Managing Leisure

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rmle20

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Published online: 10 Dec 2012.

To cite this article: Jamie Rae Walker & John L. Crompton (2013) The impact of five potential institutional barriers on park visitation, Managing Leisure, 18:1, 61-70, DOI: 10.1080/13606719.2012.742224

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13606719.2012.742224

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The impact of five potential institutional barriers on park visitation

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Much of the work on constraints in the park and recreation field has concentrated on structural constraints. However, relatively little has been reported on the sub-set of structural constraints that have been termed institutional constraints, i.e. practices of agencies that may contribute to inhibiting participation. This study examined the impact of five potential institutional constraints to park use. It used a probability sample of 458 residents in a city of 90,000. Results showed that no significant relationship existed between park use and traffic around a park; being well informed about neighborhood park plans; and communication with park leaders. The results suggested that these three potential institutional constraints were not impediments to park use in this community. There was a significant relationship between level of park use and perceived level of information about park facilities and recreation programs (p = 0.01) and to a lesser extent (p = 0.07) with perceptions of parks being well maintained and clean. The latter relationship was counter-intuitive since it indicated that respondents who believed parks were not well maintained were 15% more likely to use them. It was suggested this may be explained by park aficionados having both a better understanding of what constitutes excellent maintenance, and a greater awareness of sub-par maintenance in parks they visit frequently because of their intimate acquaintance with them.

Keywords: parks, constraints, level of use

INTRODUCTION

Early studies in the constraints literature focused primarily on barriers that were physical and external to the individual. In 1987, Crawford and Godbey (1987) published an article that changed the narrative. It was subsequently described as ‘the single most important conceptual development in leisure constraints in the 1980s’ (Jackson, 2005, p. 6). Their work is a key foundation article in the constraints literature. They classified constraints into three categories: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural. Intrapersonal constraints are ‘individual psychological states and attitudes which interact with leisure preferences’ (p. 122).

Interpersonal barriers arise as a ‘result of interpersonal interaction or the relationship between individuals’ characteristics’ (p. 123). Structural barriers are defined as ‘intervening factors between leisure preferences and participation’ (p. 124). They are outside the control of the individual. This classification has been widely embraced and empirically verified (Pennington-Gray and Kersletter, 2002; Raymore et al., 1993).

In a follow-up article, Crawford, Jackson and Godbey (1991) suggested the three categories of constraints were hierarchically related. The most powerful were intrapersonal because they determined motivation and leisure preferences. If there was a desire to participate, then interpersonal
constraints had to be negotiated – i.e. the availability of others to participate with. Finally, structural constraints outside the individual's control had to be surmounted.

The early work in this area addressed 'barriers to participation', but the term barriers gradually morphed into 'constraints'. This occurred because barriers tended to direct researchers' attentions only to the constraints between preference and participation – what Crawford and Godbey (1987) called structural constraints. Their taxonomy of three types of constraints made such limiting connotations inappropriate (Jackson, 1991).

Structural constraints may be sub-divided into two categories. First are those that are beyond the influence of leisure managers such as work schedules, financial constraints, and weather. For the most part, these constraints are difficult for agencies to mitigate. Park managers can seek only to tailor responses to them, and cannot directly ameliorate them.

The second sub-set of structural constraints are those that can be influenced by the actions of leisure managers. Crompton and Lamb (1986) lamented that 'little attention has been given to agency created constraints' (p. 146). Scott (2005) concurred and suggested this sub-set of structural complaints that are under the control of agencies should be termed 'institutional barriers'. He commented, 'what is missing from constraints research is an examination of how everyday practices within leisure service agencies … may actually contribute to non participation' (p. 287).

Illustrations of institutional constraints include facility or program failings such as poor quality, overcrowding, bureaucratic procedures, and inadequate safety procedures; price failings such as charging too much or too little; distribution failings manifested in lack of public transportation access and unconventional schedules or locations; and or promotion failings exemplified by lack of information (Crompton and Lamb, 1986). Facility or program, distribution, price and promotion decisions are the combination of variables that an agency can control and manipulate to achieve desired outcomes, and are commonly termed the marketing mix. Each of these marketing mix failings represents a potential inhibitor of park use.

This study examined the impact on level of park use of five potential institutional constraints: traffic around parks; maintenance level and cleanliness of parks; level of information about park facilities and recreation programs; level of information about neighborhood park plans; and opportunities to communicate with the park department.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature review focuses on the institutional barriers that were central to this study: traffic, park maintenance, information, and feedback opportunities. As Crompton and Lamb (1986) and Scott (2000) noted, the literature related to these areas is relatively sparse and much of it is dated.

In their early discussion of 'frustration factors' that inhibited urban park use, Hatry and Dunn (1971) concluded that major streets were barriers to park use. They recommended that agencies be aware of this constraint and locate parks where such impediments to use were not present. In their seminal book *The Experience of Nature: A Psychological Perspective*, Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) reinforced the potential negative impact of traffic on perceived access to nearby nature:

Even if a nature place is, in fact, only minutes away, if the perceived distance is substantial, the setting is pragmatically far away. Thus a green place that requires crossing a major highway with no traffic light in sight is appropriately considered far away. (p. 155)
Bangs and Maher (1970) discussed the implications of high road traffic on pedestrian access to parks in their study of the proximity-use relationship among a sample of children in Baltimore, MD. They were concerned about the impact on park use of a local access street bordering a park. This concern was mitigated by the adjacent roadway being closed during peak play hours in the summer months. Nevertheless, findings relating to park use and access indicated that perception of a visual barrier persisted and that it inhibited use. Berg and Medrich (1980) explored play patterns of children residing in four different neighborhoods in Oakland, CA. Their results similarly identified traffic patterns, particularly heavy ones, and the need to cross major thoroughfares, as constraints that consistently influenced use in all four neighborhoods. The impact of traffic in inhibiting park visitation highlighted by the early studies presumably has accentuated in more recent times as the intensity of traffic has increased in almost all locales.

Poor maintenance of parks as an institutional factor affecting non-use of parks was cited by Gold (1977) who pointed out it is a constraint that park managers have the ability to alleviate. Godbey (1985) subsequently explored the relationship between maintenance and park use but reported that only a relatively low 8% of respondents indicated poorly maintained parks or facilities were a reason influencing their non-use (Godbey, 1985).

Haty and Dunn (1971) appear to have been the first to draw attention to the key role of information about parks in facilitating use. They concluded that many people did not use neighborhood parks because they did not know where they were located. Similarly, Godbey (1985) found that 15% of respondents did not use parks because they did not know enough about them. He reported, ‘The most prevalent reason for non-use of public leisure services would appear to be that people do not know they exist’ (p. 10). These results were supported by Howard and Crompton’s (1984) research in three communities (Dade County, FL; Austin, TX and Springfield, OR) in which 22%, 9%, and 26% of respondents, respectively, indicated they did not use parks because they had no knowledge of them. When data of a sub-set of low income respondents in this study were reviewed, lack of knowledge was more prominently cited as a constraint to park use.

Spotts and Stynes’ (1984) investigation of respondents’ knowledge of 19 parks in Lansing, Michigan indicated that, on average, respondents had heard of only 11 of these parks. They reported their respondents were ‘generally ill-informed’ (p. 6) about the facilities in parks. Schroeder and Wiens (1986) found among their random sample of Tulsa residents that a lack of information was a primary factor inhibiting use. This was confirmed by Scott and Munson (1994) who reported that 70% of all non-users and infrequent users in their Cleveland Metro Parks study indicated they would increase their future park use if they were better informed.

Lack of information has consistently emerged in large-scale statewide surveys as a primary reason given as inhibiting park visitation. For example, samples of randomly selected residents in Alberta, Canada (Alberta Community Development, 2000), Arizona (Virden and Yoshioka, 1992), and Texas (Scott and Kim, 1998) all reported that lack of information was a strong constraint (relative to others that were presented to respondents) on greater use of parks. In their nationwide sample, Godbey et al. (1992) reported that one-third of Americans said lack of information was why they did not participate in local recreation programs. This was the second most frequently cited constraint after lack of time.

The potential constraint to use posed by lack of opportunity for residents to interact
with park personnel was identified by Gold (1977). He suggested that failure to involve local residents in the planning process of park development, rehabilitation, or programming inhibited use by local people for two reasons. First, they had no emotional commitment or ‘ownership’ of the park and, second, there was incongruence between the planners’ values and those of the prospective users: ‘Most neighborhood parks are a tragic monument ... because they usually reflect the objectives, values, and conditioning of the suppliers or decision makers instead of the users’ (p. 375).

**HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The literature review suggests that traffic patterns around parks influence use; poor maintenance of parks may negatively impact use by a relatively small number in a population; lack of information will have a major adverse impact on use; and lack of either feedback from users or user interaction with agency staff will adversely affect park visitation.

Five hypotheses were tested:

**H1**: Respondents who perceive that traffic around parks should be diverted or slowed down are less likely to use parks than respondents who do not believe this.

**H2**: Respondents who perceive parks are well-maintained and clean are more likely to use parks than respondents who do not perceive this.

**H3**: Respondents who agree they are well-informed about park facilities and recreation programs are more likely to use parks than respondents who do not agree that they are well-informed.

**H4**: Respondents who agree they are well-informed about plans for neighborhood parks are more likely to use parks than respondents who do not agree that they are well-informed.

**H5**: Respondents who agree that they can easily communicate with park leaders are more likely to use parks than respondents who do not agree that they can easily communicate with park leaders.

Respondents’ perceptions of these issues were measured by five single-item questions that asked them to ‘circle the response which indicates how much you agree or disagree with each statement’. They were offered a five-point scale: strongly agree, agree, I have no knowledge, disagree, and strongly disagree. For the purpose of this analysis, these were collapsed to two categories: agree and disagree. There were three reasons for this decision. First, there was no reason to retain in the analysis those who indicated they had no knowledge of the issue. Thus, responses in the ‘no knowledge’ category were discarded. Second, differences between strongly agree/agree and between strongly disagree/disagree were probably quite nuanced for some proportion of the respondents. Collapsing them into a dichotomous format removed this level of arbitrariness. Third, there were a small number of cases in the ‘disagree’ and ‘strongly disagree’ categories. Collapsing them to create a larger number strengthened the statistical analysis. The five items were:

- Automobile traffic around parks should be diverted and slowed down.
- [Community name] parks are well-maintained and clean.
- I am well-informed about [community name’s] park facilities and recreation programs.
- I am well-informed about plans for parks in my neighborhood.
- It is easy for me to offer feedback to the park department and obtain answers from them to any questions.

Data were collected from respondents in a central Texas city. Two samples, comprising 800 single-family homes and 400 multiple-dwelling units, were drawn from the city’s utility list by selecting every nth name on the list. Three waves of mailings and a
reminder card yielded an initial 546 responses (45.5%). A sub-set of 458 respondents provided data that qualified for inclusion in this study.

Respondents were asked to report how often their household’s members used neighborhood and community parks on a five-point scale: almost daily, about once a week, about once a month, a few times a year, or not at all. Park users in this study were defined as those using parks at least once a month, while those using them less than once a month or not at all were classified as non-users.

Logistical regression was used to test all five hypotheses. In addition, likelihood odds were calculated to better understand the magnitude of difference between groups. While it is meaningful to know if one group is significantly more likely to use a park, likelihood odds ratios provide a more in-depth understanding of the relationship. That is, if one group is significantly more likely to use parks, it is helpful to know if its members are 1% or 40% more likely to use them.

### RESULTS

The demographics of respondents are summarized in Table 1. The community is home to a major university which explains the relatively high (26%) proportion of students in the sample.

A summary of the logistical regression results used to test the five hypotheses is given in Table 2. The analysis showed no significant relationship between level of park use and perceptions of the need to slow down traffic around parks ($p = 0.78$); being well-informed about neighborhood park plans ($p = 0.68$); or being easily able to communicate with park leaders ($p = 0.37$). There was a significant relationship between level of park use and perceived level of information about park facilities and recreation programs ($p = 0.01$), and to a lesser extent ($p = 0.07$) with perceptions of parks being well-maintained and clean. The only previous study that empirically explored the relationship of maintenance levels with park visitation found that it was an issue for only a minority of residents (Godbey, 1985). Given the paucity of empirical data,
it is worth drawing attention to the relationship found in this study, even though the significance is outside the conventional 0.05 level.

Likelihood odds ratios were calculated for the two constraints that were significantly related to park use. The results in Table 3 appear to be counter-intuitive. They show that respondents who believed parks were not clean and well-maintained were 15% more likely to use parks. Table 4 reports more orthodox results indicating those who believe they are well-informed about park and recreation programs were more likely to use parks.

**DISCUSSION**

The rejection of three of the hypotheses means that the results were contrary to those which have appeared in previous literature. There are perhaps two reasons for this. First, the literature related to the institutional constraints examined in this study is sparse. As Scott (2005) noted, the impact of these institutional constraints has received relatively little empirical attention. Given the sparsity of work reported on institutional constraints, contrary findings to the limited existing body of literature should be expected.

A second reason for the contrary findings may be contextual. Scott (2005) pointed out that the relative strength of particular constraints varies across different activities. This contextual influence is likely to extend to different geographic and structural features of communities. This study was undertaken in a relatively small city. Only a few of its major parks are proximate or adjacent to roads with high speed limits, so the impact of traffic on park use may not be an issue for most residents. The city makes extensive efforts to involve neighborhoods in the planning of parks and in stimulating two-way communications. These outreach efforts similarly mean that there are multiple constraints.
**Table 3.** Likelihood and Odds Calculations for Maintained and Cleanliness of Parks Constraint

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Park users</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Probability of park user</th>
<th>Non-users</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Probability of non-user</th>
<th>Odds User:non-user</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>220</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>0.61</td>
<td>141</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*In probability of park use between respondents who agree and disagree.*

**Table 4.** Likelihood and Odds Calculations for Well-Informed about Parks and Recreation Constraint

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Park users</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Probability of park user</th>
<th>Non-users</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Probability of non-user</th>
<th>Odds User:non-user</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>0.65</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>0.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>0.51</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>0.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*In probability of park use between respondents who agree and disagree.*
feedback opportunities to communicate with the parks agency. So lack of opportunity to offer feedback is unlikely to be perceived as a strong constraint. Thus, the particular characteristics of the city’s park agency may result in these constraints being relatively weak.

There was a marginally significant relationship at the 0.07 level between park visitation and perceived level of maintenance and cleanliness. However, this relationship was antithetical to that which was hypothesized. Ostensibly, the finding that those who do not perceive parks to be clean and well-maintained are 15% more likely to use them appears counter-intuitive. However, it may reflect the greater familiarity of users with their parks and their expectations of higher standards. In the contextual locale of this study, the city is the only provider of parks. In essence, it is a monopolist. Thus, park aficionados are likely to use them even though they consider their maintenance to be sub-par. In essence, they may have ‘negotiated’ the lower standard of maintenance so they may enjoy other benefits of the park environment. Such aficionados are likely to have an understanding of what excellent maintenance entails. Further, frequent park users are likely to have a heightened awareness of maintenance levels and cleanliness. For example, litter trapped in undergrowth, unkempt edges to grass areas, weeds in flower beds, broken equipment inter alia, may not be seen by those driving on proximate streets, but those using the parks are likely to be highly conscious of such aberrations and to react negatively to them. This relationship between use and heightened awareness of poor maintenance is consistent with Godbey and Blazey’s (1983) analogous finding that only 65% of the senior citizen users gave an unqualified yes when asked if they considered the parks they used to be safe. As users, they were much more likely to be more conscious of the safety problems in parks than those who did not use parks.

Over 25 years ago it was observed, ‘There is considerable evidence that people lack knowledge of recreation facilities and programs’ (Spotts and Stynes, 1984, p. 6). Those authors went on to suggest ‘Ameliorating this lack of information can be expected to result in fuller utilization of recreation opportunities’ (p. 2). The significant relationship in this study is between use and level of information about the city’s park facilities and recreation programs. This is a substantial sub-set of all information relating to parks and recreation to which Spotts and Stynes refer, and it appears to empirically validate the intuitive linkage they suggest and to reinforce the importance of promotion. It has been noted that:

The only ways to learn of the existence of any recreation or park facility are to hear about it, see it, or see a reference to it. Generally, because leisure facilities are not essential to people’s needs, the extent to which potential users actively seek to find out what leisure facilities exist is limited. Most knowledge about leisure facilities, particularly in urban areas is acquired directly from other more essential activities such as commuting to and from work or engaging in a shopping trip. (Howard and Crompton, 1980, p. 368)

In response to level of use being related to level of information about park facilities and recreation programs, the city in which the study took place has erected signs on major highways directing people to its major parks. The major role of such signage is not its ostensible purpose of directing individuals who want to use a park on how to get there, but its pervasive, perhaps insidious, role of consistently reminding people about the very existence of the park. This visible reinforcement is even more effective when parks border streets so they are highly visible, rather than being bordered by houses and consequently hidden from public view.
The investigation of the impact of institutional constraints has lagged behind that of intrapersonal, interpersonal, and external structural constraints beyond the control of agency managers. Institutional constraints may include the following facility or program failings: poor-quality service, poorly maintained facility, safety concerns, too empty/sterile facility, stereotypical agency attitudes, negative image, inadequate support services, poor coordination with other suppliers, and intimidation by bureaucratic procedures.

Institutional constraints also embrace potential pricing, distribution or promotion failings such as: price is too high or too low, service is oversubscribed, inconvenient location, inadequate public transportation, inconvenient schedule, lack of information, lack of awareness of the benefits the service offers, or communications that raise expectations too high (Crompton and Lamb, 2006). All of these issues are to some extent controllable by agency managers. The following observation was made 40 years ago in the context of health-care services, but it appears germane to contemporary leisure services:

The traditional preoccupation of the planners and administrators of services and perhaps of society in general is with the personal pathologies of underutilizers and it shows very little concern with the organizational characteristics of the services that people underutilize. (McKinlay, 1972, p. 132)

Scott’s (2000) use of the term institutional ‘barriers’ rather than constraints appears to have been purposeful indicating that while constraints under the control of potential participants could be negotiated by them, they lack the power to negotiate those constraints controlled by an agency so they are, indeed, barriers. While it may be possible for managers to respond to some of the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and external structural constraints, they do not control them. In contrast, they do control institutional constraints. Thus, it would seem that the research community could have more impact on enhancing participation if their emphasis was shifted to better understanding the impacts of institutional constraints.

REFERENCES


