

Millions of Americans lack access to quality parks - 20 May, 2020

1. What did you think of the article?
2. Was it easy to understand the main ideas?
3. Do you think the same is true of parks in other cities in the world or is this just a North American issue?
4. What do you think about green spaces here in Santiago?
5. How do green spaces add value to our lives?
6. How does spending time in green spaces reduce our levels of stress and help our physical and mental health?
7. How do we get people to use parks more?
8. How can we encourage governments to create more green spaces?
9. How far are you from your nearest public park? Do you ever go? Why or why not?
10. If something "hits hard", what is the effect?
11. If something is "unprecedented", what is it?
12. If you are "preparing for a fight", what are you doing?
13. Final thoughts.

Poor investment in public parks for many years means 100 million Americans, including 27 million children, have no access to nearby green spaces during the coronavirus lockdown, according to a new report.

Many people have been really grateful for their local parks during the pandemic because schools, gyms and walking trails have closed to reduce physical contact and stop the virus. Many studies have shown that spending time in green spaces reduces stress and is good for the physical and mental health of adults and children.

But the report by the Trust for Public Land (TPL) shows big differences in access. For example, 98% of people in Washington, in Minneapolis and in Saint Paul, Minnesota are within a ten-minute walk of a park. But, less than 50% of people in cities like Charlotte, North Carolina, Mesa, Arizona and Oklahoma City are within a ten-minute walk of a park.

Even inside cities, access to green spaces is also different. Poorer families and people of colour are least likely to live close to parks with basic amenities like toilets, playgrounds and basketball courts.

For example, in New York City, where the Mayor, Bill de Blasio, promised to open 100 miles of streets to pedestrians and cyclists, the places with least park access include Morris Park in the Bronx and Corona in Queens. These are both mainly black and brown neighbourhoods where coronavirus has hit hard.

As summer comes closer, it's clear that public parks will play an important role in giving safe, cheap leisure spaces to millions of people unable to work or travel. But the report suggests local governments might reduce park budgets because of the unprecedented economic challenges as a result of the lockdowns.

A survey of 300 parks by the National Recreation and Park Association found that about half had already been told to cut budgets by 10% to 20% for the current financial year. All over the US, the parks system took years to recover from budget cuts after the Great Recession. The economic effect of the coronavirus pandemic will probably be worse.

“Park supporters are preparing for a fight,” said Bill Lee, the senior vice-president at TPL. The organization is asking the federal government to give financial help to parks. “We need our parks, and we will not allow park systems to be victims of the Covid-19 pandemic.”

But there is some hope for environmental activists. The crisis could make people see how important parks are. This might encourage local activists to fight for fair access. Rue Mapp, the founder and CEO of Outdoor Afro, said: “This is an opportunity for us to rethink public lands. Many people think that nature is somewhere that you have to drive to, but we can change that idea.”