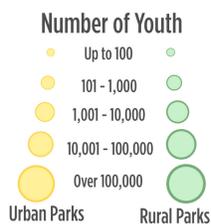


# California State Parks: A Valuable Resource for Youth Health

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Number of  
youth in visitorsheds  
of California state parks

California state parks are a tremendous, potentially underutilized resource for youth health. This is the main takeaway from the preliminary results of new research that we are currently conducting at UCLA’s Institute of the Environment and Sustainability.

In our research, we are studying potential youth audiences and programs to get youth outdoors in state parks. We have found that more than half of young people under 18 in California live within the “visitorshed” of one or more of California’s 282 state park units, and that the percentage is even higher for disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged households.

An extensive body of health research, which we have reviewed for this study, documents the benefits for youth health and well-being of time spent outdoors, whether in active recreation, such as sports, or passive recreation, such as walking or even just hanging out with friends and family. Those benefits are especially important for youth from disadvantaged households, who tend to experience higher levels of stress and risk of disease and death. These studies indicate that parks can be part of a prescription for improving youth health and well-being in California. In our

research, we are seeking to identify ways that California state parks can help contribute to this prescription by providing pathways for youth to spend time outdoors.

At the end of this briefing on our preliminary findings, we provide a link to a survey. If you manage programs in California State Parks or for a partner organization that conducts programs in state parks, we hope that you will take a few minutes to fill out the survey at your convenience. We hope to gain and share more insights into the kinds of programs that currently exist for getting youth outdoors in state parks, the opportunities and barriers to getting youth outdoors, and the potential health benefits. We will publish our final results this summer. If you are interested in those results, you can also sign up to receive them when filling out the survey or by emailing us at the address at the end of this briefing.

## Who lives within the “visitorsheds” of California state parks?

- » 57% of Californians, 22 million people.
- » 54% of the state youth population, 5 million people under 18.
- » 53% of impoverished youth, 1 million youth living in poverty.
- » 59% of the state’s disadvantaged households, 3 million households.
- » 60% of the state’s severely disadvantaged households, 2 million households.

We define a “visitorshed,” or catchment area, for a park by calculating the area within the average distance that residents typically travel for social and recreational purposes in their everyday lives, whether by vehicle, bicycle, or walking, based on the National Household Travel Survey. For urban areas that distance is 13 miles by car, compared to 23 miles in rural areas. The distances for bicycling (around two miles) and walking (around a half mile are more similar in urban and rural areas).

## What are the health benefits for youth of time spent outdoors?

A large and growing body of research has found that young people today spend less time outdoors and are less likely to be active than youth in previous generations. Children are much more likely now to suffer from obesity, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), asthma, and other chronic conditions associated with sedentary indoor lifestyles. And these conditions are more common among disadvantaged youth who have historically been denied equal access to recreational spaces and opportunities. An increasingly large body of research also demonstrates the benefits—for physical and mental health—of time spent outdoors:

### Physical Health

- » Living near a park increases a person’s likelihood of being physically active, is associated with less screen time, and physical activity produces a wide range of health benefits.
- » Nearby park space is associated with lower body mass index, lower risk of circulatory and cardiovascular disease, and lower risk of death.

### Mental Health

- » Living near a park is associated with better overall measures of mental health.

- » Time spent in parks results in improvements in mood and overall well-being, increased energy, and relaxation.
- » Time spent in parks can contribute to attention restoration, reduce symptoms of attention-deficit disorders, improve cognitive function, and reduce problem behaviors in young children.
- » Park use substantially reduces stress and can reduce the negative effects of stressful life events, increasing a person’s resilience.

Many of these effects are not dependent on physical activity, but accrue just from spending time outdoors. Physical activity can increase the benefits, as can social activity—being outdoors with other people, whether family or friends.

Because some of these effects may be stronger for demographic groups less likely to use parks in the first place, children with the least access to park space are those who stand to benefit from it the most. And policies and funding matter. One study found that an extra \$10 spent per capita on parks and recreation was associated with eight more hours per week of vigorous exercise for young women. Programs to encourage young people to make park use part of their lives are cost-effective investments in public health equity.

## Can California state parks be part of a prescription for youth health?

State parks can play an important role in helping to get youth outdoors. Many state park units, as well as nonprofit organizations that conduct programs in the parks, have youth-oriented programs. But fewer of those programs currently have a focus on health, according to preliminary results of a survey that we are currently conducting, even though survey respondents overwhelmingly recognize the health benefits of parks for youth.

If you manage programs for state parks or a nonprofit that conducts programs in state parks, we hope that you will take a moment soon to fill out the survey so that we can get an accurate and full picture of current programs for youth and the potential for state parks to get more California youth outdoors.

Please fill out the survey here:

» [bit.ly/CAyouthoutdoors](https://bit.ly/CAyouthoutdoors) «

If you have any questions about this research or would like to receive our final report, please email Jon Christensen at [jonchristensen@ioes.ucla.edu](mailto:jonchristensen@ioes.ucla.edu).

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