# Measuring Neighborhood Park Use

New Yorkers for Parks (NY4P), in partnership with **Bronx REACH CHAMPS**, led by the **Bronx Community Health Network**, made this guide to help city residents measure how people use neighborhood parks. This guide builds on local expertise and puts the tools for measuring neighborhood parks into the hands of local experts. The guide allows anyone to collect and share information that can bring new resources to parks. The guide works with other advocacy tools provided by NY4P.

Once you know what works and what does not work in your park, based on evidence collected through observing how people use a neighborhood park, you can make the case for change with local decision makers - from elected officials to parks staff.

The contents of this guide are adapted from a formal study and process created by the RAND corporation called System for Observing Play & Recreation in Communities (SOPARC).

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Learn more:
www.rand.org/health/surveys_tools/soparc.html

</center>

# How to use this tool

This guide will teach you, and any other volunteer interested in studying how people use city parks, to do the following things:

- **Divide** your neighborhood park into zones to study different uses

- **Measure** how people are using the parts of your parks

- **Count** the users that you observe, along with information about who they are

- **Understand** the information you gather and how to share it

- **Improve** things in your park using information gathered

The guide is divided into four sections that describe how to set up your study, who can help you, how to measure park usage, how to interpret what has been observed and what to do with the new information to improve your park.

1. Getting Ready for the Study
2. Collecting Data on Park Users
3. Understanding Park User Counts
4. Putting the Study of Park Users to Work

**1** Getting Ready

**2** Collecting Data

**3** Understanding
the Park User Counts

**4** Putting Your Study
of Park Users to Work

# 1 Getting Ready

# Getting Ready!

**First things first!** Now that you've decided to take a look at how your park is being used and to share what you learn… You are going to need help!

**Technical Assistance:** New Yorkers for Parks (NY4P) will help you get started and will be available to help with any problems that come up during and after your study.

**Volunteer Support:** Taking a deep look at park usage is a big job. Gathering volunteers to help collect information will make the lift easier and the study more fun. These volunteers will also be able to help share what is learned with community members and work with you to get help for your park.

# Step 1: Technical Assistance

Reach out to New Yorkers for Parks (NY4P) at the beginning of your study. NY4P will provide background information about studying parks, as well as sharing the forms and formulas used for the information gathered. Once the study is completed, NY4P will help with the effort to put the new measures into action with advocacy steps that will help improve your park.

**What you can count on:**

- General advice from staff at the beginning and end of the study
- Online tools, through the Google platform, to collect and organize the information collected
- Map and/or aerial image of the park
- Copy of the Park User Study Form for gathering information in the park

**Find contact information/email addresses at http://ny4p.org**

# Step 2: Volunteer Support
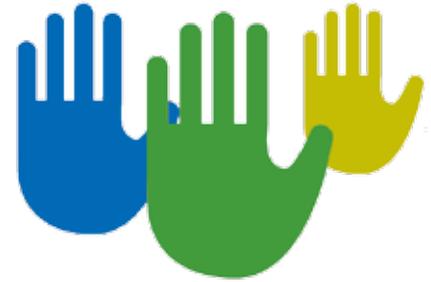
## Put out a Call for Volunteers

For the study, you will need people to visit every section of your park at least 3 different times to count the number of people and note the ways each person uses the park. The park will be divided into zones and each zone will need about 10 minutes for the individual to count every user. That's a lot of time, so you will need help from other volunteers.

Volunteers may come from within the community and be found through a variety of resources. A great source for help is Partnerships for Parks (PfP), a joint program of NYC Parks and City Parks Foundation. Your local Outreach Coordinator can help you get started finding volunteers in your neighborhood who have an interest in parks.

### Find your PfP Outreach Coordinator here:
https://cityparksfoundation.org/about-partnerships-for-parks/

# Activity Areas



DEVOE PARK
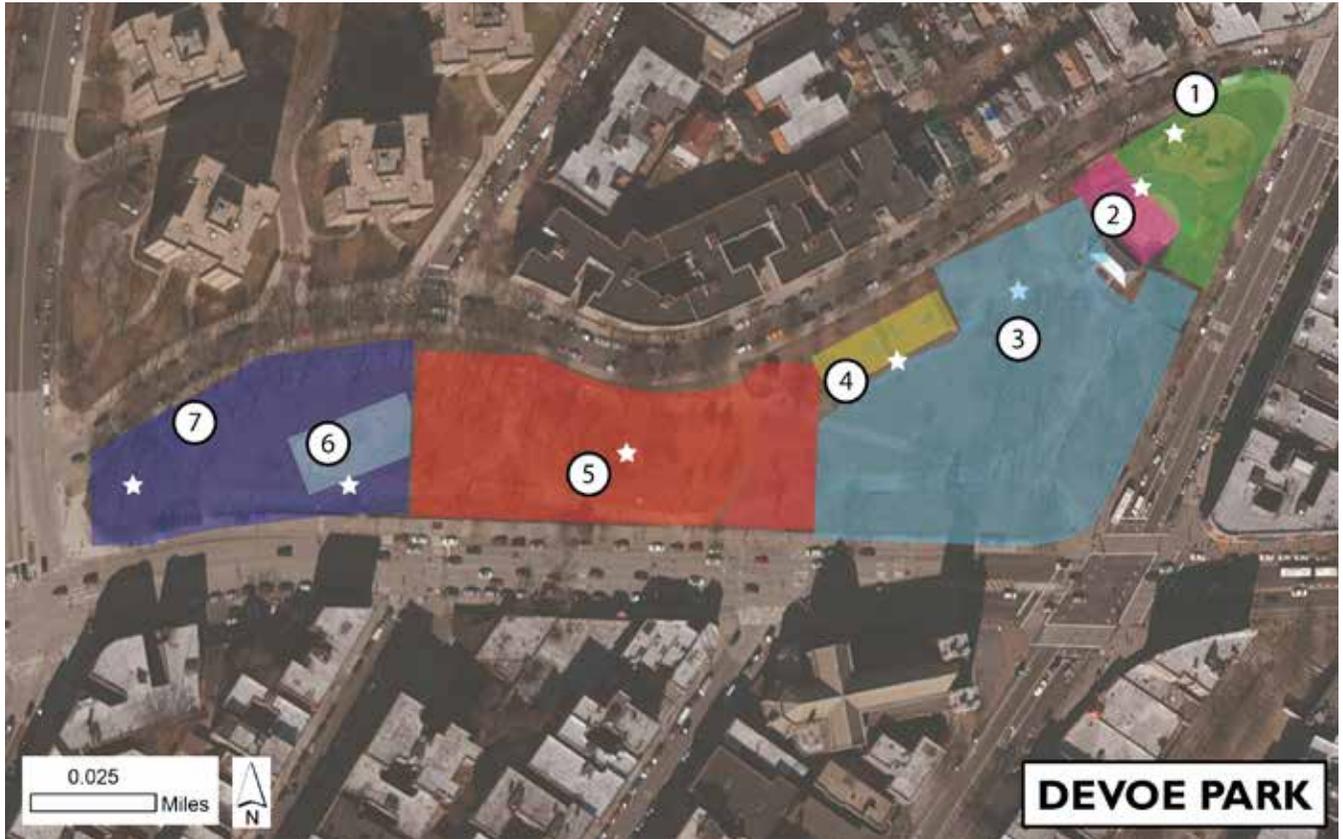
# Step 3: Schedule Volunteers

Once you have identified volunteers interested in helping with the Park User Study, find some time to meet and discuss scheduling. Each activity area (or zone) of your park must be counted and should take about 10 minutes. On average, a typical neighborhood park will take less than 2 hours to observe and count users. Do a test run to see how long it takes to count all of the users in your park, then plan accordingly.

**Plan a schedule** that allows volunteers to sign up for one or more study windows.

**Try to get coverage** on at least 3 mornings and 3 afternoons.

**Get coverage** on weekend days and during the week to get a more complete scan about how the park is used.

**Working pairs** is recommended and makes the work more fun!

# 2 Collecting Data
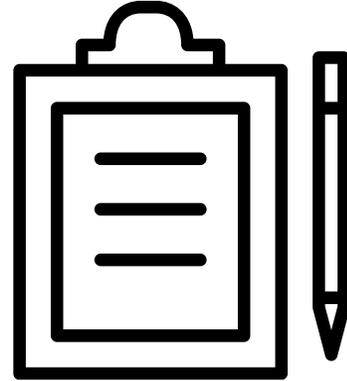
# Data Collection

Once the volunteers are on board, the schedule is set and you have all of the tools from NY4P, then you are ready to begin collecting information about how people use your park. The Data Collection phase has two tasks, one happens out in the park, and the second happens with your computer or smartphone.

**Outdoor Work:** Photography and user counts in the park

**Indoor Work:** Uploading photos and entering the counts collected online

## Taking Photographs

You will need pictures of each activity area (or zone) in your park that will be studied. For this, you can use your smartphone or a camera. Take a shot in each activity area that shows the whole area in the same picture.

There might be people using the park while you try to take these background pictures. If another park goer is concerned about being in your photo, ask their permission. You can explain why you are taking photos. Give that person the option to move out of the camera's sight before you take the photo.

Also, remember that you can use these photos for other projects related to your work in your park, so take good ones and lots of them!

# Outdoor Work

## Counting Users: Overview

You'll use the form provided by NY4P to count the number of people using each section of your park. Use a new form for each zone or activity area of the park when you are collecting this information.

At the top of the page, you'll write information about your research project and the park, including:
- Your name
- The name of the park
- The weather conditions
- The time of day

You'll report information like age, gender, and level of activity for each park user.

Plan to visit each activity area in the park on at least three different days. Try to visit at different times of day in order to get the best picture of what is happening.

## Counting Users: Form

The form provided by NY4P has a new row for information about each park user you observe. The columns at the top of the form allow you to report your best guess about each user's activity, age, race, ethnicity, and exercise level. Remember that you won't have time to speak to each user, so your best guess is good enough.

**SOPARC CODING FORM - 2017**

| Date | | Temp/Weather | | Park | |
| Partner A | | Partner B | | Start Time | AM / PM |
| Target Area | # | First Photo # | | End Time | AM / PM |
| AREA TYPE | Feature / Linear | Last Photo # | | | |

**NEW YORKERS FOR PARKS**

| Person | Gender | | Activity | Age Group | | | | Race | | | | Ethnicity | Activity Level | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Female | Male | | Child | Teen | Adult | Senior | B | W | A | O | Latinx | S | M | V |
| 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 3 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 4 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 5 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

# Outdoor Work

### Counting Users in the Park

Use the map you made earlier to be sure you visit each different activity area or zone in the park to count the park users.

In each activity area, find a place to stand where you can see everything in that zone or area. Use the form to record what you can about each park user in that area. Counting the users should take around ten minutes, but could be more less depending on the number of users you find.

After recording everyone in that activity area or zone on the form, move to the next area and start again. If you run out of space on your form, start a new one for that area.

## Entering and Sharing the Park User Information

One volunteer can be responsible for entering all information collected by those who counted users in the park, or each volunteer can enter the information that they themselves collected in the park. Talk with your volunteers to decide what works best for the group.

NY4P has provided a spreadsheet with important formulas built-in to help you input and process what you have observed. NY4P can help you understand the results and to use your user counts to improve the park, so reach out if there are any questions.

# Indoor Work

### Park User Information

**Counts:** Carefully enter the information written on the paper data forms into the online spreadsheet. The spreadsheet is formatted to give you totals and percentages that help tell the story of what people are doing in your park.

**Photos:** Give each of your park photos a name that will be useful later on and help your parks advocacy in the future. Save your photos to the PHOTOS folder in your "Measuring Neighborhood Park Use" Google Drive. That way you and NY4P will have a record of the conditions of the park when you collected the park user data.

# 3 Understanding the Park User Counts

# Congratulations!

You counted the users in your park.

You visited each activity area at least three times, recording each person observed and photograph-ing each section of the park that you studied.

You entered the data into the spreadsheet. You uploaded your photos on the Google drive.

## Now What?

First: Get back in touch with NY4P. Let them know you finished! Staff from NY4P will work with you to find a time to touch base and analyze the data you collected.

# Using the Representation Worksheet

The next step is to take the information collected about your park users and compare that to information that is available about who lives nearby. These are all the people who should be seen using the neighborhood parks close to where they live. You'll find that information on the Representation Worksheet that NY4P put on the Google Drive.

**If certain groups of people are missing from your counts, that's a big red flag!**
You'll find these groups by comparing age, gender, race, and ethnicity percentages at your park to these figures for the borough you're in. Other resources available from NY4P include the City Council District Profiles, which include maps with all open space and information about each district. Here you can also find the contact information for elected leaders and officials.

Find your NYC Council District: http://ny4p.org/research/ccd-profiles

Greenwich Village
SoHo
Tribeca
Little Italy
Chinatown
Bowery
Lower East Side
Battery Park City
Financial District
Governors Island

## Legend

1/4 Mile

City Council Districts

City, State, and Federal Parkland

Playgrounds

Schoolyards-to-Playgrounds

Community Gardens

Swimming Pools

Recreation Centers

Public Plazas

Privately Owned Public Spaces (POPS)

(S) New York State park
(F) National Park Service park
*Home to an active volunteer group

## Parkland

1 Hudson River Park (S)*
2 Brooklyn Bridge Park
3 Battery Park City
4 Governors Island National Monument (F)
5 Battery Park*
6 Statue of Liberty National Monument (F)
7 Washington Square Park*
8 City Hall Park*
9 Sara D. Roosevelt Park
10 Ellis Island National Monument (F)
11 Seward Park*
12 Columbus Park*
13 Washington Market Park*
14 Coleman Playground
15 Thomas Paine Park
16 Alfred E. Smith Plgd
17 Allen Mall One
18 Luther Gulick Plgd*
19 Tanahey Playground
20 Little Flower Playground*
21 Castle Clinton National Monument (F)
22 Bowling Green
23 Collect Pond Park
24 Sol Lain Plgd
25 Nathan Straus Plgd
26 Vietnam Veterans Plaza
27 Lillian D Wald Playground
28 Canal Park
29 Mercer Playground
30 Schiff Mall
31 Playground One

| PARKS ACREAGE | CDI | CITYWIDE[1] |
|---|---|---|
| Total District Land (acres) | 3,455 | 266,690 |
| City, State & Federal Parkland[2] (acres) | 199 | 50,499 |
| Percent Parkland | 6% | 19% |
| Parks & Playgrounds[3] (acres) | 206 | 23,635 |
| Percent Parks & Playgrounds | 6% | 9% |

**6%** Percent parkland of total district acreage

| POPULATION & PARK ACCESS | CDI | CITYWIDE |
|---|---|---|
| Resident Population | 162,146 | 8,128,980 |
| Parks & Playground acres per 1,000 residents | 1.3 | 2.9 |
| Residents within 5 minutes' walk of a park | 77% | 61% |
| Residents under 18 | 14% | 22% |
| Park & Playground acres per 1,000 children | 9.3 | 13.3 |
| Residents over 65 | 13% | 12% |
| Park & Playground acres per 1,000 seniors | 9.6 | 23.3 |

**25** Ranking of park & playground acres per 1,000 residents *1 highest, 51 lowest*

**2** Ranking of residents within 5 minutes' walk of a park *1 highest, 51 lowest*

| PARK AMENITIES | CDI | CITYWIDE |
|---|---|---|
| Community Gardens | 9 | 11 |
| Recreation Centers | 1 | 1 |
| Playgrounds | 49 | 34 |
| Swimming Pools | 0 | 2 |

**2.2** Number of playgrounds per 1,000 children

| PARKS INSPECTION PROGRAM RATINGS, FISCAL YEAR 2014 | CDI | CITYWIDE |
|---|---|---|
| Parks "Acceptable" for Condition | 88% | 86% |
| Parks "Acceptable" for Cleanliness | 92% | 91% |

88% Condition    92% Cleanliness

| PARK FUNDING, FISCAL YEAR 2010–2014 | CDI | CITYWIDE |
|---|---|---|
| Completed Projects (millions) | $62 | $26.1 |
| Funding per Park & Playground acre (millions) | $0.3 | $0.14 |

**3** Rank of Funding per Park & Playground acre *1 highest, 51 lowest*

| CIVIC ENGAGEMENT | CDI | CITYWIDE |
|---|---|---|
| Registered Voters | 74% | 73% |
| Park-related 311 calls per 1,000 residents | 3.2 | 6.8 |
| Park Volunteer Groups | 26 | 10 |

**74%** Registered voters

| SOCIOECONOMICS | CDI | CITYWIDE |
|---|---|---|
| Median Household Income | $67,920 | $51,270 |
| Population in Poverty | 18% | 19% |
| Children Receiving Public Assistance | 23% | 33% |

**3** Ranking of average median income *1 highest, 51 lowest*

[1] Value for the city as a whole; when italicized, average for all City Council Districts. [2] Parklands are all city land under the jurisdiction of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation, the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation, and the National Park Service. [3] Parks & Playground excludes unsuitable properties, such as greenstreets, triangles, parking lots, undeveloped land, and highway properties.

### RESOURCES FOR YOUR COMMUNITY

**CITY COUNCIL MEMBER**
Margaret Chin
chin@council.nyc.gov
212-587-3159

**MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD 1**
212-442-5050

**MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD 2**
212-979-2272

**MANHATTAN COMMUNITY BOARD 3**
212-533-5300

**CITY OF NEW YORK**
311 or nyc.gov

**STATE & FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVES**
www.elections.state.ny.us

**PARTNERSHIPS FOR PARKS**
www.cityparksfoundation.org/partnerships-for-parks

**PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING IN NYC**
council.nyc.gov/pb

### NEW YORKERS FOR PARKS

www.ny4p.org | 212-838-9410
The Arthur Ross Center for Parks and Open Spaces
55 Broad Street, 23rd Floor
New York, NY 10004

For over 100 years, New Yorkers for Parks has built, protected and promoted parks and open spaces in New York City. Today, NY4P is the citywide independent organization championing quality parks and open spaces for all New Yorkers in all neighborhoods.

## www.ny4p.org

# Telling the Story:
# Who is Using Your Park?

Now that you've measured users in your park, you have a sense of what's working, and what's not working for your community.

You can answer these questions to help create the story of who is – and isn't – using your park. You can connect the use observations to how the park is designed or how it is programmed.

- Are there people missing?
- Are some parts of the park more popular than others?
- Are some activities more popular than others?
- Are there places to rest and places to be active?
- Are there places for all ages and abilities?
- Are there activities for all ages and abilities?

# Use your Data!

Let the data that you collected support the changes that will make your park more popular than ever, serving all members of your community.

You can comment on the physical spaces in your park, and about the activities that are happening there using your data. Some questions you can answer might be:

- Is there enough seating?
- Are people using the spaces that are there?
- Are organized activities happening in the park?

**Get ready to share your story!**

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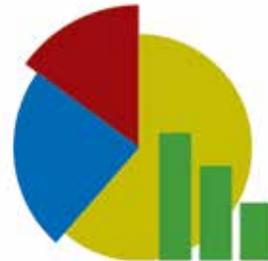
Putting Your Study
of Park Users to Work

# Sharing the Story of Your Park

Now you know how people are using your park. You know who is present in your park and who is missing. You know what sections and activities are popular, and what might not be working. Telling these stories to decision makers in the parks department, elected officials and funders will be the key to improving your neighborhood park. With your new data, you can make the case for funding or staffing to change the physical elements or the programs available in your park.

The first question is whether the problems you identify can be solved with a Capital Project or if it is a Maintenance, Staffing or Programming Issue. As you build the right advocacy approach, reach out to New Yorkers for Parks again for advice, tools and support.

# How Can I Improve My Park?

You can request a printed copy of this advocacy guide created by the Center for Urban Pedagogy, Partnerships for Parks and New Yorkers for Parks. The guide helps to explain some of the types of improvements you can bring to your park and gives step-by-step instruction for making these changes. You will need to understand the issue first, and that means knowing about Capital and Maintenance Issues. You can download a pdf here:



http://welcometocup.org/Projects/MakingPolicyPublic/HowCanIImproveMyPark
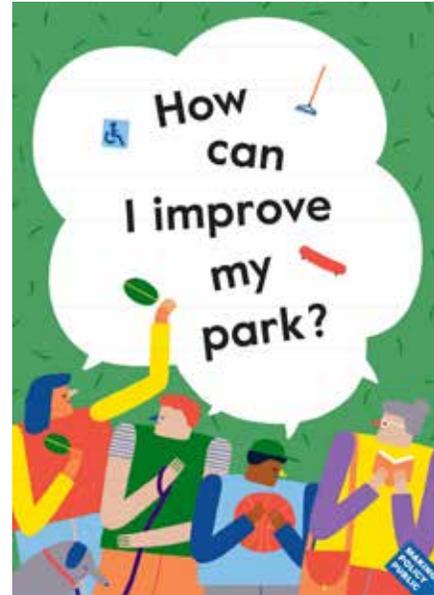
# Capital vs. Maintenance Issues

Some parks improvements require planning and funding large physical projects, while others need help by staffing for maintaining what is already there. Some examples:

**Capital Projects**
Ballfields & courts
Buildings & bathrooms
Paths & walkways
Playground furniture & seating
Play & exercise equipment

**Maintenance Issues**
Trash pick-up
Seasonal plantings & gardening
Small repairs
Keeping things clean
Paint freshening & graffiti removal

**To see who takes care of parks, check out Clean & Green by NY4P on the Google Drive**

# Programming in Your Neighborhood Park

Another thing that can bring more users to your park, or bring more diverse uses to your park is free or low-fee programming. Popular programming includes entertainment like free movie screenings, music or dance performances. Exercise classes are also very popular and can attract users of all ages.

Some free programs are offered by NYC Parks and City Parks Foundation, so reach out to see if these free activities can be hosted in your park. If you wish to bring a new program or event to your park, reach out to your City Council Member, who may have funding to pay for the activity.

# Building Your Coalition

The surest way to bring long-term improvements to your park is to bring people together to make the changes needed. The volunteers who have worked to help with this park user study are a natural starting point for a coalition or friends group that can help steward change in your neighborhood park.

Projects and programs that have support from neighbors not only have the most chance of being successfully funded, but they are most likely to best serve the community that lives near your park. This is where local expertise comes together with hard data and community organizing to improve your park!

# Support for
# Friends of Parks Groups

**NEW YORKERS FOR PARKS (NY4P)** works with parks stewardship groups throughout the city, helping to advance advocacy efforts and connecting groups in each borough to bring systemic improvements to the parks system.

Plug into the citywide conversation here: http://www.ny4p.org/advocacy/ny4p-x-nyc

**PARTNERSHIPS FOR PARKS,** a joint program of NYC Parks and City Parks Foundation can help with group formation. The first step is to find your local Outreach Coordinator and work to build the capacity of your park stewardship group.

More here: https://cityparksfoundation.org/support-park-groups/

Cards designed by Anne LaFond
for New Yorkers for Parks and the the Bronx REACH CHAMPS led by
the Bronx Community Health Network