Real and perceived safety concerns are among the barriers to individuals attaining 150 weekly minutes of physical activity endorsed by Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, 2nd Edition. Addressing these concerns requires time to build relationships among community members, local government, and law enforcement.

This factsheet provides perspective on this work as experienced by team members of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s High Obesity Program (HOP) conducted in Hardeman County 2019-2023. It also suggests actions that community members can take to address concerns.

As stated in Prevention Institute Advancement Project’s 2015 factsheet: “Thoughtful implementation of safety and surveillance policies and attention to maintenance will foster increased positivity, encourage more individuals to utilize the facilities and increase individuals’ level of physical activity. The resulting sense of civic pride will benefit the parks and the community itself.” All true points, but limited resources in small, rural communities require higher level cooperation among community members, local government and law enforcement.

**Local assessment**

In 2019, 76 percent of Hardeman residents who responded to a community assessment indicated that they felt their community was a pleasant place to walk. However, many people did not use parks with results varying from 2 percent (Hickory Valley) to 56 percent (Bolivar). A 2020 survey found that only 37 percent (of 429 respondents) used walking trails in the community. Rurality of the county led the HOP team to emphasize park usage for walking and other physical activity.
A standardized park audit tool, Environmental Assessment of Public Recreation Spaces (EAPRS), was utilized in 2019 (Saelens et al., 2006). Three aspects of parks (physical activity elements, aesthetics and amenities) were assessed. On a scale of 1 to 51, the average ParkScore was 13.4 and ranged from a low of 7.4 (Grand Junction Elementary School) to a high of 24.4 in Middleton Park (Middleton, TN). The average sub-scores were physical activity score (5.0), aesthetic score (1.8) and amenity score (6.6). To connect people to places to be physically active, community members across all towns in Hardeman County identified safe walking routes that people were known to walk. Subsequently, walking route signage was created to guide people along these walking routes. Because the HOP cooperative agreement mandated routes to destinations, parks and paths near the identified safe walking routes were emphasized.

**Safety and security ideas**

Having a new park or park amenity draws attention, but without community interest and funding, such as HOP can provide, the capability for “new” is low in many rural areas. New or renewed attention to a park may increase the need for security measures but can also serve as a deterrent to them. Whether or not “newness” is possible, there are actions that can be taken to provide a greater sense of safety and security. Four general action categories are listed below along with examples that can be implemented with varying levels of financial cost or volunteer input.

- **Cleanliness/maintenance**
  - **Increase cleanliness of paths and parking lots.** Concrete trash bins are less likely to be blown over or vandalized. Another preference could be for bins that are mounted on a pole, which also makes mowing easier if installed in a grassy area. A plan for routine trash removal helps reinforce proper trash disposal.
  - **Clean and repair current equipment.** Depending on the type of material, a bleach solution and scrubbing can remove a great deal of grim from outdoor play equipment. Having the equipment hosed down by a local fire department cleans away residue. There are also solutions to recover rusted areas on playground equipment decks that are cheaper than replacing an entire metal set.
  - **Remove litter and graffiti that contribute to perceptions of fear.** Social disorder in a park can heighten feelings of being unsafe.
  - **Remove undergrowth to improve the sightlines within the park.** When people can see around them and what is ahead, they have a better perception of being safe. A small town may not have the people power to provide groundskeeping to a natural area. When this is the case, reach out to church or other volunteer groups.
  - **Remove hazardous and outdated equipment.** Some pieces of equipment are beyond repair. Community members may be hesitant to allow them to be removed because they remember playing on them as a child. If a town is looking to legitimize the need to remove equipment before there is something to replace it with, a Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) Parks & Recreation Technical Advisory Service (PARTAS) consultant can inspect the equipment and make recommendations.
• **Signage**
  o **Consider signage from the start of the project so that it is installed at the time of other amenities.** This is particularly important for rules for use, entrances, exits, parking, amenities, and security contacts. Why is it important to have signage from the start? Users confused or scared of their surroundings are less likely to return and are likely to tell their friends about the negative experience.
  o **Install directional signage.** This adds to a sense of security because people like to know where they are. This is especially the case when paths go through wooded areas. It can also be important for vehicular traffic arriving at the walking path. Crosswalks may also be needed in parking areas that intersect with paths.

• **Events**
  o **Hold routine events at parks, paths and trails.** These not only get people to see the park, but they get to experience it with others, which can increase their sense of safety. Low- or no-cost examples are second Saturday walks, bike rides (where appropriate) and outdoor exercise classes.
  o **Promote events through word of mouth or social media.** Ask participants to take and share their own photos at the event.
  o **Park, path and trail event ideas are everywhere.** Consider national health observances as opportunities to try something new. Think about the types of activity that community members are interested in for inspiration. For example, would people in the area attend a car show, food truck rally or community yard sale at the park?

• **Surveillance**
  o **Recruit community members to form a community watch with expectations for at least two walk throughs or drive throughs each week.** Local churches, their Sunday school classes or civic groups may provide pools for interested people.
  o **Engage with law enforcement for positive police presence and interaction with patrons, such as playing basketball with children and youth.** However, in some situations, police presence may add to a perceived safety problem. This is why it is important to talk with the community.
  o **Increase the amount of lighting in the area.** While not strictly “surveillance,” lighting increases the opportunity for people to see what is going on around them.
  o **Install a surveillance camera if areas are secluded.**

Documents with additional safety and security ideas are detailed in the reference section of this publication.

**Notes for implementation**

• **Friends of the Park**
  In some communities, Friends of the Park groups have helped address safety and security concerns like those listed above. Friends groups are typically formed by interested citizens. They run the gamut of formality: They may provide short-term support for a specific project or formalize as a non-profit for broader fundraising and advocacy efforts. Strong leadership by people with time to focus on the park and its needs are crucial to the effectiveness of the groups. *The Park Advocate Handbook* provides various resources on the topic.

• **Master Plans**
  One of the application requirements for TDEC funding for parks and trails is a Master Plan created within the last five years. Towns can pay consultants to create a Master Plan for them. However, smaller towns may not have the resources for this and can create their own
Collaborating for Safer Parks, Paths, and Trails

utilizing guidelines provided by PARTAS. PARTAS consultants are available to answer questions and assist with the process.

References


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