



**National  
Recreation  
and Park  
Association** 22377 Belmont Ridge Rd.  
Ashburn, VA 20148-4501 703-  
858-0784  
Fax 703-858-0794  
www.nrpa.org

## **ACTIVE LIVING BEHAVIORS**

### **A Fact Sheet on Physical Activity, Obesity and the Role of Parks and Recreation**

#### **National Statistics on Physical Activity and Obesity**

- 60% of U.S. adults do not get enough physical activity to provide health benefits.<sup>1</sup>
- 30% of U.S. adults are completely sedentary.<sup>2</sup>
- In 2000, the total cost of obesity in the United States was estimated to be \$117 billion.<sup>1</sup>
- Of children and adolescents aged 6-19 years, 15%--about 9 million young people--are considered overweight.<sup>1</sup>
- According to a U.S. physical activity statistics data report from 36 states, between 1988-2002 the U.S. population reported that their leisure-time physical activity decreased from about 31% in 1989 to 29% in 1992 and further to 25% in 2002.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most important issues communities face today is a staggering increase in the rates of obesity and chronic disease. Active Living is a way of life that integrates at least 30 minutes of physical activity into daily routines. Individuals may do this in a variety of ways such as walking to work, bicycling to school, playing in the park, and even working in the yard.

The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) conducted the Active Living Approaches by Local Government survey in winter and spring 2004. The survey was mailed to the Chief Administrative Officers in municipalities with populations 10,000 and over. Out of 3,246 municipalities surveyed, 959 responded (29.5%). **The following survey results highlight the role of parks and recreation in addressing obesity.**

#### **Local Government's Role, a Report from Municipal Administrators**

- Nearly 67% of Municipal Administrator's surveyed said that physical activity opportunities (such as walking to work or playing in the park) were an important issue to the residents of their community.<sup>2</sup>
- Of the 959 respondents, nearly 65% said that it is very important for local government to encourage and provide physical activity opportunities for community residents.<sup>2</sup>
- According to those surveyed, nearly 55% said that they believe that the relationship between community layout/design and the ability for residents to be physically active is an important policy issue.<sup>2</sup>

- Nearly 33% of Municipal Administrator's surveyed said that it would take strong community support and local government leadership (26%) to achieve active living communities.<sup>2</sup>
- Overall, respondents agreed that local parks and recreation departments (nearly 89%) should take *the* leading role in developing a community conducive to active living.<sup>2</sup>
- 84% of Municipal Administrator's surveyed said that they are currently supporting recreational programs that encourage active living in their community.<sup>2</sup>
- According to those respondents, 45% say that currently their communities' highest action item is to address the need for developing cohesive systems of parks and trails, and incorporating accessible neighborhood parks.<sup>2</sup>
- 67% of respondents said that the primary barrier facing communities in promoting active living behaviors is a lack of funding, staff, or resources.<sup>2</sup>
- Overall, funding proved to be the factor in asserting leadership to address the barriers a community faces in promoting active living behaviors.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov); Preventing Chronic Diseases: Investing Wisely in Health, Preventing Obesity and Chronic Diseases through Good Nutrition and Physical Activity, <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdoh%efactsheets/oeoa.htm>  
Internet Downloaded, September 2004.

<sup>2</sup> International City/County Management Association, [www.icma.gov](http://www.icma.gov); Active Living Approaches by Local Government, 2004, <http://www2.icma.org/main/ld.aso?ldid=18012&hsid=1&tpid=31>  
Internet Downloaded, September 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov); U.S. Physical Activity Statistics 1986-2002 No Leisure-Time Physical Activity Trend Chart  
<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdhdnhsicalstatsushsicalactiveleisuretime.htm>  
Internet Downloaded, September 2004.



## QUICKFACTS

### The Health Benefits of Parks and Recreation

Park and recreation services play a vital role in creating active and healthy communities. However, your community leaders may not be aware of the direct contribution that parks and recreation play in shaping community health. Here are some facts that can be used to convey the health and physical activity benefits of parks and recreation. These facts are the result of rigorous scientific studies across different age groups, communities, and across a variety of park and recreation services.

#### Did you know that...

- Two-thirds of older adults who visit parks report moderate or high levels of physical activity during their visit? <sup>1</sup>
- Active users of public parks have a lower body mass index (a ratio between weight and height) than did people who use parks passively or not at all? <sup>1</sup>
- People who visited parks for longer periods of time (one hour or more) had significantly lower systolic blood pressures than those who only stayed for short periods of time (less than one hour)? <sup>2</sup>
- Park users who were more physically active and who made frequent contact with friends through their leisure time were less likely to report feeling depressed? <sup>1</sup>
- Users of a community-based senior wellness program had significantly higher endurance levels, even after controlling for their level of physical activity? <sup>3</sup>
- Stress relief, clearing one's mind, and exercise were the most common benefits that older adults attributed to their park visits? <sup>1</sup>
- People who visited parks with companions (as opposed to visiting alone) reported significantly higher levels of physical health? <sup>2</sup>
- Citizens who had better access to parks, visited parks more frequently, and engaged in physically-active park behaviors also made fewer visits to their doctor (for reasons other than a regular check-up)? <sup>1</sup>

- People who visited parks more frequently were more likely to have a positive perception of their general health? <sup>1</sup>
- Fifty-percent of older adults who participated in light to moderate aerobic park activity reported being in a better mood after visiting parks? <sup>4</sup>
- Research subjects who drove through a simulated park environment recovered more quickly from stressful situations than those who drove past a simulated environment dominated by built structures? <sup>5</sup>
- Older adults who engaged in a broad repertoire of park and recreation activities were more likely to report higher levels of perceived physical health? <sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Godbey, G., Roy, M., Payne, L. L., & Orsega-Smith, E. (1998). *Final Report on the Health and Park Use Study*, The National Recreation and Park Association.

<sup>2</sup> Orsega-Smith, E., Mowen, A., Payne, L., & Godbey, G. (2004). The interaction of stress and park use on psycho-physiological health in older adults. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 36(2),232-257.

<sup>3</sup> Orsega-Smith, E., Payne, L. L., & Godbey, G. (2003). Outcomes associated with participation in a community parks and recreation based wellness program for older adults. *Journal of Aging and Physical Activity*, 11(4),516-531.

<sup>4</sup> Godbey G., & Blazey, M. (1983). Old people in urban parks: An exploratory investigation. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 15, 229-244.

<sup>5</sup> Parsons, R., Tassinary, L. G., Ulrich, R. S., Hebl, M. R., & Grossman,-Alexander, M. (1998). The view from the road: Implications for stress recovery and immunization. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 18,113-140.

<sup>6</sup> Payne, L. L., Mowen, A. J., & Montoro-Rodriguez, J. (2006). The role of leisure style in maintaining the health of older adults with arthritis. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 38(1)

Fact Sheet assembled by Penn State University  
QuickFacts compiled by:

Andrew J. Mowen, Ching-Hua Ho, Laura L. Payne, Elizabeth Orsega-Smith, Geoffrey C. Godbey

