

# Visitor access, use, and desired improvements in urban parks

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## BACKGROUND

Urban parks can provide many physical and mental health benefits, but these may not be shared equitably among visitors. The purpose of this study was to explore park visitor demographics and activities, as well as in-depth narratives regarding experiences, perceptions of accessibility, and desired improvements in a range of urban park types of Portland, Oregon.



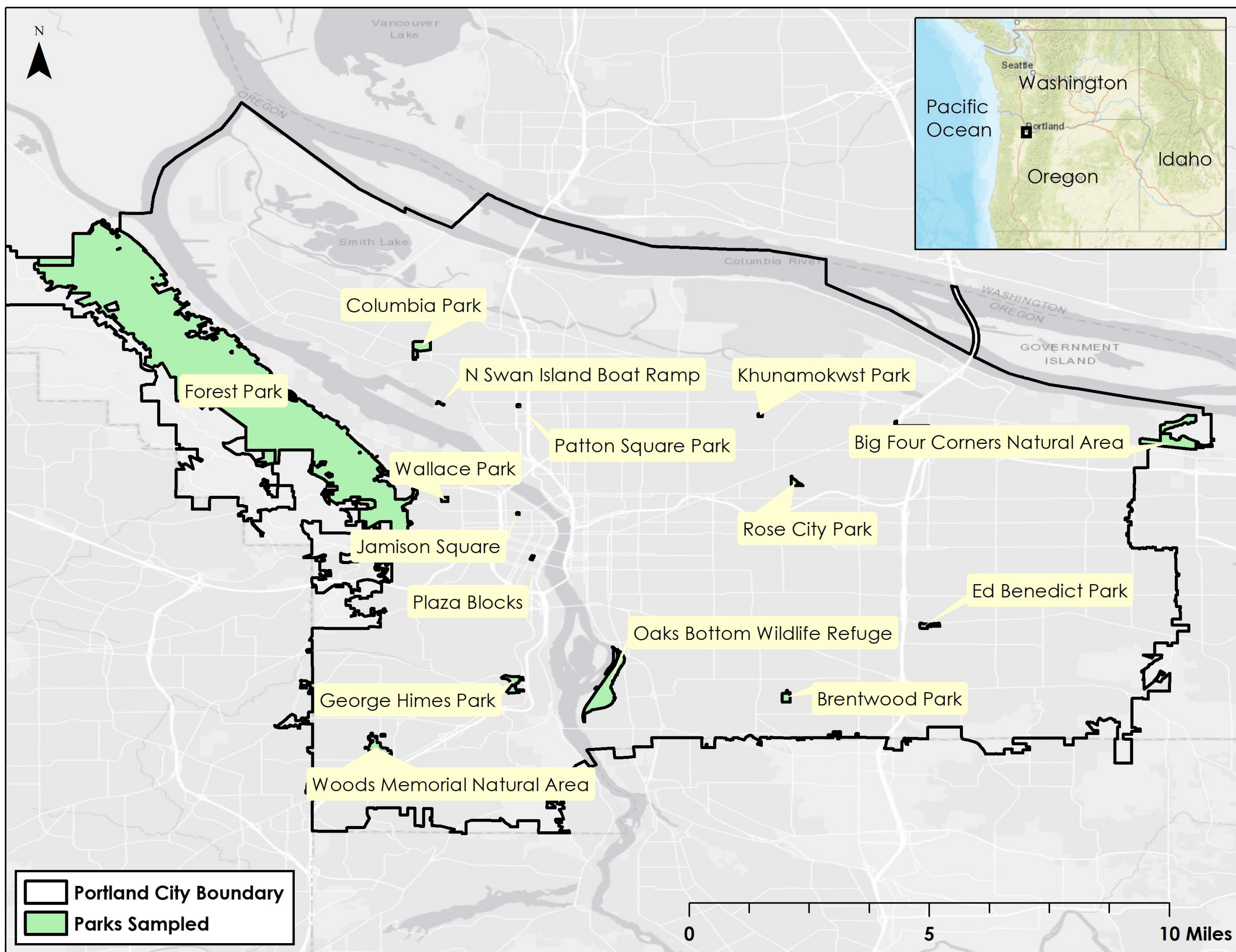
Columbia Park in Portland, Oregon

### Why do you visit urban parks?

- Bicycle ride
- Dog walk
- Educational activities
- Enjoy the beauty
- Family
- Fishing
- Friends
- Isolation
- Kids
- Nature experience
- Photography
- Picnic
- Proximity to home/work
- Rest
- Romantic dates
- Running
- Walk
- Working
- Other

**Observations:** We observed the behavior and demographics of 1,216 urban park visitors.

- Most common visitor activities were physical recreation, interactions between adults, and interactions between adults and children.
- 94% of children were engaged in physical recreation and 75% were interacting with other children.



Surveyed urban parks in Portland, Oregon

## METHODS

**Study area:** Portland, Oregon is has ~ 4,723 ha of land managed within its park system (Figure 2).

**Data Collection:** We used a mixed-methods approach to perform on-site semi-structured interviews of visitors and observed behaviors and demographics in 15 urban parks.

**Analyses:** We performed content analysis of the in-depth interviews by coding them for themes and patterns of meaning using NVivo 12 Plus Software. For the observation data, we tested hypotheses about variables associated with park visitor demographics groups and activity categories across three general park types (recreational-active use, multi-use, and natural-passive use parks).

## RESULTS

**In-depth Interviews:** We interviewed 43 urban park visitors about their motivations, access concerns, and desired improvements.

- Feelings of safety particularly important for female-identifying visitors.
- Sense of community appreciated by visitors with under-represented racial-ethnic backgrounds.
- Only 19% of participants indicated that no improvements were needed.

### Themes for Improvement and Participant Quotes

- Main Visitation Motivations:**
- Physical recreation**
- Accessibility**
- Children**

- Primary Accessibility Concerns:**
- Proximity**
- Trails/Paths**
- Maintenance**

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No Changes	"I don't think I'd change anything. It's got a restroom, turf, statues, big trees. It's got everything you need."
Bathrooms	"[I'd want] more open restrooms. During wintertime, the permanent bathrooms are locked and sometimes there are no porta-potties."
Garbage / Recycling Bins	"I would recommend more waste baskets. There is only one in the middle. It would encourage people to pick up waste..."
Unfavorable Visitor Behaviors	"There's a lot of bad behavior. I didn't have a phone to call for help."
Vegetation	"I think the grass is well-tended, but it could be improved in terms of tending and watering the grass. There are some brown spots..."
Playgrounds	"The playground – seems that it gets busy. I would add a smaller playground for the littles on the side."
Covered Space	"I would add another covered area near the tables."
Drinking Fountains	"There's only one drinking fountain, and I don't know if it's working. Updating one would be great."
Parking	"...more parking...on busy weekends, it's one of the reasons that I don't come here."
Tables	"Picnic tables – in general, it could have more, but it's not much of a big deal."
Information / Interpretive Signs	"...have more signs or information (like interpretive) signs available for trailheads, identifying trees, maps."
Water Features	"I'd add a water feature..."
Paths	"I would fix this street - the bumpiness, especially when riding a bike and there's no sidewalk."
Wheelchair Accessibility	"We need to have more parks that are accessible to people in wheelchairs."
Art	"I might add some more art sculptures that are more interactive."
Fences	"Cars have gone straight through before the northern side was fenced. I wish they would have planned ahead. But luckily no one was in the way or got hurt."
Lighting	"One of the lights in the middle of the park goes out sometimes and I have to bring a flashlight at night."
Size	"...bigger is always better."
Viewpoints	"...add some viewpoints on the hiking trails..."

## DISCUSSION

Understanding urban park experiences and evaluating visitor perspectives on accessibility can help to advance planning, design, and management of urban parks. We found that urban park visitors are motivated by physical recreation opportunities, accessibility, and to visit with children, but there are still many concerns about accessibility. Urban park planners, governmental agencies, and community groups should continue to seek participatory solutions to improve urban park accessibility for diverse visitors.

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