

Equity in Assessment

Understanding Barriers and Opportunities to Improve Safe Park Access



Assessing Safe Routes to Parks: Local Knowledge is Key

There's a saying that when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail.

When thinking about solutions to improve park access, we each bring our experiences, background, skills, and bias to the table. As transportation professionals, we may readily see the improvements needed to street design. As park professionals, we may think the solution is improving the programming at and quality of the park. A powerful tool community residents have is their lived experience. They have inside information and local knowledge that may not be readily apparent to external organizations. Neighbors will know the informal routes people take to get to parks, which may not follow sidewalks or roads, and have opinions about parts of the community where they feel safe or not. The solutions community members identify may draw from various sectors, like transportation, public safety, and parks and recreation are more likely to actually improve park access because they are based on real challenges that they have experienced.

Everyone deserves safe and easy access to parks, but not all people and neighborhoods have that opportunity. Safe Routes to Parks is especially important in communities lacking infrastructure, such as sidewalks, crosswalks, and speed humps, to support safe walking and bicycling; where violence and crime are prevalent; and where there are high rates of weight-related diseases or conditions. Improving safe park access requires thoughtful assessment and inclusion of strategies aimed at overcoming these injustices in each stage of a community's Safe Routes to Parks efforts. This provides an opportunity to achieve optimal health for every person regardless of the color of their skin, their level of education or the job they have, their gender or sexual identity, whether or not they have a disability, or the neighborhood they live in.¹ This fact sheet offers ideas and examples of strategies to advance equity that can be included in the **Assessment** stage of Safe Routes to Parks efforts.

Working Toward Equitable Assessment

The assessment stage of the Safe Routes to Parks framework aims to identify existing barriers to local park access and begins to craft solutions to overcome those barriers. Potential strategies to conduct more equitable assessment of Safe Routes to Parks include:

- ❖ **All kinds of residents, including youth, seniors, non-English speakers, people of color, people who identify as LGBTQ, and people with disabilities, should be involved in assessment activities.** The project will benefit from additional voices, options, and perspectives being included from the beginning.

Take Action: When planning assessment events, work with partners to ensure a diverse and wide audience is invited and in attendance. Identify credible messengers in the community to conduct outreach and make invitations to community residents. Ask partners to invite their members, stakeholders, and contacts to the event. Assess your list of partners to identify any potential gaps in representation and to ensure they have a diverse and wide reach.

- ❖ **Data collection and analysis should account for various types of diversity within a community, and include qualitative data about community perceptions of park access.**

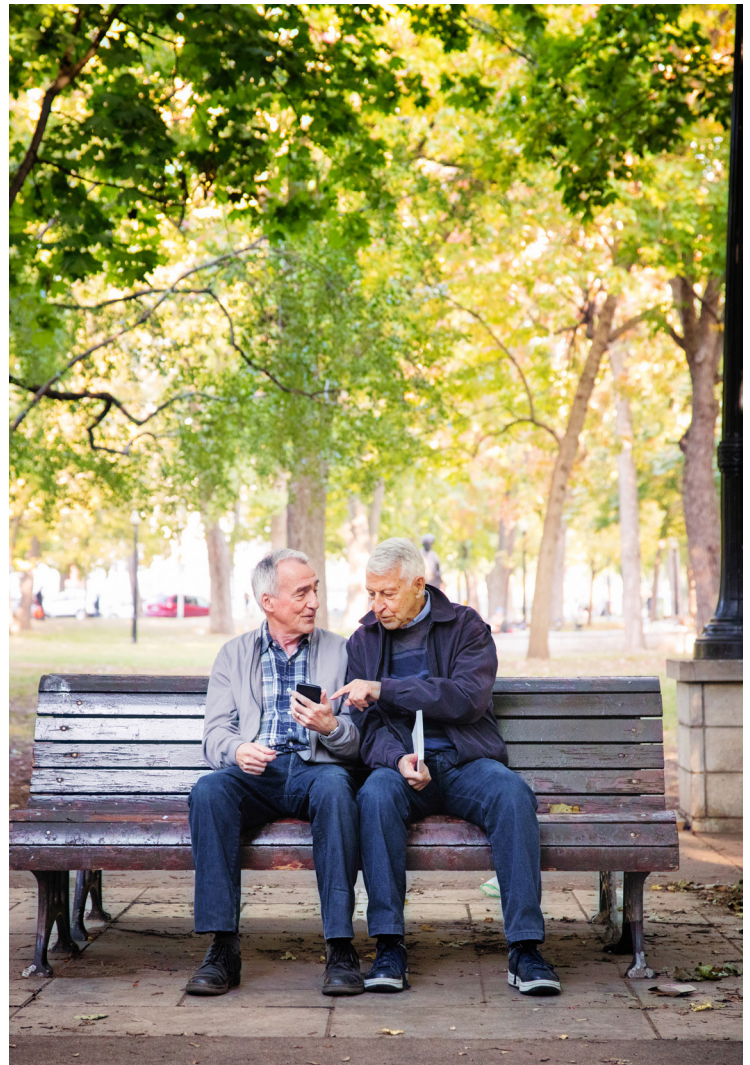
Take Action: Meet with local residents to hear their stories about the history of the neighborhood and park. Listen to why people feel unsafe walking to the park or aren't using the park at all.

- ❖ **It's essential to understand the policy and legislative landscape related to parks and park access in your community, and consider the equity implications of those landscapes, to determine where changes can be made.**

Take Action: Conduct a scan of park and transportation policies and practices, including: Complete Streets, Safe Routes to School, Vision Zero, Parks and Recreation plans and budgets, bicycle and pedestrian plans, neighborhood master plans, and comprehensive plans. When reviewing these policies, plans, and practices, consider whether they intentionally target resources toward historically disinvested communities, especially low-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods with high proportions of people of color.

- ❖ **While assessment tools like [walk audits](#) naturally seek to identify barriers to safe walking that can be improved, it's important to remember that communities have assets to build upon, too.**

Take Action: Although you may be working with community members to identify (and then collaboratively create solutions for!) challenges to safe, easy park access, be sure to provide community members the opportunity to describe the great things about their neighborhood, too. Residents can build upon their neighborhood's strengths to improve safe access to and within parks. If you do not or have not lived in the community, it's especially important that you do not frame your work as trying to fix a neighborhood's "problems."



What is *Safe Routes to Parks*?

Safe Routes to Parks aims to improve accessibility for people walking, bicycling, and taking public transportation, 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.² 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](#).

References

1. Braveman, Kumanyika, Fielding, et al. (2011). "Health Disparities and Health Equity: The Issue of Justice" American Journal of Public Health. Accessed October 15, 2018. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3222512/>.
2. Safe Routes to Parks." National Recreation and Parks Association. 2016. Accessed June 22, 2018. <https://www.nrpa.org/Safe-Routes-To-Parks/>.

Equitable Assessment in Action

CAN DO Houston is a non-profit organization working to advance healthy living through community-driven solutions in Houston, Texas. To improve Safe Routes to Parks in Houston's Near Northside neighborhood, CAN DO Houston enlisted residents who had been trained in the organization's Community Leadership and Advocacy program to lead the process. These community leaders worked with their neighbors to select parks of focus (Castillo, Irvington, Moody, and Henderson Parks), conducted [Safe Routes to Parks walk audits](#) at each of the parks, and developed a survey to understand the barriers to accessing the parks and potential solutions to overcome those challenges. The Near Northside Park Safety Survey captured information on safety, quality, features, and access to the parks. This survey occurred in conjunction with walk audits, and was also distributed to neighbors who hadn't participated in the walk audits. CAN DO Houston worked with the neighborhood leaders to analyze the data to identify the principle challenges to safely accessing the parks. The group then prioritized improvements to increase access, including reducing driver speeds, fixing cracked sidewalks, adding signage and streetlights, and removing a fence that serves as a physical barrier to the park. CAN DO Houston partnered with residents, students and staff at nearby schools, the city's department of public works, local law enforcement, and the Mayor's Office of Special Events to temporarily enhance three crosswalks with art near Castillo Park and Marshall Middle Academy of Fine Arts. This increased the visibility of crosswalks between the park and school that is often used by students and drew attention to the need for a permanent enhancement of these crosswalks. CAN DO Houston is a 2018 grantee of the Safe Routes to Parks Activating Communities program.



CAN DO Houston hosted a meeting with various partner organizations to coordinate efforts around improving safety, walkability, park access, and infrastructure in the Near Northside community.