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Why People Pee in Public: Is a Lack of Public Restrooms Keeping Portland Too Weird?

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Introduction

Portland has a large amount of restrooms per capita (Wall, K. 2021). An audit in 2006 demonstrated that there was a great need for public restrooms in the city (Ahmann et al., 2006). In 2008, the Portland Loo was introduced. These cheap, single user capsule restrooms allowed for public restrooms to be strategically located in zones of need throughout the city, in an attempt to meet need. Now, in 2024, there may still be unmet need, and further adaptations considered to make using the restroom in Portland accessible for all.

Methods

An analysis of publicly available google reviews of some Portland Loo locations was used to identify strengths and weaknesses with the facilities. A comprehensive literature review was conducted to examine the identity based factors that can hinder public restroom access, as well as discover the history of public restrooms in Portland, and what has been implemented.



Results

Analysis of the most frequently reviewed Portland Loo, on NW 8th, yielded 20 reviews. 2 were excluded, due to irrelevance or the reviewer stating that they were unable to find the facility. Of the 18 included reviews, half of them mentioned issues with cleanliness or maintenance, including dirty conditions, missing parts of the restroom, and filth. 4 reviews rated the facility 1 star because it was locked, or padlocked shut, with no one inside, despite being a 24 hour facility. The remaining 5 reviews were positive or neutral, and most did not include text.



Analysis of scholarly articles about public restrooms revealed multiple established barriers to restroom access, including chronic illness (Corradi et al., 2022), housing status (Maroko et al., 2021), family status (Anthony & Dufresne, 2007) and gender (Hartigan et al., 2020). These factors are essential to consider when proposing updates and changes to current infrastructure.

Discussion

With the preliminary research, it is probable that Portland's public restrooms could be improved. There are very few 24 hour options, and issues with maintenance may be hindering the current solution of Portland Loos. A Pilot Study in San Francisco called the "Pit Stop Program" was shown to be a successful working model in improving restroom access as well as greatly reducing public defecation (Amato et al., 2022). This model could potentially be implemented in Portland with some modifications.

Author and Year	Title	Primary Purpose	Conclusions
Amato, H. K., Martin, D., Hoover, C. M., & Graham, J. P. (2022)	Somewhere to go: assessing the impact of public restroom interventions on reports of open defecation in San Francisco, California from 2014 to 2020	Implement "Pit Stop Program" in San Francisco, which increased public restrooms in the city	The Pit Stop Program was correlated with a significant decrease in public defecation
Wall, K. (2021)	Which Cities Have the Most and Fewest Public Toilets?	Show how many restrooms exist in different cities	Portland has 17 public restrooms per 100,000 citizens as of 2021
Hartigan, S. M., Bommet, K., Chisholm, L., Kowalik, C., Dmochowski, R. R., Schlundt, D., & Reynolds, W. S. (2020)	Why do women not use the bathroom? Women's attitudes and beliefs on using public restrooms.	Examine and explore women's attitudes towards public restrooms, including gender disparity	Multiple gender based barriers exist in public restrooms
Corradi, G., Garcia-Garzon, E., Barrada, J., & León, L. (2022)	Negative experiences with public bathroom and Chronic Illness-Related Shame.	Explore and establish the relationship between GI disorders and public restroom use	Individuals with GI disorders often experience fear, shame, and access barriers related to public restrooms
Maroko, A. B., Hopper, K., Gruer, C., Jaffe, M., Zhen, E., & Sommer, M. (2021)	Public restrooms, periods, and people experiencing homelessness: An assessment of public toilets in high needs areas of Manhattan, New York.	Investigate the relationship between homelessness, periods, and restroom access	Experiencing periods and homelessness both cause difficulty with accessing public restrooms
Ahmann, J., Bond, K., Gresser, W., Selden, S., Springberg, A., Srinivas, K., Swae, J. (2006)	Going Public! Strategies for Meeting Public Restroom Need in Portland's Central City	Audit of Portland's public restrooms to assess areas of need	Many zones of need were identified, and Portland required more restrooms
Anthony, K. H., & Dufresne, M. (2007)	Potty Parity in Perspective: Gender and Family Issues in Planning and Designing Public Restrooms	Investigation of how families face unique challenges in accessing restrooms	Families with children face access barriers to restrooms