

PITTSBURG PARKS ASSESSMENT REPORT



*A community-based
participatory research
and evaluation project*

A collaborative project of:
East County Regional Group
First 5 Contra Costa Children and Families Commission
Healthy & Active Before 5

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Abstract

In spring and fall of 2012, a collaborative team of resident advocates and early childhood health organizations assessed 22 Pittsburg city parks to determine their suitability for young children and families to play and engage in physical activity. The partners included: the East County Regional Group—a parent advocacy group comprised of residents of Pittsburg and East Contra Costa County; staff from First 5 Contra Costa Children and Families Commission; and staff from Healthy & Active Before 5 (HAB45)—a collaborative of Contra Costa agencies committed to promoting early childhood health and preventing chronic disease. During follow-up workshops, project partners: analyzed the park assessment data; identified exemplary playspaces; selected priority parks and areas in need of improvement; and developed recommendations for improvements. The partners found that the overall quality of the 22 parks assessed varied considerably. An analysis of the data showed a disparity in the quality of parks located in lower- versus higher-income neighborhoods and revealed issues specific to each park. Among parks needing improvements, four thematic priority areas emerged from the data analysis: safety, play equipment, bathrooms, and water fountains. The partners recommend immediate improvements are made to DeAnza and City Park because these parks: rated very poorly; are located in neighborhoods where poverty rates are high; have a high concentration of children under age five; and DeAnza, in particular, is located in a neighborhood with very high crime rates.

1. INTRODUCTION

Public parks are crucial community assets that promote physical activity, social cohesion, and healthy neighborhoods. Parks promote environmental health and can enhance the economic value of neighborhoods. For low-income families, access to quality, safe public parks is particularly important to facilitate social, emotional, and physical development of young children and overall community health. These opportunities for safe outdoor play are essential for promoting early childhood health and preventing chronic disease.^{1,2}

To promote increased park use among young children, a collaborative team of East Contra Costa County residents and early childhood health organizations embarked on a community-led project in spring 2012, to assess the quality of public parks in the City of Pittsburg, identifying the best parks and those in need of improvement. The collaborative partners included: the East County Regional Group (ECRG); First 5 Contra Costa Children and Families Commission; and Healthy & Active Before 5 (HAB45).

These partners convened with a shared goal of promoting outdoor play among young children and equitable environmental conditions that foster healthy, safe, and family-friendly communities.

The partners grounded their approach in the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR). As defined by Minkler and Wallerstein, CBPR is a “collaborative approach to research, [that] equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the unique strengths that each brings. CBPR begins with a research topic of importance to the community with the aim of combining knowledge and action for social change to improve community health and eliminate health disparities.”³

The following report is a summary of the park assessment findings and final recommendations. It seeks to promote immediate public and private investment in key

About the Partners

East County Regional Group (ECRG):

A group of East Contra Costa parent and community advocates whose mission is to create a healthy, safe, and family friendly community by supporting leadership development, and advocacy on behalf of young children and their families.

First 5 Contra Costa Children and Families Commission:

First 5 Contra Costa invests Proposition 10 tobacco tax revenues in local health and education programs for expectant parents and children, birth to age five. First 5-funded programs help young children grow up healthy, ready to learn, and supported in safe, nurturing families and communities. First 5 Contra Costa sponsors the ECRG.

Healthy & Active Before 5: A collaborative in Contra Costa County with a mission to prevent obesity in children ages 0-5, by building partnerships and environments for healthy eating and active play. The collaborative is led by a steering committee that includes representatives from: Contra Costa Child Care Council; Contra Costa County Employment & Human Services; Community Services Bureau; Contra Costa Health Services; Contra Costa WIC; Contra Costa Health Plan; First 5 Contra Costa; John Muir Health; Kaiser Permanente; and La Clínica de La Raza. The HAB45 advisory board is comprised of diverse interdisciplinary representation, including over 80 community organizations, public agencies, churches, funders, hospitals, and other stakeholders.

Pittsburg parks in order to foster overall community health for children and families. Finally, the report highlights a community-based methodology that served to strengthen partnerships, build leadership capacity, and empower residents through shared project ownership and participation.

2. METHODOLOGY

Prior to assessing the parks, the collaborative partners developed a park survey tool that incorporated community input, questions from an independent park survey,⁴ and information gathered through key-informant interviews with local evaluation and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) experts. The survey covered seven assessment areas: family amenities, maintenance, safety, innovative/creative play atmosphere, ADA accessibility, young child experience, and overall parent rating (Table 1). The survey included a combination of Likert scale ratings and open-ended questions to capture

| Table 1: Survey Tool, Areas Assessed | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| Category | Description |
| Family Amenities | Restrooms, seating, shade, water fountains, toys, asphalt games, sports fields, barbeque pits, picnic area |
| Maintenance | Landscaping, trees, litter, cleanliness, trash cans, maintenance of play equipment, signs, and surfaces |
| Safety | Lighting, perception of neighborhood, graffiti, noise and air pollution, visibility, protection from street traffic |
| Innovative / Creative Play Atmosphere | Unique and accessible play equipment for young children, nature, water, themed elements, art, gardens, free-standing activity panels etc. |
| ADA / Special Needs Accessibility | Ramps, wide paths, smooth surfaces, wheelchair-accessible swing, braille panels and signs, picnic areas connected by paved paths |
| Young Child Experience | Parent impression of young children's experience of the park |
| Parent Overall Rating | Parent overall rating of the park |

surveyors' observations. Partners consulted the City of Pittsburg website and staff to identify all city-owned parks, and then performed a preliminary review of the parks to confirm their locations (Appendix, Image 5). Of the 24 city parks identified on the city's website, the partners decided to exclude two from the assessment: Small World Park and Heritage Park Plaza. These parks were excluded because Small World is a fee-based amusement park and Heritage Plaza is a small, outdoor urban plaza that serves primarily as a lunch gathering place, rather than a playspace for young children. In April and September of 2012, staff and ECRG Members conducted an assessment of 22 Pittsburg parks. Upon completing the assessments, project staff compiled the survey data into an Excel spreadsheet and facilitated a series of five workshops in 2013 and 2014 with ECRG Members. During the workshops, staff and ECRG Members analyzed the survey data to identify themes across highly-rated parks and those parks in need of improvement. Partners also consulted data from the East Contra Costa County health indicator report and U.S Census Bureau^{5,6} to identify two priority parks and agree upon

recommendations for park improvements. In winter 2015, the partners and residents conducted site-visits at the priority parks to inform the final recommendations. Lastly, the partners designed a bilingual Pittsburgh park map brochure that highlights the city's highest-rated parks, and distributed over 2,300 of these maps to Pittsburgh families, childcare providers, and community-based organizations in an effort to promote increased use of the City's exemplary playspaces (Appendix, Image 8).

3. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The following assessment results primarily reflect the perspectives and needs of parents of young children who rely on parks to support their children's optimal development. For the purposes of the findings, the "Parent Overall" rating was used as an indicator of overall park quality.

HIGH-RATED PARKS

Pittsburgh has 24 parks serving its residents and surrounding communities, with an average park-per-capita rate of 4.9 acres per 1000 residents, when including undeveloped park open space.⁷ When considering only developed park space, the city has an average park-per-capita rate of 1.8 acres per 1000 residents.* 14 parks are located north of Highway 4, while 10 are located south of the Highway (Appendix, Image 5). The survey data shows that 27% of the 22 parks assessed are rated highly by parents and are not in need of improvement. Parents gave the highest overall ratings to Highlands Ranch, Mariner, Buchanan, Hillsdale, and John Henry Johnson, with the first three rating highest. Highland Ranch received the highest Parent Overall, Young Child Experience, and Innovation ratings of all the parks assessed. It also received relatively high ratings in Amenities, Maintenance, and Safety. One survey respondent remarked on Highland Ranch Park:

"An example of a perfect park!"

Another participant noted,

"It has everything you could need for individual or organized sports. Great for babies all the way up to teens. Great for parties. You see a lot of happy families."

Buchanan received high Parent Overall and Young Child Experience ratings and rated relatively high in the areas of Amenities, Maintenance, and Innovation. One parent respondent noted:

"Great park! Pond is beautiful. Lots of picnic tables, green area, and the bathrooms are clean!"

Mariner Park received very high ratings in the areas of Amenities, Maintenance, and ADA accessibility. One parent said of Mariner:

"It's a nice, clean, family park in a more suburban setting."

These comments highlight some of the elements that make Pittsburgh parks quality public spaces for parents with young children.

* Acreage per capita is calculated by dividing the total park acreage by the city population and multiplying that figure by 1,000 (e.g. (312 acres / 63,263)*1,000 = 4.9; (112/63,263)*1,000 = 1.8).

LOW-RATED PARKS

While some Pittsburg residents benefit from these highly-rated outdoor playspaces, the data shows that quality across the 22 parks varies considerably. According to Parent Overall ratings—a measure of parents' perception of overall park quality for young children—73% of the parks assessed need some kind of improvement and, nearly 23% need major improvement.

Priority Areas for Low-Rated Parks: Among parks most in need of improvements, four thematic priority areas emerged from the data analysis: safety, play equipment, bathrooms, and water fountains (Table 2). An analysis of the qualitative data showed that most negative survey comments related to one of these four priority areas. Concerning one of the most poorly-rated parks, one survey participant noted:

"It is not a park. There is a green open space [but] no tot lot or nothing for kids. It doesn't look like a park."

Another comment reveals:

"It's not safe. There's nothing here. The park is hidden in neighborhood. It appears empty and not well used. I would be afraid to come."

A parent participant commented on another poorly-rated park:

"I don't like it. The bathrooms are in very bad condition [and] there is standing water in front of the bathrooms. I didn't like the mud in the picnic area. There is only a small playground."

The issues highlighted in these comments are representative of the common themes that arose across all the lowest-rated parks. Both assessment data and community workshop discussions indicated that, in order to facilitate family access to Pittsburg parks, all poorly-rated parks in Pittsburg need improvement most to the four priority areas of safety, play equipment, bathrooms, and water fountains.

Low-Rated Parks and Poverty Rates: In addition to the survey data, Pittsburg census data shows that many of the low-rated parks are located in the city's lowest income neighborhoods (Image 1).^{8,9} Four of the five parks included in the 23% of parks needing major improvement (DeAnza, City Park, Santa Fe Linear and Columbia Linear) are located in very low-income areas (defined as areas where over a third of the population is living below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL)). Table 3 demonstrates the disparity in park quality by neighborhood socioeconomic status. The parks with the lowest ratings are generally located within lower-income areas, while the highest-rated parks tend to be located in the higher-income neighborhoods. Of the 11 parks located in low-income areas, 9% need minor improvement, 18% need some improvement, and 36% need major improvement. Conversely, among the 11 parks located in the higher income areas of the city, survey respondents identified only one park in need of major improvement. Taken together, 63% of the parks located in low-income areas are in need of some kind of improvement. It is of note that 60% of the lowest-rated parks are located in areas where more than half of the population lives in dire poverty (Table 3).

**Table 2:
Thematic Priority Areas
Across all Low-Rated
Parks**

| |
|-----------------|
| Safety |
| Play Equipment |
| Bathrooms |
| Water Fountains |

Image 1: Park ratings, percent of population under 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL)

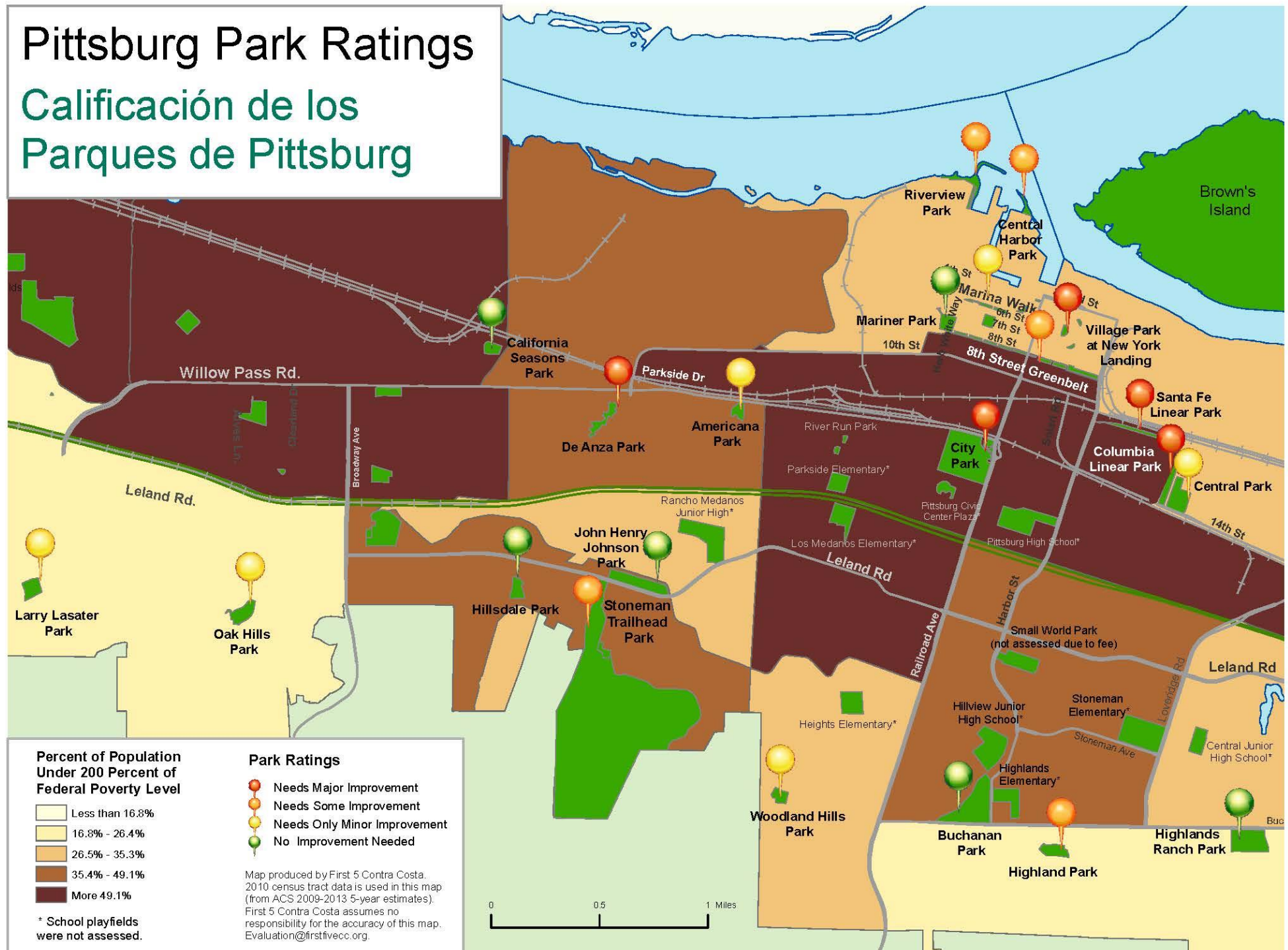


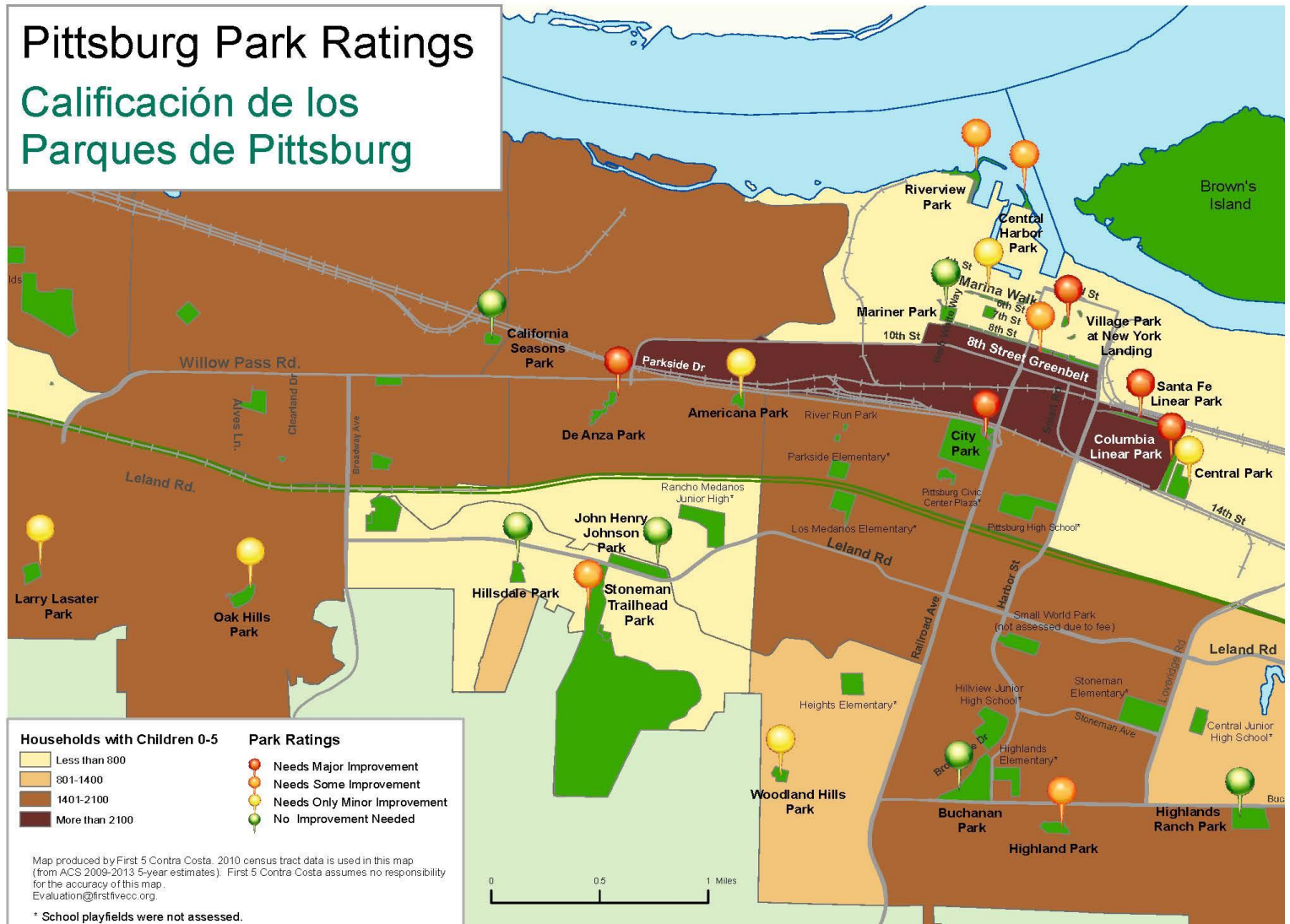
Table 3: Park ratings, stratified by percent of population living under 200% of the Federal Poverty Level in area surrounding park

| % Population Under 200% FPL | Park Name | Amenities | Maintenance | Safety | Innovation | ADA Access | Child | Parent |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------|-------------|--------|------------|------------|-------|--------|
| 16.8% - 26.4% | Highlands Ranch | 4.9 | 4.9 | 4.4 | 4.9 | 3.3 | 5.0 | 4.9 |
| | Larry Lasater | 3.4 | 4.7 | 4.0 | 3.4 | 3.3 | 3.5 | 3.9 |
| | Oak Hills | 3.9 | 4.4 | 3.4 | 2.5 | 1.6 | 3.4 | 3.7 |
| | Highlands | 2.9 | 3.3 | 3.3 | 2.8 | 1.5 | 3.8 | 2.8 |
| 26.5% - 35.3% | Mariner | 5.0 | 5.0 | 4.8 | 4.8 | 5.0 | 5.0 | 4.8 |
| | Central | 3.8 | 4.2 | 3.8 | 2.4 | 2.0 | 2.8 | 3.6 |
| | Marina Walk | 3.0 | 4.4 | 4.0 | 3.6 | 4.2 | 3.5 | 3.5 |
| | Woodland Hills | 3.0 | 3.9 | 3.4 | 2.3 | 2.6 | 3.3 | 3.3 |
| | Central Harbor | 2.4 | 3.0 | 3.2 | 1.3 | 3.6 | 1.7 | 2.4 |
| | Riverview | 3.1 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 2.2 | 2.8 | 3.3 | 2.3 |
| | Village Park at New York Landing | 1.3 | 3.5 | 4.2 | 1.2 | 3.8 | 1.0 | 1.0 |
| 35.4% - 49.1% | Buchanan | 4.4 | 4.1 | 3.7 | 4.1 | 2.2 | 4.4 | 4.7 |
| | Hillsdale | 4.4 | 4.5 | 4.2 | 4.0 | 1.8 | 4.4 | 4.4 |
| | John Henry Johnson | 4.1 | 3.8 | 3.6 | 3.3 | 3.9 | 4.6 | 4.1 |
| | Americana | 2.5 | 4.3 | 3.0 | 3.2 | 3.8 | 3.8 | 3.2 |
| | Stoneman Trailhead | 2.3 | 2.7 | 3.0 | 1.0 | 1.5 | 2.0 | 2.0 |
| | DeAnza | 1.3 | 2.4 | 2.2 | 1.0 | 1.5 | 1.3 | 1.0 |
| 49.2% or greater | California Seasons | 4.8 | 5.0 | 5.0 | 4.3 | 2.0 | 4.8 | 4.0 |
| | 8th Street Greenbelt | 2.0 | 4.0 | 3.6 | 2.0 | 1.2 | 3.0 | 2.4 |
| | City Park | 2.4 | 3.1 | 3.3 | 1.6 | 2.9 | 2.0 | 1.9 |
| | Santa Fe Linear | 1.8 | 2.5 | 3.0 | 1.7 | 3.0 | 2.6 | 1.8 |
| | Columbia Linear | 1.2 | 3.7 | 2.3 | 1.0 | 3.3 | 1.0 | 1.0 |

| | | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 4.00 – 5.00 | 3.00 - 3.99 | 2.00 - 2.99 | 1.00 - 1.99 |
| No Improvement Needed | Needs Only Minor Improvement | Needs Some Improvement | Needs Major Improvement |

Low-Rated Parks and Young Children: Overall, 50% of the Pittsburg parks assessed are located in neighborhoods with a high concentration of young children in their first five years (Image 2). Among the five lowest-ranked parks, 80% are located in areas with a high volume of young children (more than 1,400 children per census tract). In contrast, while 50% of the highest-rated parks are located in areas with a large number of young children, none of the highest-rated parks are found in neighborhoods with the City's highest population of young children (more than 2,150 per census tract). Census

Image 2: Park ratings, households with children 0-5 years of age



data further shows that 36% of all parks assessed are located in areas that are both very low-income and inhabited by a high concentration of young children.

Low-Rated Parks and Community Safety: Included among the parks located in the lowest-income neighborhoods with a high concentration of young children are DeAnza, Santa Fe Linear, Columbia Linear, and City Park. Pittsburg crime data from January

2014 through December 2014¹⁰ demonstrates that a high incidence of certain crimes occurred near (within the reporting district in which each park is located) these low-rated parks (Image 3). During this time period, 33% of the City's total aggravated assaults occurred near Santa Fe Linear and 29% took place near DeAnza Park, for a combined total of over 60% of all assaults in Pittsburg. An alarming 25% of the murders in Pittsburg happened in the neighborhood surrounding DeAnza Park. The area surrounding DeAnza Park was the site of 10% of citywide burglaries and 14% of total vehicle thefts. Lastly, DeAnza, and Santa Fe Linear have higher incidences of crimes that compromise park safety when compared to other parks in the surrounding areas. Crime reports reveal 38 counts of drug- and vandalism-related crimes occurred near Santa Fe Linear and 37 happened near DeAnza Park (Tables 4 and 5).

Image 3: DeAnza Park, Reporting District 8113 (left) and Santa Fe Linear Park, Reporting District 8205 (right)

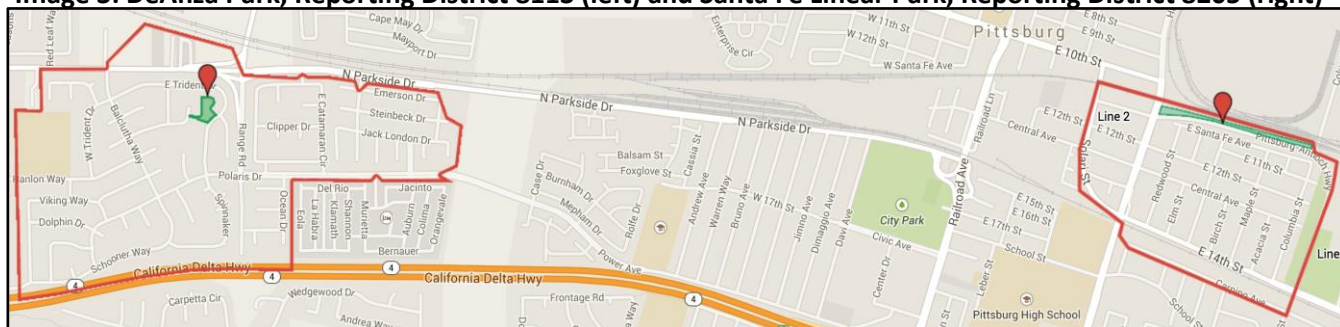


Table 4: Crimes committed in the reporting district surrounding each selected park, as a percentage of all reported crimes in Pittsburg, between 1/2014 and 12/2014

| Crime Type | DeAnza | Santa Fe Linear | Combined Total |
|---------------------|--------|-----------------|----------------|
| Aggravated Assaults | 28.77 | 32.88 | 61.65 |
| Murder | 25 | 0 | 25 |
| Motor Vehicle Theft | 14.03 | 5.69 | 19.72 |
| Burglary | 10.18 | 3.33 | 13.51 |
| Vandalism | 25 | 22 | 47 |
| Drugs | 12 | 16 | 28 |

Table 5: Number of incidents of crimes that compromise park safety committed in the reporting district surrounding each selected park, between 1/2014 and 12/2014

| Crime Type | DeAnza | Santa Fe Linear | Combined Total |
|------------|--------|-----------------|----------------|
| Vandalism | 25 | 22 | 47 |
| Drugs | 12 | 16 | 28 |

Quality Parks are Used Parks: Half of all Pittsburg parks are located in very low-income areas. Survey data shows the present state of over 50% of these parks is inadequate for young children. Research shows that the presence of parks alone does not ensure access or usability of these critical community spaces, but instead, public parks need adequate amenities, play structures, and safety to be frequented.¹¹

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the partners recommend that the parks prioritized for immediate improvements are those located in very low-income areas (areas where 35.4% of the population or more is living at or below 200% of the FPL) and those areas where the highest concentration of young children live. The partners recommend that the attention given to these parks focuses on the four priority areas of safety, play equipment, bathrooms, and water fountains.

In particular, the partners recommend that DeAnza Park and City Park (Appendix, Images 6 and 7) receive immediate and more comprehensive attention in the areas of safety, play equipment, amenities, and maintenance. While analysis of the data indicated that 73% of Pittsburg parks are in need of at least minor improvements—especially those in lower-income areas—ultimately, the partners prioritized DeAnza and City Park for immediate improvement because they: received low ratings; are located in the lowest-income neighborhoods

(where more than 35% of the population is living below 200% of the FPL); and are located in an area inhabited by a high concentration of young children under age five.¹² DeAnza Park, in particular, is located in an area of high crime violations that are of concern to park users. Consultations with City of Pittsburg staff also informed the partners' selection of priority parks. City Park and DeAnza are most adequately designed and positioned for the recommended park improvements at this time. The specific improvements recommended for the two priority parks are listed in Table 5.

“Every child deserves to be able to go down the block and enter the world of wonder that is the local park, but for many of us, a safe and clean park is not down the street but across the city. It is sad to know that only a select amount of children are allowed to have that.” –ECRG Member

| Table 5: Priority Parks, DeAnza and City Park | |
|---|---|
| Priority Area | Recommendations by Needs and Issue Areas (* indicates City Park only; † indicates DeAnza Park only) |
| Amenities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basketball courts† Bus shelters† Picnic tables† Grills† Mosquito prevention and abatement* Water fountains Walking path with ADA accessibility Multilingual signs with key numbers |
| Maintenance | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bathrooms* Garbage and recycling bins* Dog waste bags* Dumping and bulk waste vouchers† |
| Play Equipment | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Innovative playgrounds for children of all abilities, ages 0-12 |
| Safety | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lighting Video surveillance Neighborhood watch† |

The recommendations reflect a comprehensive vision for park redesign that community members assert will promote equitable park access, increased park use by young children and families, increased social cohesion, and neighborhood safety. The partners recommend that the City of Pittsburg allocate city capital improvement funds and work

with the partners to seek additional park improvement grant funding to implement the suggested renovations. Partners also encourage Pittsburgh city staff and elected officials to work with community partners—including the partners in this park assessment project—to explore other revenue generating strategies to fund the recommended park improvements at DeAnza and City Park. Lastly, the partners recommend that a coalition of local law enforcement, Pittsburgh residents, city Parks Department staff, and community safety advocates is formed to implement a robust violence prevention strategy in the neighborhoods where DeAnza, City Park, and Santa Fe Linear parks are located. Because safety in DeAnza Park, in particular, was identified as a pressing issue for residents, it is critical that community health prevention strategies are explored to address the root causes of the area’s poor park conditions.

4. CONCLUSION

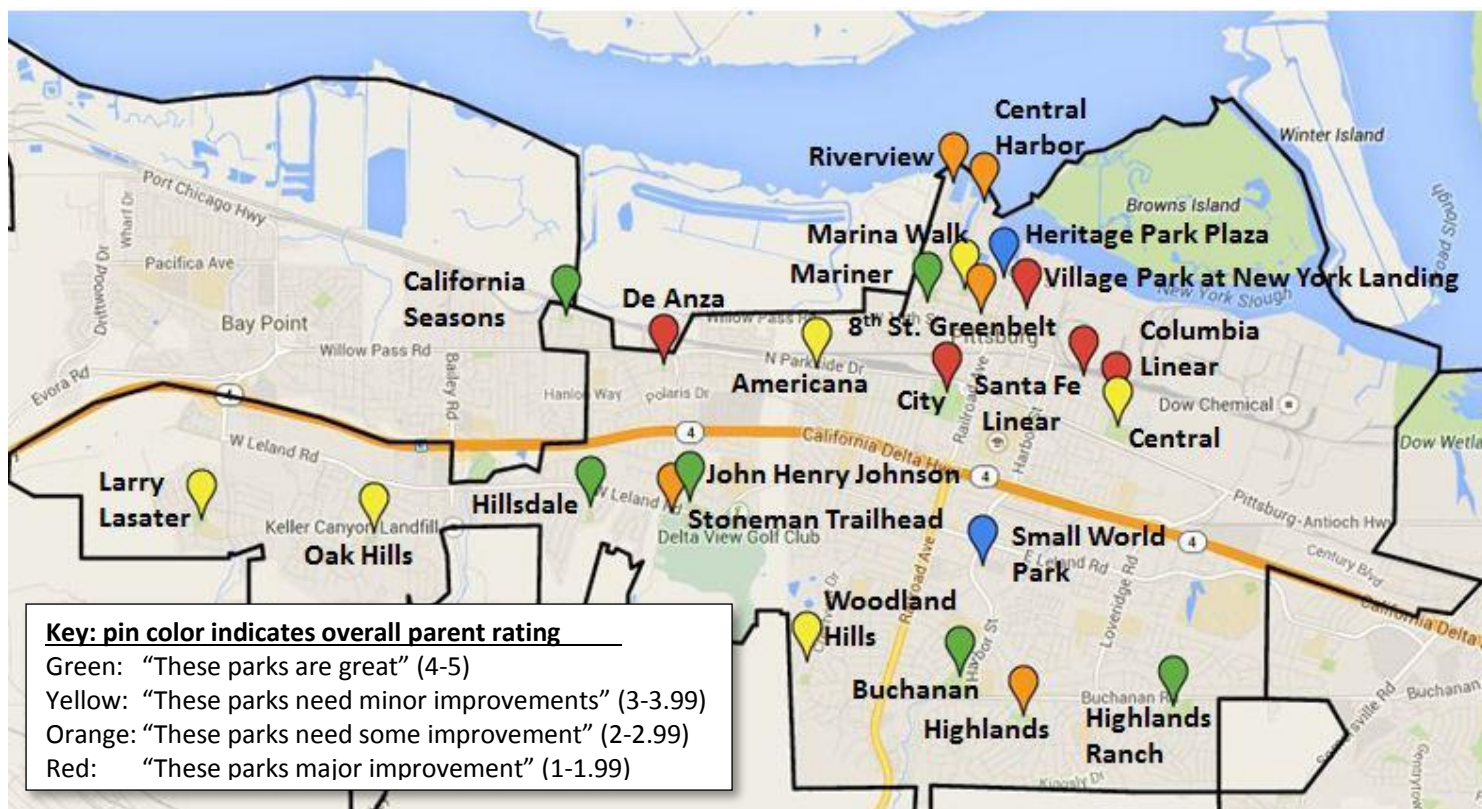
Public parks are essential spaces for promoting community health, and in particular, physical activity among families with young children. The City of Pittsburgh has many parks, some of which are excellent, and others with potential for improvement to their amenities, play equipment, safety, and maintenance. The park partners recommend that DeAnza and City Park are prioritized for immediate improvements in these four areas. These two parks not only rated very poorly on the assessments, they also are located within the lowest-income neighborhoods in Pittsburgh and are inhabited by a high concentration of young children under age five. DeAnza, in particular, is located in a neighborhood that experiences high crime incidence.

It is well established that early childhood is a critical time in the life-course for promoting health and preventing chronic disease. With improved access to quality parks in their own neighborhoods, the youngest children of Pittsburgh are more likely to benefit from opportunities for a healthy start to their lives.

The data and findings of this report are distinct in that community members were central to the park evaluation process from beginning to present. This community-based participatory project is uniquely positioned to provide rich, invaluable data and promote innovative health improvement strategies that are possible when local organizations, city governments, and residents join efforts to improve community health.

“As a kid, I spent my summers at my local park. I learned so much about the outdoors, people, and myself during those hours spent running around playing. I did not have to worry about glass in the sand, unsafe play equipment, or the lack of water fountains. I also did not have to travel far to play. I would have missed out on so many great moments and lessons if I did not have that great park by my house and, unfortunately, too many children do not have the chance to play at the park and build similar memories. I know that we can do better for our kids” –ECRG Member

APPENDIX Image 5: Pittsburg park locations by Parent Overall ratings



APPENDIX Images 6 and 7: Photos of DeAnza Park and City Park



Above: City Park. Tot lot area is small and lacks innovation. Bathrooms not always open during daylight hours. Limited access to water fountains. Left: DeAnza Park. Trash dumping, vandalism, no shade, no tot lot, limited amenities, basketball court without nets.

APPENDIX Image 8: The partners' park map, *Let's Go to the Park!*, highlighting top parent-rated parks in Pittsburg



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