your efforts.

1 Determine What You Want to Learn from This Evaluation

It may seem obvious, but the first step to evaluation is to determine what you would like to learn from the evaluation! Before you get caught up in identifying data points and collection methods, it's important to list out the questions you would like answered through these evaluation activities. Although your general question may be "Is what we're doing making an impact?", you will need to break that into more discrete questions in order to get a useful answer. Questions such as "Did the temporary pop-up crosswalk activity increase awareness of the need for safe crossings to access the park?" can help determine if a step positively or negatively affects your long-term outcome, such as safe walking or bicycling facilities along a route to a park.

The list of possibilities is endless, but for many Safe Routes to Parks advocates, at the top of their list is understanding the effects of initial implementation action to remove a particular barrier for accessing the park. For example, "Did the newly implemented wayfinding system improve awareness of the park and distance from certain destinations, such as the library or grocery store?" Be sure to create specific questions so that the evaluation can accurately reflect what you want to learn.

In the event you would like to understand the long-term impact of initial actions you have taken, use a question along the lines of "After a year of implementation, do residents still use the wayfinding system to access the park from various destinations, such as the library or grocery store?" Be mindful that evaluating a long-term impact question can present challenges if project funding has finished, since it can require more resources such as additional funds, partnership support, and time.

2 Select the Data Collection Methods

Once you have identified what you would like to learn from the evaluation, it is time to select the data metrics that will help to answer your evaluation questions. While it's often tempting to gather as much information as possible, you may want to limit the data you collect to the key points that will show outputs and outcomes. For example, advocates working to improve safe and equitable access to parks will want to identify data metrics related to traffic and personal safety when determining the effectiveness of their Safe Routes to Parks efforts. These metrics should include both quantitative (measured through numbers) and qualitative (measured by qualities that cannot simply be summarized through numbers) data to give a more complete picture of the impact your efforts have made.

Safe Routes to Parks for Everyone

Improving Safe Routes to Parks is of particular concern in communities lacking safe walking and bicycling facilities and where violence and crime and high rates of weight-related chronic disease are prevalent. Safe accessible routes to parks are also necessary for kids, who are not old enough to drive themselves to parks, older adults, who may not wish to drive, and for people without reliable access to cars, who rely on walking or bicycling to get around. When thinking about the metrics to answer your evaluation questions, be sure to identify data points that will help you understand the specific impact on people of color, women and girls, low-income individuals, people with disabilities, youth, older adults, LGBTQ community, and other vulnerable and marginalized populations.

Quantitative and Qualitative Data Metric Examples

Quantitative	Qualitative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Percentage of population living within a half-mile distance of a park or open space • Network distance to park entrances and other usable public open spaces • Ratio of sidewalks and/or bicycle lanes to roadway miles • Number of ADA compliant facilities along route to park • Number of park users • Annual rates of fatal and severe pedestrian and bicyclist injuries near park(s) (note: use to show change over years) • Annual crime and violence incidence (vandalism, assaults, other crimes committed in parks or on their borders) (note: use to show change over a period of years) • Current financial, staffing, and other resources related to improving park access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Descriptions of community-identified assets that exist along the route to the park • Descriptions of community-identified challenges that exist along the route to the park • Stories from community members explaining their perception of traffic and personal safety along the route, emerging problems, desires for improved park access • Oral histories showing community perceptions of how resident engagement in park development and implementation relates to historic experiences • Art by non-park users reflecting their perception of park and park access

Involve the Whole Community

It is important to ensure that you collect information from important constituencies (such as residents, local businesses, local government agencies, community-based organizations, etc.). Whether you are conducting quantitative or qualitative data collection, accounting for the various perspectives and voices within your community is necessary to capturing a comprehensive view of the state of park access.



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Identify the Data Collection Methods

Data collection can be time-consuming and expensive, and you may be constrained by grant funding timelines, so it is important to identify methods that work within your timeframe and resources. Common data collection methods for various circumstances include:

Pre-existing data can be collected in numerous ways, such as from community health assessments (prioritized health needs data), police reports (violence, crime, or crash and injury data), records of organization or group use of parks (data on frequency of use, and population and number served), walk audit assessment data (community-identified assets and challenges), or data from any other data collection methods. To identify pre-existing data, connect with other organizations, particularly local government units, such as health departments, planning, transportation, and parks and recreation to determine the data they collect and use. Examples of such data include: the percentage of the population that is physically active, the percentage of residents who live within a half mile of a park, records of percentage of annual budget designated for parks and how it is spent by neighborhood, etc. Existing collaborations are beneficial, and your data gathering will also provide an opportunity to develop new partnerships. Also, think about what data your organization collects or has collected that aligns with what you want to learn from the evaluation. For example, are there current projects or previous grant opportunities where you gathered relevant data that could be used for your efforts? Ideas include observations of park usage, mapping of walking and bicycling supports along a park route, and records of crime and violence rates by neighborhood, etc. Next, consider opportunities to modify or adapt the existing data collection process of another initiative for your Safe Routes to Parks efforts. In this case, be sure to consider whether you can get the data within the timeframe needed. For example, universities conduct a lot of research and may be in the process of coordinating focus groups and interviews. If their area of focus aligns with your Safe Routes to Parks efforts, it may be helpful to see how you can incorporate some questions that will help to measure a specific metric(s). Pre-existing data is the most cost-efficient form of data collection because you either have the information already or it can be collected through an existing process.

Surveys are a research method used to gather people's opinions and ideas on a particular topic and often used to make generalizations for a larger population.¹ Surveys help gather information from a larger sample of individuals than in focus groups or interviews and can help to quantify assets and barriers. They can help you to understand a variety of information on park access, such as barriers, modes of travel to the park, safety concerns, usage and satisfaction with the park, effectiveness of community engagement, and more. Even though this data collection method is not the best at finding out a person's thoughts or feelings, it helps you to gather information from a large number of people, which can be helpful in short periods of time. It is important to note that although a large sample can be collected it may not be representative of the population. This data collection method is also cost-efficient as you do not have to hire or assign a person to conduct the conversation (unless conducting face-to-face surveys), but you may want to consider having someone skilled in survey development to produce the survey or analyze the data. Surveys come in the form of face-to-face surveys, telephone surveys, and self-administered written or computer surveys.



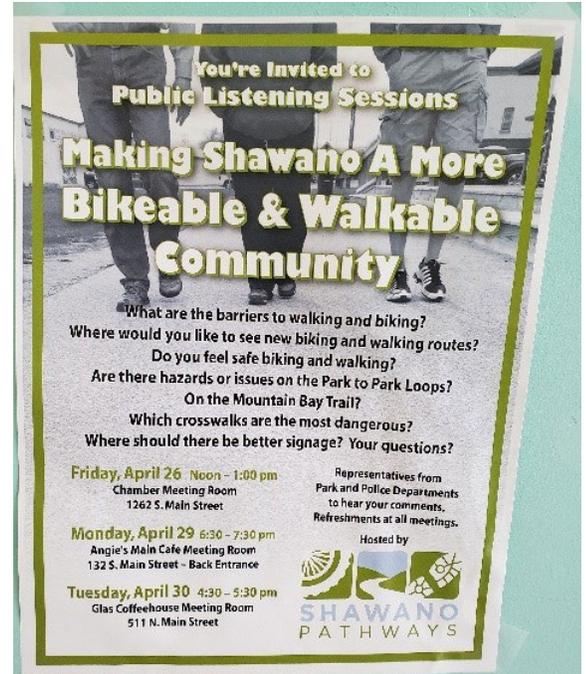
Observations are a technique used to watch and record people and places in their natural state.² This method is used to observe the flow of behavior, for example, what travel modes do people use, what routes do they take, and the number of people that access the park, etc. Having a clear plan about what you are observing beforehand is helpful so that you know what notes to take. In addition to watching social behaviors, observations may also include photos of the physical environment, such as barriers to access the park, condition of facilities, level of vegetation or litter, and any other items in their natural state to paint a full picture of what contributes to or hinders park access. Observations may also include collecting measurements during a walk audit, for example, measuring the width of a sidewalk or curb ramp to determine ADA-compliance. Baseline and follow-up observations should be collected at the same time of year, with similar weather, the same day of the week, and same time of day to properly evaluate any changes. If you notice any significant changes, take some time to investigate why. The benefit of observing the natural flow of behavior in a park setting is useful, but these observations can be limited since they usually occur on a small scale and may lack a representative sample.³ This method of data collection is cost-efficient, but be sure to identify an observer(s) that can accurately capture the information you need.

Focus groups are a research method that uses group conversations that help to gather people's opinions, ideas, and beliefs on a particular topic. This form of data collection helps gather qualitative data, which allows you to understand what a person is thinking or feeling about a topic. This information typically cannot be collected from a survey, as surveys offer limited opportunity to answer “why” a respondent answers a particular way or to explore unexpected issues that emerge in responses. Focus group data come in the form of notes (voice recorded or written) and can be assessed and documented to show what people said and later compared to perceptions of the improved environment. Focus groups can be beneficial in understanding the effects of park access on a variety of constituencies at one time, especially people representing marginalized and vulnerable populations. Focus groups can also be useful to gather input on conceptual designs for improved walking and bicycling facilities or park entrance design. It is helpful to consider whether you will need to hire someone to orchestrate these conversations as you consider the qualities required for a person to connect to the group, so that you can budget for this cost.

Collecting Community Feedback With the Photovoice Method

Photovoice is a fun way to both assess park access and engage residents and other key stakeholders in efforts to improve safe and equitable access to parks. The photovoice method is a qualitative method that has community participants use photography and storytelling to explore issues of importance to them, such as barriers to park access.⁴ It is important to get people with different perspectives involved to take photos, document why the picture is essential, and what it shows to have a comprehensive understanding of the issues. It is helpful to conduct this activity before and after the implementation of an initial action or any other physical improvement to evaluate the change based upon people's opinions. Photos are worth a thousand words, and can often convey a complex idea more effectively and compellingly than words, which is a great reason for using photovoice as a means for advocating for change. Photos also do an exceptional job at showing progress made, which is a helpful tool in showing impact of your Safe Routes to Parks efforts.





Interviews are similar to focus groups as they gather people's perceptions, opinions, and thoughts about a particular topic or range of topics. The main differences are that interviews are typically one-on-one conversations that can allow you to delve deeper into a person's thoughts and feelings, which may be more challenging to do with a group of people. Like focus groups, the method of collection allows for probing more of the 'why' and providing more information, which surveys are limited in doing. Interviews can be voice recorded or notes can be written down to allow you to document and assess baseline concerns to later compare to future data notes to evaluate changes. Interviews can also be used to delve deeper to understand the effects of park access on different constituencies, especially people representing marginalized and vulnerable populations that can be adversely impacted by these changes. If you are considering this method, determine whether you have the capacity on your team of a skilled interviewer that can connect to your target population, and if not, hire someone to do so.

Once you determine which data collection methods you will use, you will need to identify the following: materials, staff/consultants, a timeframe(s) for collecting the data, lead responsible party, questions to be answered, metrics, sample size, and method for recording your data. This plan should include details for collecting data to evaluate the short- and long-term impacts of your efforts.

Shawano Pathways: Connecting People to Parks

2019 Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities awardee Shawano Pathways is working to establish a network of pedestrian and bicycle trails connecting parks and other destinations in Shawano, Wisconsin. As a part of their assessment activities, Shawano Pathways conducted three focus groups to gather information on assets and barriers to their park-to-park walking and bicycling loops and park access. Approximately 7 to 15 community residents attended each of the three listening sessions. Shawano Pathways used their trained focus group facilitator and identified a note taker and photographer to conduct these focus group listening sessions. The results were analyzed with other assessment data from walk audits, surveys, interviews, and crash and crime data to determine community-identified priorities for their Safe Routes to Parks action plan and initial implementation actions. Shawano Pathways plans on collecting additional data in the future to determine the impact of their efforts.



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Collect and Analyze Baseline Data

Once you've identified your evaluation questions, metrics, and data collection process, what comes next? It is now time to collect your first set of data, also known as baseline data. Identify your strategy from your data collection plan, gather your resources, and accurately collect your data.

If you are collecting primary data, this may include going to where your audience is and gathering information using a specific data collection tool, such as a survey, focus group questions, walk audit checklist, observation template, or camera. Depending on the amount of information collected, determine whether further data is needed to answer your evaluation question. Secondary data collection can be done on an ongoing basis once you identify the appropriate data sources, however, make sure that the timelines for gathering all that data fits with the timeframe of your evaluation.

When you have your data, identify the analysis technique needed based upon whether it is quantitative or qualitative. In most cases, Safe Routes to Parks advocates can use descriptive analysis techniques, such as mean, median, mode, percentage, frequency, and range to analyze their quantitative data. Comparative analysis is another helpful tool to convey the importance of a particular park access improvement strategy or justifying why you are focusing on a particular park. For example, contrasting citywide percentages of crime activity

versus proportions near the park or citywide averages of park access within a 10-minute walk or bicycle ride as opposed to means based on race/ethnicity, income level, age, or other demographics. For more qualitative data, identifying common themes found throughout is a simple analysis technique to use. Be sure to house the original data along with the analysis in case you need to refer back at a later time. This baseline data is essential to help identify priorities for improving safe and equitable park access, create an action plan with specific goals and actions, and inform next steps in implementation, including course correcting if the change isn't positively benefitting the community.

Baseline data collection and analysis is a valuable time to engage residents and other key stakeholders. Engagement can occur by collecting information from residents or having them participate in the process of collecting the data, for example, using the community participatory technique of photovoice. In some cases, data analysis is not thought of as a means for engagement, but it can be if you provide training opportunities to develop the capacity of community residents to analyze data. For example, you can offer basic training on descriptive analysis and identifying common themes for more qualitative data analysis. Not only will you build support for collecting and analyzing data, but you will also teach tangible skills to the community that can be useful to them in the future.

5 Measure Short-Term Impact

The goal of Safe Routes to Parks is to advance safe and equitable access to parks for all. One way that we know this goal is being achieved is through evidence of short-term impacts. Initial actions can provide an example of short-term impacts because of their potential role in improving safe and equitable access to parks. For instance, a temporary crosswalk, pop-up bike lane, or wayfinding signage can help build momentum through community and political awareness to garner support for future funding to improve Safe Routes to Parks efforts. Measuring these short-term impacts within the project period or right after helps to determine whether your Safe Routes to Parks efforts are initially positively or negatively leading to the outcome of enhanced safe park access for all.

To measure short term impact, you will need two or more sets of data to compare with each other. You will need some type of baseline data on the conditions of the environment before the implemented change occurred. Depending on the data collection method, you may need to collect more recent data on the conditions of the environment before the change takes place. You will want to conduct observations under the same conditions for both sets of data; ideally, the same time of year, with similar weather, the same day of the week, and same time of day can be helpful in properly evaluating changes. If obstacles prevent gathering both sets of data under the same conditions, consider how the differences may have affected the results. In the end, be sure you can compare the data following the implemented change to your baseline data. It is worth noting that sometimes data takes years to become available, for example crash or crime statistics are often available a few years after they are collected, so it will be difficult to use these types of data to convey change within a short project period. On the other hand, photos are a great way to show improvements to the physical environment over a short period, which can be done by comparing the picture of the changed environment to your baseline photos of the physical area.

While collecting data on the changed environment, also assess your efforts to engage residents in advancing this work. Many communities, such as people of color and low-income individuals, have a history of being adversely impacted by changes to their environment and are often left out of the process to improve their communities. Therefore, it is key to assess your efforts to engage residents, for example, through focus groups, interviews, and surveys, all of which can provide useful information on how to conduct meaningful community engagement in the future.

Zyp BikeShare's Safe Routes to Parks Evaluations Show Early Success

2018 Safe Routes to Parks grantee Zyp Bikeshare worked to improve park access via bikeshare in Birmingham, Alabama. Zyp Bikeshare connected the Assess and Evaluate stages of the Safe Routes to Parks Framework by using pre-existing data on bikeshare dock usage to both inform project site selection and to evaluate whether their actions made a difference. Before Zyp's Safe Routes to Parks efforts, the Memorial Park bikeshare dock was consistently ranked among the five lowest-performing docks in the system. After moving the dock into the park, the dock's usage increased, suggesting that moving the dock off of a busy arterial and into the park positively impacted people's use of bikeshare.

Zyp Bikeshare evaluated another initial action. Zyp hosted a tactical urbanism pop-up event, during which they temporarily striped a bike lane and installed motivational and directional signage guiding riders from Smithfield Library to Memorial Park. Zyp surveyed riders about their perceptions of safety and comfort of the newly installed features with the goal of working with the city to install permanent bike lane striping along the route. Rather than publicize the event to the wider Birmingham community in the hopes that cycling enthusiasts would come out in droves, Zyp limited promotion of the event to the Smithfield and Titusville neighborhoods. It was much more important to meaningfully connect with neighborhood residents and understand the impact a bike lane would have on their community than create the impression of a widely attended event. The survey results showed overwhelming support for a permanent bike lane along Center Street.

During your analysis, you can use similar techniques applied to analyzing your baseline data. Findings from your analysis should help you to determine whether you prioritize the things you initially saw in your baseline data and whether any of the data proved to impact the community negatively, which helps show that your investments are data-driven and reflect the needs of your target population. If your data analysis shows that the implemented change(s) negatively impacted the community, immediate efforts should be taken to address the concerns. It is not only important to evaluate who the implemented changes are benefitting, but who may be disadvantaged, such as marginalized and vulnerable populations who have historically been adversely impacted by changes to the built environment. If your short-term evaluation doesn't prove favorable, reassess and make program improvements.

Overall, evaluating the short-term impact of your initial action can help to generate further interest and investments in Safe Routes to Parks in your community. Producing favorable evidence of short-term Safe Routes to Parks impacts helps to show the need for improving safe and equitable access to parks and displays an initial commitment to improving equitable park access. This can be used to leverage more funds and resources from your local jurisdiction or a variety of organizations to support long-term actions to improve safe and equitable access to parks.



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Measure Long-Term Impact

Changes to the physical environment can have a long-lasting positive impact on a community, a negative impact, or no benefit at all. Even though you cannot directly attribute all of the outcomes to your efforts, it is important to ensure that the changes made continue to impact the community positively after the project is done.

Though long-term evaluation of your project actions or related physical changes is essential, there can be significant challenges to accomplishing it. One of the main challenges is determining who will manage the evaluation over the long-term, beyond your project period, and how it will be funded. In the event that you do not have separate evaluation funding, advocates may be able to ask coalition partners or develop external partnerships with other groups or organizations who can fund and implement the evaluation after the project funding period. This can still present itself as an obstacle in the event that you cannot identify someone to manage and fund the evaluation, which is a severe limitation on measuring long-term impact. Therefore, it is useful if Safe Routes to Parks advocates take time during their early program planning period to identify opportunities to conduct long-term evaluation around one to three years following the grant period or implementation of Safe Routes to Parks changes.

Despite the challenges, there are opportunities for conducting long-term evaluation. For instance, there are more data collection methods than available for short-term impact evaluation. In addition to using focus groups, interviews, surveys, and observations to determine use and perceptions of the changed environment feature, you can also collect data from other sources that require at least six months to a couple of years to see changes, such as crime, crash, and health outcomes data as well as records of park use by organizations and groups. Although, it is important to note that there are many variables that can affect your ability to show impact using these data sources, such as being able to hone in on data that is specific to your impact area. Photos are also an excellent way to show changes to the environment over some time, especially if the changes occur in phases. As more time passes, the long-term evaluation also allows you to determine the number of changes to the physical environment to improve safe and equitable access to parks, such as the increase in ADA compliant facilities or ratio of sidewalks and/or bicycle lanes to roadway miles.

While collecting data on the changed environment, assess your efforts in maintaining a presence within the community, including keeping those engaged aware of the impact of the project. Safe Routes to Parks advocates can assess continued community engagement efforts by attending community-driven activities and events and conducting surveys and interviews, which can also be used as an opportunity to collect data on the perceptions and use of the changed environment after some time. Similar to short-term impact evaluation, these findings can help you to determine whether the implemented change positively impacts the community, and if not, changes should be made to address those concerns. Positive long-term evaluation results can provide greater evidence than positive short-term evaluation results, which can justify further funding and other resources to continue your Safe Routes to Parks efforts.⁵





7

Share Your Evaluation Results!

Evaluation is key to informing program planning, making continuous program improvements throughout the life of the project, as well as ensuring your efforts are positively affecting the community. One of the most rewarding parts of conducting your evaluation is sharing your results with the community, local foundations, local jurisdiction staff (e.g., transportation, planning, parks and recreation), and other decision making bodies (e.g., city council, county board, transportation or planning commissions). Be sure to clearly summarize your findings and make clear connections to how the community-identified feedback and priorities align with other community plans and initiatives. The goal is to show the positive impact of your efforts in order to create more interest in advancing Safe Routes to Parks through funded programs, policies, and environmental changes that support safe walking, rolling, and transit to parks for all.



Conclusion

Due to the vast benefits of evaluation, it should not be an afterthought, but instead thoughtfully planned during early program planning phases to ensure that you can assess what you want to learn. Advocates that are working to improve safe and equitable access to parks should make sure to develop an evaluation plan that will help them to assess their efforts to enhance physical changes in the environment, the effects on marginalized and vulnerable populations, and their efforts to engage residents throughout the process. These efforts will not only help to build awareness and support for Safe Routes to Parks, but can also provide useful information on how to conduct meaningful community engagement that can later lead to more authentic relationships with community residents while advancing this work.

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