Citizen and Administrator Perspectives of Equity in the Delivery of Park Services

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Abstract This paper addresses the issue of what constitutes fairness and equity in the allocation of park resources. Four alternative equity models are presented. A general population sample and a sample of park and recreation directors were surveyed to gain empirical insights into which of these models the two groups perceived to be most appropriate for governing the allocation of park resources. Both samples overwhelmingly supported the view that parks should be allocated to all areas equally, rather than on the basis of need, demand, or amount of taxes paid. There was a lack of consensus on whether entrance fees should be set at a level that recovers operating costs. Implications of the findings are discussed.

Key Words: parks, equity, user fees, allocation of resources, distribution.

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Introduction

The emergence of an era of scarcity in many local government jurisdictions in the United States has stimulated public debate concerning the appropriate role of government in service provision. The resulting changes have created complex dilemmas for park administrators to which there are no simple solutions. For example, a reduction in general fund revenues caused by a middle-class tax revolt may require a reduction in relatively discretionary services such as parks. However, at the same time, agencies may face class-action legal suits by disadvantaged client groups who feel they are being inadequately serviced by the diminished service levels. Additional questions concerning optimal and acceptable allocation patterns are likely to arise as local governments become more decentralized, departments become more proprietary, and a marketing approach to the delivery of services is adopted. These dilemmas account for the increasing attention that is being focused upon allocation decisions.

Research in the leisure field evaluating local service delivery has primarily been limited to investigations concerned exclusively with the efficiency and effectiveness of service production, and studies that have examined service allocation or equity are conspicuously absent. Equity is concerned with the perceived fairness of resource allocation patterns. Two sets of decisions are involved in the delivery of park services. The first, which addresses the fairness (equity) issue concerns the question, “Who gets what?” or in normative terms, “Who ought to get what?” (Laswell, 1958). These decisions are concerned with how much target clienteles are (or should be) allocated resources for park services. This constitutes the focus of the present study. After the “Who gets what” question has been answered, the subsequent decisions of when, where, and how, which are concerned with physical distribution, can be addressed.

The emerging concern with equity has been stimulated primarily by two factors (Crompton and Lamb, 1983a: 29). First, this is an era of retrenchment in government spending. In the past, governments often responded to claims of inequitable treatment in service allocation by increasing the total budget and providing additional resources to alleviate the criticism. This approach enabled decisionmakers to avoid having to make hard judgments as to who should get what. This expedient approach is no longer possible in many jurisdictions. In this changed environment, the definitional question of service allocation—“Who gets what”—may need to be rephrased as “Who keeps what and who loses what?” (Masotti and Lineberry, 1978: 11), which invites closer scrutiny of the fairness of a service’s allocation.

The second factor stimulating interest in equity is the potential interventionist role of the courts. In recent years, suits have been filed against local governments alleging inequitable allocation of public park and recreation resources. The most recent of these cases were the suits filed by public interest groups and the United States Justice Department against the Chicago Park District. These were finally resolved in 1984 after four years in the court system and total legal costs exceeding ten million dollars. One of the outcomes of these suits was an agreement by the Chicago Park District that it would spend sixty million dollars over the next six years to renovate and build parks and recreation programs in black and Hispanic neighborhoods.

The Conceptual Basis of Equity

The government frequently provides services that society deems necessary but the free market is not capable of producing. These services generally fall into two categories: (1) public goods, such as defense, and (2) social welfare services, which often address disparities created by social and economic conditions.

The specific criteria used to evaluate the success of social welfare services in meeting broad societal objectives are efficiency, effectiveness, and equity. The consideration of equity decisions for government (that is, who ought to get what) is critical because the role of public agencies tends to be monopolistic.

On a macro level, political philosophers have repeatedly examined issues concerning governments’ allocation of resources among constituents. John Rawls’ (1971) treatise, A Theory of Justice, and the many works published by those reacting to that
book, have drawn attention to the equity issue. Rawls suggests that service allocation decisions be based on guidelines embraced by what he terms, “The Difference Principle.” The crux of this allocational model is summarized by Merget (1981: 406), who states that “the Difference Principle permits the redistribution of resources across society’s members in order to improve the relative condition of those worse off. Redistribution may occur even if some members are made worse off providing they were among the better off.” Commenting on the difference principle, Crompton and Lamb (1983a: 32) state, “It accepts plurality and preserves privilege. Such inequalities are justified because of the incentives they offer the more talented and productive to use their knowledge, skills and capital to raise the level of the least advantaged.”

Linkages between Rawls’ theory and pragmatic service allocation decisions are tenuous. It has been pointed out by Merget (1981: 406) that the application of Rawlsian theory to day-to-day service delivery decisions may not always be possible due to “the real world of political bargaining where the resources of power are not uniformly distributed.” Politicians, self-serving citizen groups, and bureaucrats may not embrace Rawls’ philosophy. Merget ultimately concludes that the practical message of Rawls’ theory is the recognition of the profound importance of the allocational process as well as the distributional outcomes.

Rawls’ work establishes a basis for developing general guidelines for allocating park and recreation resources. It suggests that determination of the appropriate model of equity should evolve through consideration of three basic principles: (1) equal opportunity should be recognized as the point of departure; (2) deviations from this point of departure should be encouraged if they benefit the least advantaged; (3) there should, in all cases, be a stated minimum level or floor below which quantity or quality should not fall. This process provides administrators with a base from which to assess the equity of service allocations in their agencies (Crompton and Lamb, 1983b; Lucy et al., 1977; Rich, 1979).

The method most frequently used in empirical investigations of equity has been to plot service distribution by a selected unit of analysis and then to apply an equity model to the resulting pattern of distribution (Lineberry, 1977). However, it can be argued that the study and understanding of equity should precede an analysis of distribution, rather than follow it. That is, the desired allocation pattern (definition of equity) should be defined and then compared to the existing service distribution pattern. This latter approach counters the criticism offered by Merget and Berger (1982: 22) that “the accent of empirical research is on disparities rather than inequities.”

Establishment of an equity model to guide allocation decisions requires that participants in the decisionmaking process understand the available equity options. In addition, awareness of perceptions of equity alternatives by conflicting groups is likely to provide insight that may foster a consensus about service delivery goals. Crompton and Lamb (1983a: 30) highlight the need to resolve group differences when they state, “Agreement by decision-makers and agency personnel on the appropriate equity model to be used is essential inasmuch as this governs and guides all of the subsequent distribution decisions.”

The notions of fairness, or equity, held by directors of municipal recreation and park departments are likely to have a substantial impact on service distribution patterns (Levy et al., 1974; Lineberry, 1977; Mladenka, 1978; Lucy and Mladenka, 1980; Jones, 1980). Therefore, in the study of the allocation of resources to services, it is important to understand the attitudes of both administrators and the general public toward equity.

Alternative Equity Models

The literature suggests that there are four equity models that may be used to define service allocation norms and thus link the allocation process to distribution. They are equity as equality, need, demand, and market (Campbell, 1976; Rich, 1979; Savas, 1979; Ostrom and Ostrom, 1977; Vernez, 1978; Lucy et al., 1977; Lucy and Mladenka, 1980).

Equality

The underlying premise of this allocation criterion is that everyone should receive an equal amount of, or have equal opportunity
to use, a specific service or facility. In U.S. society this traditional egalitarian perspective is based upon notions of “democracy,” “fairness,” and the Fourteenth Amendment (Zaitovsky, 1982; Cram, 1982).

Despite the widespread acceptance of this allocational norm, its adoption has been challenged. Some reject the implications of a strict adherence to the concept of equality on the grounds that it treats each individual exactly alike and does not consider distributive justice or need (Savas, 1979; Wise, 1976).

**Need**

Equitable allocation based on need attempts to provide more of a given service to those who exhibit the greatest need. Generally this equity model is the most fiscally redistributive of the four.

Equity based on need has three overlapping implications: that some individuals should receive more of a service than others in a jurisdiction; that such a distribution pattern should be funded or subsidized on a redistributive basis; and that the private sector’s distribution of the service is inadequate (Lucy and Mladenka, 1980).

**Market**

This equity model implies that a consumer has the necessary desire and resources to acquire a service at market price. If a neighborhood or individual wants a service it can have as much of that service it is willing to pay for. This means of allocating public services is the accepted method of distributing many municipal utilities, such as electricity, water, and sewage. However, its application to a wider array of services such as recreation and parks has not been generally accepted.

The important notion underlying this equity model is that the market, not the agency, determines the pattern of service distribution. No explicit service delivery choices need to be made other than those based on demand and ability to pay. This concept assumes, however, that individuals have the economic means to participate in the market and that it is acceptable for society to exclude those who cannot afford the service. The fundamental difference between demand and market equity is that market equity is based upon the exchange of currency, whereas demand equity is based upon usage rates or political efficacy.

Many allocational studies have overlooked the market equity model either because it was considered inappropriate, as in the case of welfare or police services, or because it was already the accepted means of distribution, as in the case of utilities. However, this equity criterion is emerging in the recreation and park field where prices are increasingly being imposed and more self-supporting programs are being implemented (Howard and Crompton, 1980; Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, 1979).

**Demand**

Demand equity may be viewed as an attempt to incorporate the responsiveness of market equity into the public sector’s system of service allocation. Resource allocations would be based on the number of citizen contacts or complaints and the intensity of citizen advocacy toward recreation and park services, rather than on the basis of monetary exchange (Lucy and Mladenka, 1980). The primary cost to the consumer is not dollars; rather it is the time, effort, knowledge, and acumen necessary to change the distributional pattern in favor of the contactor’s interests.

Demand may also be defined by rate of participation. In this case, administrators provide more resources to those services that receive the greatest use. For example, parks that receive the most use would receive the highest levels of maintenance. Although this concept is related to need, the important difference is that in the demand equity model, the public, by their use of a service, determines the allocation of agency resources; in the need equity model, the agency employs objective need criteria to measure distributional patterns. The rational appeal of this “Adam Smith” model is that, hypothetically, the maximum number of citizens benefit from this resource allocations model (Wildavsky, 1979).
Objectives

The literature suggest that there are three dimensions to equity: first, equity as a moral issue (e.g., Rawls); second, equity as a legal principle; third, equity as a decision rule in public policy” (Merget, 1981). This study builds upon the work of the philosophers and the interpretations of the courts to expand understanding of decisionmaking about equity at the policy formulation stage of the political process.

The objectives of this research were (1) to determine the level of support among a population of general citizens for each of the alternative equity models; (2) to determine the level of support for the alternative equity models among a population of local government recreation and park directors; (3) to compare the opinions of the directors and citizens; and (4) to analyze the usefulness of this approach for measuring perspectives of equity. The assumption on which the research was based is that providing insights on perceptions of equity will contribute to reconciling or ameliorating conflicting views in the decision process. The analysis and discussion are based on the following premises:

1. The allocation of park services by local government is an important concern of citizens in that jurisdiction.
2. Administrators play a substantial role in determining allocation patterns.
3. A rapidly changing environment requires public park agencies to evaluate the process by which allocation decisions are made.
4. The perspectives of all those involved in the allocation decision process (elected officials, bureaucrats, elite groups, and the general public) may be relevant to allocation decisionmaking, which determines service outcomes.

Methods

The purpose of the statewide citizen survey from which the data for this study were derived was “to identify outdoor recreation issues and to suggest solutions for these major issues by learning the attitudes and opinions of Texans” (Conway, 1983). Equity was one of the issues investigated by the survey; the questions used to explore this issue are listed in Table 1.

The sample was taken from the Texas Department of Public Safety’s most current accounting of registered drivers and identification-card holders (a list in excess of 10 million names). The Department of Public Safety staff who drew the random sample of 1,250 names estimated that their list included between 85 and 90 percent of the Texas population sixteen years of age or older. The use of highway vehicle registrations as a sampling frame does exclude nondrivers (who, it may be hypothesized, include larger proportions of low-income citizens) and those with out-of-state licenses. However, it was the most comprehensive sampling frame available. The sociodemographics of survey respondents were compared with those reported for the state in the 1980 census. Little variation was found between the two sets of data, except in the case of ethnicity. The survey respondents included 7 percent blacks and 14 percent Hispanics, compared to the census figures of 9 percent and 17 percent, respectively.

The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department personnel who conducted the survey followed Dillman’s “Total Design Method” (Dillman, 1978). Each member of the sample received by mail (1) a pre-notification postcard; (2) the survey; (3) follow-up postcards; (4) a follow-up survey; and (5) a second follow-up survey, in which minorities were sent survey packets by certified mail in an effort to increase their response rate. A Spanish version of the questionnaire was also made available upon request.

Sixty-eight of the surveys were returned unopened indicating that the occupants no longer resided at the addresses used, reducing the effective sample size to 1,182. Of that sample, 833 questionnaires were returned, giving a response rate of 70.4 percent.

Data also were collected from municipal park and recreation directors in Texas. To facilitate comparisons, the same equity questions were asked as in the statewide citizen questionnaire. Of the 100 surveys sent out, a total of 64 usable responses were returned after two mailings.

The five questions listed in Table 1 were developed by the authors and included in the larger survey. They consisted of three
trade-off questions and two agree/disagree statements. The question were listed after the following statement: “Texas' local governments are making difficult choices about how to spend your tax dollars when providing park and recreation services. Your answers to the next questions will help make sure funds are spent the way you wish.” Respondents were then asked to choose the options they felt were most appropriate for their community. They were also given the option of indicating that they were undecided in order to reduce the likelihood of invalid responses caused by those surveyed checking an answer when, in fact, they did not have a real opinion.

The objective of question A was to determine relative citizen support for the equality and need equity concepts, whereas the objective of question B was to compare citizen support for equality with that for market equity based upon taxation. Question C removed the equality option and explored the relative strength of support for equity as need compared to market equity based upon taxation. The intent of question D was to identify support for market equity based upon fees. Question E measured citizen support for the role of advocacy or demand as an equity option.

**Responses from the Sample of Park and Recreation Directors**

The data reported in Table 1 show that there was little variation among directors in their responses to questions of what constitutes equitable allocation. With the exception of question D, a clear majority of directors selected the same alternative in each question. This suggests that among Texas park and recreation directors, a consistent set of mores is widely accepted.

The findings reported for question A show that when given the option of choosing between equality and need, directors overwhelmingly selected equality. There was a very low level of indecision, indicating that these respondents strongly supported the equality alternative. The overwhelming support for equality suggests that directors would prefer to service all sections of the community equally than to give extra emphasis to any groups or special interests, even those with low incomes. However, the data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Park &amp; Rec. Directors (N = 64)</th>
<th>General Citizens (N = 833)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Provide parks to all areas equally, regardless of the amount of taxes or entrance fees residents are able to pay</td>
<td>92.1</td>
<td>73.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide more parks in low-income areas of a community than in other areas</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Provide more parks in those areas of a community that pay most taxes</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide parks to all areas equally, regardless of the amount of taxes or entrance fees residents are able to pay</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>76.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Provide more parks in low-income areas of a community than in other areas</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide more parks in those areas of a community that pay most taxes</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>79.6</td>
<td>48.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Entrance fees for parks should be set at a level that recovers operating costs</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>40.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>49.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
do not indicate whether this support reflects conflict-avoidance behavior by the directors or a true egalitarian commitment.

In question B, directors again demonstrated agreement with the equality option and rejected the market equity alternative. Indeed, not one respondent selected the market equity taxation option.

When the equality option was removed in question C, directors were asked to select between two options they clearly did not favor. The data in Table 1 show that the result of these choices was a dramatic increase in the proportion who were undecided. Four-fifths of the park and recreation directors were not able or not willing to make a choice between market equity based on taxation and need. The support for both equity options was less than half of that reported by the general citizen sample.

Citizens and directors responded in the same direction in all questions except question D, which was concerned with the acceptance of entrance fees to cover park operating costs. Whereas 50 percent of citizens supported and 30 percent rejected this equity option, almost half (48.4 percent) of the administrators rejected it and only 40 percent supported it. This indicates a mix of opinions regarding this volatile issue and may suggest that park and recreation directors are somewhat more reluctant to implement user fees than are the general citizens.

The mixed opinions among directors concerning entrance fees may reflect a transitional state of opinion among professionals. Whereas five years ago charging fees was not common, today it is a frequent practice that many agencies consider essential to their economic survival. This question probably would have received less support in the past, and as this practice becomes more widespread it is likely to have greater acceptance in the future. The data showed that this option may be an acceptable deviation from equality, since it received more support than the need, market equity, or demand through advocacy alternatives.

The responses to question E, which sought to determine support for advocacy (demand) as an allocation criterion, confirmed the earlier finding that directors do not believe it appropriate to cater to special interests. Three-quarters of the respondents rejected the advocacy option.

**Responses from the Sample of General Citizens**

The responses of the general citizens to questions A and B, shown in Table 1, indicate that approximately three-quarters of the citizen sample believed resources for parks should be allocated equally across all areas of a political jurisdiction. The alternative allocative options of providing more services to low-income groups or to those who pay more taxes received low levels of support: 11.5 and 7.9 percent, respectively. However, when respondents were asked in question C to select between the two less favored equity models, they selected “provide more parks in low-income areas” rather than “in those areas that pay most taxes” by a ratio of two to one. This suggests that need is a much more acceptable allocation criterion than the level of taxes paid and that this citizen population is more likely to support that option when equality is not deemed an appropriate means of allocation. The proportion of respondents in question C who were undecided was three times greater than those who responded undecided to the previous two questions, suggesting
Opinions of Citizen Subpopulations

The percentages reported in Table 1 indicate relative levels of support for the alternative equity models by all respondents. However, it was considered important to determine if different segments of the general population adhered to different concepts of equity. For this reason, a series of contingency tables were developed and chi-square tests undertaken to analyze the relationship between equity model and demographic variables. The results of these analyses are shown in Table 2. For none of the chi-square tests was there a significant relationship between the response given to each of the five questions and any of the demographic variables. In other words, there was no variation in responses to the five questions that could be attributed to differences in sex, income, education, ethnicity, race, or age. The only variation in responses was for those who pay the most taxes. A relatively large proportion of respondents (19.8 percent) indicated that they were not satisfied with the current system of providing services. In this case, those citizens who pay the most taxes are also those who are most persistent in requesting services. Responses to question E revealed that this equity concept was not well accepted by respondents. Less than one-quarter of those surveyed supported this means of allocation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Resources should go to all equally or to low income</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Resources should go to all equally or to those who pay most taxes</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Resources should go to low income or to those who pay the most taxes</td>
<td>0.66</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>User fees should cover expenses of operating parks</td>
<td>0.30</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Those who are most persistent in requesting resources should get the most</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>0.02*</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significance at the level of 0.05.
The results of chi-square tests on the subpopulations for questions A and C are discussed in the following paragraphs, since they offered evidence of significant differences among groups.

**Question A: Equality or Need.** Question A asked respondents to select between allocation based on need and that based on equality. Although 73.5 percent of respondents favored providing parks to all areas equally, there were recognizable differences between subpopulations. For example, when the question was cross-tabulated with level of education (Table 3) those having completed high school and those with graduate or professional degrees were overrepresented in their support for allocating more resources to parks in low-income areas. As a group, those with some college education or a bachelor’s degree indicated least support for low-income subsidies (7.5 percent), whereas 22.3 percent of those with less than a high school education supported redistribution. The data also indicated that as the level of education increased, the level of indecision decreased, with less than 10 percent of those with a graduate education being undecided compared to over 25 percent of those with less than a high school education.

**Question C: Need or Market Equity Based on Taxation.** The strongest variation between expected and observed frequencies occurred when question C was cross-tabulated with respondents’ ethnicity (Table 4). The data showed that the opinions of blacks toward need or market equity based on taxation as equity alternatives differed significantly from those of whites or Hispanics. Not one black respondent opted for allocating resources to parks based upon level of taxes paid, whereas 21 percent of whites and 13 percent of Hispanics supported this option. There was also a considerable difference in the level of indecision reported between ethnic groups. As a group, few blacks failed to choose, with 26.7 percent responding “undecided” compared to 51.1 and 40.0 percent for whites and Hispanics, respectively. These findings may be interpreted to mean either that blacks view allocations based on need as a redistributive tool from which they benefit or that they philosophically believe need to be a superior criterion for everybody.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>1-8</th>
<th>9-12</th>
<th>13-16</th>
<th>17 or more</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide parks to all areas equally</td>
<td>(27)</td>
<td>(262)</td>
<td>(215)</td>
<td>(61)</td>
<td>73.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide more parks in low-income areas</td>
<td>(11)</td>
<td>(42)</td>
<td>(20)</td>
<td>(13)</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>(13)</td>
<td>(57)</td>
<td>(38)</td>
<td>(7)</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column total (%)</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>47.0</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Level at which chi-square is significant = 0.01. Value in parentheses = count; value beneath that = row pct.; bottommost value = col. pct.

When question C was cross-tabulated with income, the results showed that as income level increased, support for allocation according to amount of taxation increased and support for allocation based on need decreased (Table 5). Higher-income groups were also more likely to be undecided in selecting between these two options. Of those with incomes of under $10,000, five times as many selected the need equity criterion as selected the taxes paid option. The level of support for these two options changed dramatically in the highest-income group, where an approximately equal proportion supported both options. Black, low-income groups, and upper-income persons were most likely to opt for allocational norms that fostered their own self-interests.

When question C was analyzed by level of education, the findings were very similar (and significant at the 0.01 level) to those reported for income levels. As years of education increased, support for disproportionate allocation of resources to low-income areas decreased, and support for allocation based on amount of taxes paid increased.
Table 4
Results of a Chi-Square Test Seeking a Relationship between Respondents' Preference for Need or Market Models of Equity and Ethnicity*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Row Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide more parks in low-income areas</td>
<td>(140)</td>
<td>(65)</td>
<td>(76)</td>
<td>(3)</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide more parks where more taxes are paid</td>
<td>(104)</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>(20)</td>
<td>(1)</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>(255)</td>
<td>(24)</td>
<td>(64)</td>
<td>(2)</td>
<td>45.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Column Total (%)</td>
<td>66.1</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Level at which chi-square is significant = 0.01. Value in parentheses = count; value beneath that = row pct.; bottommost value = col. pct.

When age was cross-tabulated with question C, the data indicated that older people tended to be most supportive of providing more parks in low-income areas. More than twice as many senior citizens supported this option as those in the 17 to 29 age cohort. Approximately 20 percent of those in each age group agreed with the allocation option to provide more parks where most taxes were paid. However, those under age thirty were twice as likely to be undecided as those over sixty-five.

Older respondents showed greatest support for defining equity as providing more parks in low-income areas and exhibited a low level of indecision. This finding reflects those reported for blacks and suggests that these two groups are likely to be the prime constituencies for the redistribution option.

Conclusions and Implications
The most critical decisions made by public park agencies are resource allocation decisions. They determine the "winners" and
“losers” in the community with regard to park provision. The term allocation implies that different amounts of a service are assigned to selected groups on the basis of some principle or standard. The generally accepted standard for allocating public parks is equity. A conception of equity is a set of principles for choosing between alternative patterns of park allocations.

Equity addresses the question, “Is the allocation of park resources fair?” Every existing park system reflects a model of equity. Even though it is rarely articulated, an equity model is implied whenever decisions are made concerning park resource allocations: “Every time a tax is levied or repealed, every time public expenditure are expanded or contracted, every time regulations are extended or abolished an equity decision has to be made” (Thurrow, 1980: 17).

The prevailing pattern of resource allocation for parks is a result of inputs from four sets of actors: elected officials, administrators, special interest groups, and citizens. This study considered the perspectives of a sample of administrators and citizens toward four different models of equity, each representing an allocational rule that may lead to a very different pattern of park distribution. Predominant support from both groups was for equality equity. This finding is not surprising, since it is consistent with America’s prevailing traditions of equality, freedom of choice, and the Fourteenth Amendment guaranteeing equal treatment under the law.

The study also identified constituencies that were most likely to be supportive of deviations from the equality standard. The market equity taxation option was supported most by those paying the most taxes, while the need equity model was supported most by low-income, elderly, and black respondents. Clearly, both sets of constituencies perceived that they would receive disproportionate benefits from these respective models. However, support for both of these deviations was relatively slight.

The clear preference of directors for equality equity, at least in part, may reflect their experience of conflict avoidance. They may recognize that this is a noncontroversial response and the safest path through the political minefield. The concurrent consensus of citizens provides directors with justification for their pragmatic position because it appears that their thinking is consistent with the wishes of their constituents. It is also consistent with the guidelines suggested by Rawls (1971), discussed earlier in this report, which indicate that equality should be the starting point in any discussion of equity and that deviations should have specific justifications.

Part of the overwhelming support for equality equity may reflect a lack of real understanding by respondents of the implications of their responses. Equality equity does not represent the commitment to egalitarianism that some respondents may have believed their response indicated. It is fallacious to regard all citizens as having equal needs for parks or as being able to respond equally to their existence because citizens are differentially equipped to use parks. Equality of opportunity has little to do with equality if it simply enables people with more income, better education, and superior leisure literacy to win out over the less fortunate even when the allocation of resources itself is equal. All citizens do not arrive at the starting line with equal characteristics and attributes. In addition, the provision of parks to two neighborhoods can hardly be considered equal opportunity if the residents of one area deeply desire them while those of the other feel no need for them.

There was adamant opposition by all segments, but particularly among blacks and the elderly, to the notion that those areas of a community whose citizens are most persistent in requesting parks should get the most resources. This rejection is encouraging because it can be argued that the demand equity model is not a real equity model despite the “Adam Smith” rationalization provided for it earlier in this report. Its use is likely to result in an unpredictable and inconsistent set of winners and losers, and it cannot serve to guide the allocation of park resources in a predictable direction. Demand may lead to adoption of the market, equality, or need models of equity, or it may deviate inconsistently among them. The philosophical opposition to the demand equity model by both directors and citizens unfortunately is likely often to disintegrate in the face of harsh political realities. Because demand is administratively con-
venient, political realities make it likely that pragmatism will frequently prevail over philosophical integrity.

There was little support for market equity based on taxation (questions B and C), but there was moderate support among all demographic groups for market equity based on pricing (question E). The taxation questions related to the provision of park facilities, while the pricing questions related to the operating costs of parks. Thus, the consensus appeared to be that while parks should be physically distributed equally, access to those parks should be limited to those who can afford the entrance price set at a level to cover operating costs.

Ostensibly these findings appear contradictory, since it appears antithetical to provide equal opportunity in terms of distribution if an entrance charge serves to make the opportunity unequal. However, the relatively strong support for fees among all groups, including the low-income respondents, suggests that many anticipated that such park entrance fees would be sufficiently nominal that they could be discounted; that the revenues so generated would save some programs from being eliminated and provide resources to improve others; or that they were not users of parks and thus would remain unaffected by the charges.

The market equity pricing model has considerable merit in situations in which a distorted income redistribution would otherwise occur, that is, when poorer citizens subsidize services through the tax system that are predominantly used by wealthier elements in society. Some respondents may have perceived this to be the situation in the case of parks. If parks are not used extensively by low-income groups, such segments may be better off if an entrance fee is charged. They are then given the option of not using the parks and not paying for their operation, rather than being required to pay for a service they do not want through the property tax.

Traditionally, most park and recreation agencies have adopted either the need or equality equity models. However, in response to tax cuts many agencies have adopted higher entrance prices for parks and in so doing are moving away from the two traditional models and toward the market equity model.

The increased movement toward charging entrance fees will presumably enhance efficiency and the responsiveness of resource allocations, but it may yield results contrary to an agency's preferred equity model. The key questions are, "What is our mission and whom should we be serving?" Which potential target markets should be given service priority? Are we to ignore the less responsive target markets and those who cannot afford to pay the entrance charge?

Despite the extensive resources required to develop and operate parks, the equity premises or models that govern the allocation of those resources have received relatively little attention in the popular press, in the professional literature, or from empirical researchers. This report was intended to do two things: first, to raise consciousness in the research community of the importance of the equity issue, recognizing that this is a necessary requisite to encouraging more research in this area; and, second, to illustrate how the equity issue might be operationalized and used to identify consensus and disagreement among constituency groups.

The scope of the empirical data reported here, and the consequent generalizability of the findings, are limited to recreation and park directors and the general citizenry of Texas. It may be expected that different emphases on the preferred equity models will be observed in different parts of the United States. Local communities and subcultures may hold different opinions because society is not a homogeneous mass whose tastes and values can be assumed to be uniform.

Each individual's notion of what is equitable is tempered by his or her background and social position. Given this, it would be futile and arrogant for a particular individual to assert that the model he or she prefers is "best" for society. It is in the final analysis a question of values. There probably cannot be any right or wrong concepts of equity, only different concepts.

This question is likely to be the subject of lively and ongoing debate. As Hirsch (1976: 152) has noted, the discussion of who should get what is only beginning to grapple with the conflicts among various desiderata and various ways of looking at equity. There is a need for leisure researchers to devote increased effort to understanding and empirically investigating the equity issue,
for it is a requisite condition to effective resource allocation decisions.

References


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