

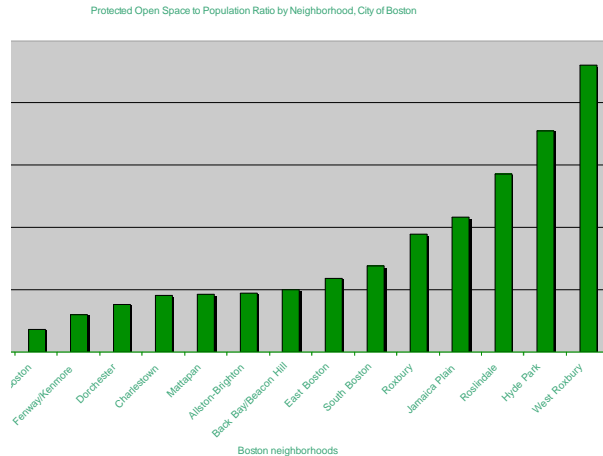
Boston Park Advocates Coalition

Critical Issues facing Boston's state and city-owned parks

Equity and Access

Public parks serve all residents. They are open rain or shine, 365 days a year, from sun up to sun down. There are no entry fees. They are a truly democratic resource.

However, not all parks are created equal, nor do all neighborhoods and people have equal access to these cherished public resources. Some neighborhoods have more open space, some parks are better maintained, some are built so those with disabilities can enjoy them, and some parks are safer. Often the neighborhoods with the most children have the least number of parks.



Perhaps more than in any other area of community involvement, parks are where everyday people take on stewardship and other roles. In many parks the majority of maintenance is free labor from volunteers and court-mandated community service workers. On ballfields across Boston it is parents and volunteers who are running soccer, basketball, football, and baseball leagues for children and teens. While a huge benefit to local greenspace and a wonderful way to build community investment, this allows the responsible public agency to relinquish maintenance and programming responsibilities. Such a “system” creates inequities – in communities where residents have the time and resources to serve as park stewards the parks remain vibrant. In poorer neighborhoods parks become neglected, unsafe, and barren of activity.

Parks are often touted as a public health solution to pressing medical and societal ills. But if they are to provide healthy alternatives they must be easy to find and use. Boston’s parks are often inaccessible by the MBTA, must be reached by crossing dangerous roadways, and lack adequate signage.

Maintenance

Well-maintained parks are testimony to the value a community places on the democratic ideal of clean, safe, and healthful open space for all of its citizens. Conversely, neglected park lands are a sign that government has broken faith with that ideal. Neglected parks create a vicious cycle: neglect invites vandalism, deterring visitors who perceive littered and vandalized parks as unsafe, creating an unused park that is abandoned completely to vandalism and crime.

- In East Boston, much of the programming for school groups has been cancelled at Belle Isle Marsh Reservation. The single employee struggles to maintain 260 acres with just one household-sized lawn mower and a much-repaired groomer.
- At the 4.7 mile long Southwest Corridor Park, running through the South End, Roxbury, and Jamaica Plain, there are three maintenance workers; in 1987 there were 21.
- While the number of volunteer park groups has grown from 60 to 87 in the past five years, volunteers cannot be held responsible for daily maintenance in our parks.

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Youth

Boston's parks are essential for the city's 142,000 children and youth, especially in the face of the obesity and violence epidemic that is hitting our urban communities of color especially hard. In neighborhood parks young people learn about active living, test their physical limits, and develop values about teamwork and nature. Parks are places to celebrate with family, feel part of a community, and escape the stress of urban living. Deteriorated playing fields, game courts and playgrounds leave neighborhoods underserved. Boston's 15-19 yr olds, the largest group of youth, are ignored by park designers as new spaces are built without the facilities or programming that is most attractive to this at-risk population. The lack of safety in parks – real and perceived – keeps many children and young people inside.

- Public outdoor recreation programming, once supported by both the city and the state, has been eliminated. West Roxbury and Jamaica Plain have thriving youth athletic programs operated by parent-run organizations and supported by local businesses. Roxbury and Mattapan park-based youth sports struggle for support or don't exist.

Public Safety

In a Boston survey of parks conducted from 1998 to 2000, residents said safety was one of their biggest concerns. The shooting last year of an 11-year-old boy during football practice at Carter Playground in Roxbury, and the slaying of a youth basketball coach a few blocks away at Ramsay Park spurred a public outcry that was further sharpened earlier this year by the killing of John Beresford, a park activist in Dorchester. When parks feel safe, people use them. Programs, events, and activities bring people to the park and help make them safer. Studies link open space and recreation as a key factor in reducing juvenile crime.

- 911 calls from a cell phone made inside a park are not recorded as park calls - the system is not able to record a location if there is not a numbered street address or intersection.
- The city and state police do not have a plan for policing parks and do not adequately coordinate resource allocation and response systems across the city.
- Larger parks, like Franklin Park, have unclear jurisdictional lines and many different police agencies.
- Dozens of state park rangers staff the Massachusetts State House security points and parking lots while there are NO park rangers in the state's urban parks providing security and interpretive services.

Trees

Trees are a crucial component of our urban infrastructure. A recent inventory established that Boston has 36,918 street trees on city and state property combined. The Emerald Necklace parks are home to about 25,000 trees. They improve air quality, reduce stormwater runoff, mitigate pollution in our waterways, and decrease energy consumption. Trees play a vital role in the social well-being of our communities. Recent studies have shown that trees in the city can reduce incidence of crime against people and property, reduce levels of domestic violence, relieve symptoms of ADHD in children, and improve self-esteem in youth. Trees and open spaces enhance the social fabric of our communities.