



# Fair Play

## Advancing Health Equity through Shared Use

*Low-income communities and communities of color often have the fewest resources for physical activity. These inequities in access to recreational space are reflected in disparities in health outcomes. Shared use can be an effective strategy for reducing race- and income-based health disparities.*

Over the past several years, shared use has emerged as a promising strategy for creating opportunities for physical activity, particularly in places where recreational space is scarce. Too many cities and towns lack the resources residents need to be active, and finding safe, accessible, and affordable spaces to exercise and play is more challenging than it ought to be. Further, because recreational space is not equitably distributed, not everyone has the same opportunities to be active. Low-income communities and communities of color are far less likely to have access to places to be active, and these communities are also less likely to have sufficient resources to create new recreational spaces. Shared use can play a role in helping to address this inequity and the resulting health disparities.

This fact sheet provides public health advocates and shared use practitioners with an introduction to shared use as a strategy for reducing race- and income-based disparities in recreational access. It also highlights three considerations – safety, maintenance, and transportation – that may be of particular concern to low-income communities and communities of color as they assess different shared use arrangements.



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## Reducing Health Disparities by Increasing Opportunities for Physical Activity

When it comes to recreational space, not all neighborhoods are created equal. Low-income communities and communities of color consistently have the fewest recreational facilities.<sup>1-4</sup> Neighborhoods where residents are predominantly people of color or low-income are significantly more likely than white or high-income neighborhoods to have no recreational facilities at all.<sup>1</sup> Even where there are recreational facilities, there are often other barriers to access, such as safety concerns, lack of transportation to and from the facilities, and poor maintenance due to inadequate funding.<sup>5,6</sup> The result: low-income communities and communities of color often have the fewest opportunities for physical activity.<sup>3,7</sup>

These inequities in access to recreational space are reflected in disparities in health outcomes. Lack of physical activity is associated with a number of negative health outcomes that already disproportionately affect communities of color, including obesity and increased risk of heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, depression, and some cancers.<sup>6,8-10</sup>

Shared use has the potential to be an effective tool in reducing these health disparities by increasing opportunities for physical activity. Because it makes use of existing facilities, shared use is a particularly potent tool in under-resourced neighborhoods where a lack of funding prevents the development of new parks or recreational facilities and limits maintenance and upkeep of existing facilities.



### What is Shared Use?

Shared use – also called joint use or community use – occurs when government entities, or sometimes private organizations, agree to open or broaden access to their facilities or other recreational spaces for community use.



### The Many Forms of Shared Use

Though shared use has traditionally involved opening up school playgrounds and fields for community use, it can take many different forms. Successful shared use arrangements have occurred in a diverse range of settings, involved a variety of partners (or no partners at all), and pursued unique goals. Here are a few examples of possible arrangements:

- An agreement between a city and a utility district to allow a community group to plant a community garden on utility district land
- A government agency acting alone to open its office buildings during the winter months to give residents a place to walk
- A community organization hosting free Zumba classes in local schools and churches
- A hospital developing a public walking trail on its property

Shared use is often set up through a formal written agreement between the property owner and the party looking to gain access to the property.<sup>11</sup> However, shared use can be, and often is, more than that; community use of facilities policies, open use policies, and even informal arrangements can create successful shared use partnerships.<sup>12-14</sup> The key is not to get hung up on the mechanism through which shared use might occur. What is most important is that shared use is a worthwhile strategy, and it can be tailored to the specific needs of a community.<sup>15</sup>

## Moving Beyond Access: Safety, Maintenance, & Transportation

Creating meaningful and equitable access to recreational space is about more than simply opening the gates to a schoolyard. Aside from making a space physically accessible – an important first step – there are three elements of access that are often particularly relevant to low-income communities and communities of color: safety, maintenance, and transportation.

### SAFETY

Communities with scarce resources and communities of color often identify safety as one of the biggest barriers to the use of existing recreational facilities.<sup>16–18</sup> The *perception* that public spaces are unsafe – in addition to *actual* crime or violence – can prevent residents from accessing those spaces for physical activity. Residents may not feel safe traveling to a local park or playground, and insufficient lighting, secluded paths and areas, and the presence of homelessness and drug use can further deter people from using parks and other recreational spaces.<sup>5</sup> Facilities that are accessible but poorly maintained may also seem unfit for use. While the perception that recreational spaces are unsafe can limit physical activity opportunities for all residents, safety concerns tend to disproportionately limit the activity of women,<sup>19,20</sup> children,<sup>21</sup> and the elderly.<sup>22</sup>

At minimal cost, recreational spaces can be modified to promote safety through the principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED).<sup>23,24</sup> For example, to reduce safety concerns among residents, shared use sites should have adequate lighting, ample sightlines (allowing users to see and be seen by other users), and allow informal monitoring of behavior.<sup>5</sup> While some communities may want security or law enforcement present in recreational spaces, it is critical that any efforts to increase police presence remain sensitive to community concerns about inequitable policing and police violence.<sup>25</sup>

Residents in many low-income communities and communities of color may feel the recreational spaces available to them are unsafe. But a well-used public space can in fact reduce violent crime, and be a social and community resource.<sup>27</sup> Parks, trails, and other common recreational spaces can help create and enhance family and community ties by increasing interaction, decreasing isolation and crime, and encouraging volunteerism.<sup>27–29</sup> Social interaction through physical activity and recreation can also help residents foster relationships and connect with people of different neighborhoods, classes, and races.<sup>30,31</sup>

### The Principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design<sup>23,24</sup>

CPTED principles have been adopted in cities across the world to modify the built environment in ways that discourage criminal activity. Some principles of CPTED are relevant to the design of recreational space:

- **Territoriality**  
Creating a sense of community ownership and pride
- **Activity Support**  
Encouraging intended, noncriminal uses of recreational spaces
- **Access Control**  
Directing movement with clear entryways and pedestrian paths, while ensuring that access is restricted when necessary (e.g., at night, during the school day)
- **Natural Surveillance**  
Putting “eyes on the street” by creating clear sightlines and ample lighting
- **Maintenance**  
Fostering a positive image of a recreational space to discourage crime and reduce fear of crime

The Community Safety Initiative of the Local Initiatives Support Commission provides an overview of CPTED principles and examples of communities putting CPTED into action.<sup>26</sup>



## MAINTENANCE

Maintenance and upkeep of recreational facilities can be challenging in under-resourced areas. Often the public entity that owns the land – the school district, city, or county, for instance – is hesitant to divert limited funds to the upkeep of existing facilities. But poorly maintained facilities can discourage people from being physically active. Inadequate or deteriorating facilities may be less appealing, and improper maintenance can pose safety and liability concerns.<sup>32</sup>

For example, residents may be less likely to use a playground if the equipment is broken or if the blacktop is significantly cracked. Likewise, they may be more likely to get injured due to inadequate maintenance of the space and its structures. Although addressing inequities in public funding should be a central part of any long-term campaign to reduce disparities in recreational access, shared use agreements and other mechanisms for creating successful shared use partnerships can be part of a solution in the short-term.<sup>11</sup> For instance, a nonprofit organization, like a Boys and Girls Club, could offer to cover a portion of the maintenance costs for school athletic fields, and/or assume some level of responsibility in the event of an injury, in exchange for the school district allowing the Boys and Girls Club priority use of the fields during certain times.



## Overcoming the Liability Barrier

Many parties interested in shared use are fearful of liability and cite it as a reason not to open up their facilities. Sometimes this fear is a real hurdle, complicating potential shared use opportunities. Other times it is merely a perception of fear that can be overcome with the right tools. For example, by using prudent risk management strategies, such as regularly inspecting and maintaining property, carrying the proper insurance, and distributing legal risk through shared use agreements, parties can often overcome any liability concerns that potentially stand in the way of a successful shared use partnership.<sup>33</sup> ChangeLab Solutions has published a [primer on liability](#) to help shared use partners overcome this barrier.

## TRANSPORTATION

Transportation barriers can limit access to recreational spaces. When selecting a shared use site, it is important to consider whether the recreational space is accessible by foot, bike, and public transit.<sup>34,35</sup> Streets in low-income neighborhoods are far less likely to have sidewalks and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure than high-income areas, limiting residents' ability to walk or bike to the site.<sup>36,37</sup> These considerations are particularly salient in neighborhoods where residents are concerned about safety and violence – even if the recreational space is safe and welcoming for people of all ages and genders, the routes residents travel to get to that space must also be safe and convenient. In rural areas where resources are geographically dispersed, it is crucial to understand the transportation patterns of the community. Shared use efforts should be targeted to locations that are widely accessible to the community, as determined through a robust community engagement process.

Safety, maintenance, and transportation are three primary concerns associated with creating meaningful access to recreational space in low-income communities and communities of color. While a number of other concerns may arise in the process of implementing a shared use arrangement – liability, insurance, scheduling, and staffing, for example – ChangeLab Solutions has published a number of resources, including a [shared use toolkit](#), a [checklist for developing a shared use agreement](#), and a [comprehensive webpage](#), dedicated to helping communities address these concerns.

## Keeping an Equity Focus

### ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY

Before opening facilities for shared use, the parties involved must evaluate community interest. Meaningful community engagement will ensure that shared use efforts target locations, facilities, and programming that residents prioritize. Flexibility is also key – shared use is not the right strategy for every community. A community may already have access to sufficient recreational facilities, or maybe residents feel other issues are more pressing. Even when shared use is a community priority, advocates must be sensitive to concerns about community identity and stability. Investment in recreational areas and parks can increase local property values, and in turn increase property tax revenues for local governments, but such economic benefits may raise valid concerns about displacement and gentrification.<sup>38–40</sup> Accordingly, one of the goals of a robust community engagement process should be to ensure that whatever recreational opportunities are created sufficiently meet and respect the needs of existing residents.

For more information on community engagement in the context of shared use, see the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s *Practitioner’s Guide for Advancing Health Equity*. It provides advice for public health practitioners on how to involve community members in health initiatives, including shared use, and includes a set of “questions for reflection” to help develop a community engagement approach. Additionally, Salud America!’s research review, *Using Shared Use Agreements*

*and Street-Scale Improvements to Support Physical Activity among Latino Youths*, includes examples of communities where thoughtful engagement and stakeholder cooperation resulted in successful shared use arrangements in communities of color.

### MAKE USE OF DATA

Individuals and groups interested in promoting shared use should keep an up-to-date inventory of communities that have the greatest need for recreational space in order to target shared use efforts in these areas. They should also compile a list of spaces and facilities that may be appropriate for shared use. With their specialized resources and expertise, local health and planning departments may be uniquely suited to undertake or support these efforts. Data and maps on potential shared use sites can help proponents of shared use work with communities to ensure that the sites are accessible in the most holistic sense possible.

For example, successful data collection and inventory efforts may be conducted by interviewing school administrators,<sup>41</sup> conducting telephone surveys,<sup>42</sup> and/or analyzing existing data to gather information and identify community needs.<sup>43,44</sup> One successful effort to collect and analyze data on potential shared use sites was undertaken by the Honolulu County Department of Parks and Recreation, which hired an independent agency to assess the shared use potential of each of the county’s high schools.<sup>41</sup>





## THINK UPSTREAM

It is important to acknowledge that shared use does not address all of the systemic inequalities that pervade our political and social systems. That is to say, shared use is not a substitute for adequate funding to develop or upgrade recreational facilities in low-income communities and communities of color. A successful shared use arrangement is not a comprehensive solution to address the significant disparities in access to recreational space; to present it as such could reduce political urgency around these disparities. Rather, shared use should be one part of a much larger strategy to increase recreational access, pursued in concert with other strategies aimed at reducing health inequities.

Advocates for social and racial justice must continue to look at the root causes of health disparities. In the shared use context, one way to have a greater impact would be to address inequities in funding for recreational facilities.<sup>4,45,46</sup> For a framework on how to work toward equity in recreational funding, research from the Los Angeles metropolitan region may serve as a case study.<sup>45,47</sup> In addition, ChangeLab Solutions authored a *Complete Parks Playbook* that includes a chapter on community-based strategies for financing the development of parks and recreational facilities.

## The Benefits of Equity-Focused Shared Use

- Shared use makes use of existing resources to increase opportunities for physical activity at low cost, which can be especially beneficial in communities with few opportunities for physical activity and scant resources.
- Shared use can revitalize existing, underused recreational spaces by opening them up for community use.
- Shared use sites can be a community resource, where residents can socialize, feel a sense of community ownership, and create an environment that is welcoming and safe for everyone.
- Well-used recreational space can place more eyes on the street, which discourages criminal activity.
- The presence of recreational space can increase the value of neighboring properties.
- Spending time outdoors and living near a recreational space can have psychological and physiological benefits, including reduced stress and lowered blood pressure.

## Beyond Access: Creating Community Resources

Creating access to new or existing recreational spaces may not be enough to encourage community use of those spaces. Community engagement is essential not only to determine which locations are desirable, but also to identify what kinds of programming would appeal to residents. People are more likely to visit and be active in recreational spaces when organized programming, such as fitness classes, walking groups, or organized sports, is offered.<sup>27,48</sup>

### CASE STUDY: PARKS AFTER DARK IN LOS ANGELES<sup>27</sup>

In 2010, as a part of a comprehensive gang violence reduction strategy, Los Angeles County partnered with the County Department of Parks and Recreation on a new program called Parks After Dark. Parks After Dark was implemented in neighborhoods with high rates of gang violence. The groups involved wanted to increase the use of parks as social and community resources, allow residents to interact with neighbors, and provide recreational opportunities for youth in order to decrease youth participation in at risk behavior. Parks After Dark extended parks' open hours during summer evenings, increased law enforcement presence, and offered organized recreational activities, educational programs, and health and social service resource fairs. The program started in the summer of 2010; by 2013, the Parks After Dark areas showed a 32 percent decrease in serious and violent crimes and a 44 percent decrease in non-violent and low-level offenses. This reduction in crime was estimated to reduce county expenditures on crime by \$155,000 for law enforcement, \$153,000 for legal and adjudication costs, and \$152,000 for custody and supervision costs for each park. This totals \$460,000 in savings per Parks After Dark site per summer.

## Conclusion

Shared use can, and should, be used as a tool for advancing health equity, as it can be an effective strategy for reducing race- and income-based health disparities. But when promoting shared use in under-resourced communities, context matters. Lack of physical activity is rarely the only or primary concern for community members that do not have adequate access to recreational space. Poverty, poor educational outcomes, environmental pollution, and crime are often more immediate concerns than access to spaces for exercise and play. However, when public health advocates thoughtfully engage with community members to develop shared use sites with facilities and programming that meet community needs, shared use can have broad and lasting benefits.

*ChangeLab Solutions is a nonprofit organization that provides legal information on matters relating to public health. The legal information in this document does not constitute legal advice or legal representation. For legal advice, readers should consult a lawyer in their state.*

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