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THE BENEFITS OF VISITING GREEN SPACE

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The benefits of visiting green space¹

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ESRI Research Bulletins provide short summaries of work published by ESRI researchers and overviews of thematic areas covered by ESRI programmes of research. Bulletins are designed to be easily accessible to a wide readership.

OVERVIEW

Though completed before the current Covid-19 crisis, this research has even greater relevance now when daily exercise is one of the few activities that is allowed under the current public health restrictions. Visiting green space, such as public parks, is associated with health and well-being effects. We find that visits to green space are associated with positive outcomes for general health, cardiovascular health, as well as mental health and well-being. Most significantly, the health impacts are greatest at low visit levels, i.e., even those who visit just once a month can experience the benefits. For example, increasing the number of green space visits from zero to just once per month is associated with a 4-percentage point increase in the probability of experiencing good mental health and well-being, from 65 percent to 69 percent. Further increasing the number of green space visits to 8 times per month (i.e. twice a week) is associated with an additional 7-percentage point increase in the probability of experiencing good mental health and well-being.

The second part of the research examines what features within our greenspaces are likely to generate higher visiting rates, which is important for planning and design of greenspace. Within our public parks people have a clear preference for higher tree density, but the park attributes that are most likely to attract visitors are facilities such as exercise equipment, coffee shops, and public toilets. In terms of park landscape, water features are also a key feature likely to lead to additional park visits.

BACKGROUND

This research is based on data from face-to-face interviews with just over 1,000 adults conducted during April and May 2018. The survey was designed to be

¹ This Bulletin summarizes the findings from Grilli, G., Mohan, G., and Curtis, J. (2020). Public park attributes, park visits, and associated health status. **Landscape and Urban Planning**, 199. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2020.103814>

representative of the population of urban residents in Ireland and the sample was stratified by age, gender, education and place of residence. Respondents were asked about their health and wellbeing, exercise and park visiting routines, as well as their preferences between multiple public park design scenarios. Using statistical techniques we identified (i) the association between self-reported health outcomes and a variety of respondent characteristics, including visits to green spaces; and (ii) the relative importance of different public park design attributes, including park layout, and visitor facilities such as toilets, exercise equipment, and cafes.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The research finding on positive health status associated with visiting green spaces confirms in the Irish context well established international literature. The policy implications are both immediate and ongoing. Within the context of the ongoing Covid-19 crisis the results show the importance of maintaining access to green spaces for exercise. In the context of urban planning and new housing developments it highlights the need for provision of green public spaces.

The research also provides clear guidance to urban planners on park design and features that are most likely to drive highest usage, increase visitor numbers and achieve a greater public health dividend. Park visits are influenced by design features (e.g. size, layout) and facilities (e.g. toilets, equipment) with the facilities having a substantially greater impact. Expanding existing parks is unlikely to be feasible in most instances but their internal landscape could be reconfigured. The changes that are likely to have the greatest impact on park visits are the addition of visitor facilities, which are often less expensive than landscape redesign. The enhancement of parks depends on several factors including available resources although international experience shows that successful projects are based around broad stakeholder consultation.

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