



# The State of Latino Green Space

Where you live is linked to how healthy you are.

Sadly, U.S. Latino communities are marked by a lack of green spaces (natural or maintained outdoor public space, such as parks, playgrounds, school yards, greenways, trails, tree-lined sidewalks, community gardens, nature conservation areas, forests, and less conventional urban “green alleyways” and “pocket parks”).

This limits Latinos’ access to health-promoting aspects of green spaces, which can lower stress, reduce disease, and add opportunity for play and social cohesion.

But there’s good news. Policymakers and community leaders can promote development of and access to green spaces, and thus opportunities for health equity.

This Fact Sheet is part of the *Salud America!* “The State of Latino Housing, Transportation, and Green Space: A Research Review.” Read the full Review with citations: [salud.to/healthequity](http://salud.to/healthequity).

## The Evidence: Latinos Face Inequities in Green Space

### Green spaces affect individual and environmental health.

- Green spaces support environmental and public health—they filter air, remove pollution, reduce noise, cool temperatures, replenish ground water, mitigate storm water, and grow food.

### Green spaces can boost physical, mental, and emotional well-being, including in Latinos.

- For Latino children, interaction with nature early in life has been associated with cognitive changes that improve behavioral development and emotional regulation.
- Individuals with more green space near their home (within a 3km radius) were less affected by stressful life events than those with low access to green space, with greenery “buffering” stress.
- Park experiences have been shown to directly reduce stress and provide a restorative effect that impacts health, by modulating the immune system and inflammatory factors.
- Those who spent time in nature emerged more restored, less stressed, and reporting less anxiety and/or depression than those who did the same activity, for the same duration, in a built environment, according to several studies.

### Access to green spaces can build social cohesion—where everyone works both individually and together to ensure everyone has a fair and just opportunity for health.

- Green spaces provide vital neighborhood hubs for social interaction.

- When properly designed, green spaces contribute to social cohesion and a sense of community, which can only occur when the needs and desires of the residents using the space are heard.
- For residents of inner-city apartment buildings, urban green spaces have been linked to stronger ties with neighbors and a greater sense of safety.

### **Latino communities lack access to green spaces, contributing to health inequities.**

- Lack of park access is linked to mortality. Green space has been shown to protect health.
- Only 1 in 3 Latinos live within walking distance (less than one mile) of a park.
- Only 19% of Latino children have access to recreational green spaces close to their neighborhoods, compared to 62% of their white peers.
- Low-income neighborhoods populated by minorities and recent immigrants are particularly short of green space. These individuals also are significantly less likely than whites and high-income individuals to engage in regular physical activity that is crucial to good health.
- Overall, Latinos are 30% less likely to engage in physical activity than Whites.
- Lack of activity plays a role in high rates of chronic disease among Latinos. 42% of Latino adults and 22% of Latino children are obese, compared to 32% and 14% of their white counterparts. Latinos are 1.7 times more likely than whites to be diagnosed with diabetes.

### **Latinos face inequitable access to existing green spaces for many reasons.**

- Top factors that prevent access to existing green spaces in Latino communities are: greater distance to parks or green spaces; low connectivity of local street networks and lack of sidewalks; poor maintenance of these spaces; poor access to public transit; and funding issues.
- In a study of four rural Latino communities, only half of road segments were rated as walkable, only 44% had walkable shoulders, and only 32% had sidewalks in good condition.
- In these four communities, parks and playgrounds were ranked as “available,” but of these, half were rated in poor condition and thus unusable. Furthermore, all four had afterschool outdoor physical activity programming, but only two school districts provided a late busing option.
- Race relations and safety issues also have kept Latinos from using parks in their neighborhoods, as a given space may be perceived as “belonging” to another group in the community.
- Studies of funding for urban parks and recreation show that low-income communities of color have far less to spend on parks and recreation, and have fewer non-profit resources, too.
- The smaller tax base in low-income communities has made it difficult for leaders to invest in health-supporting environments, services, and programs for underserved communities.
- The race and socioeconomic status of government officials may not represent their constituents, and decisions about green space investments might be based on political influence and not on neighborhood need; thus low-income neighborhoods may not be prioritized in funding decisions.

## **The Solutions: Ways to Boost Green Spaces for Latinos**

### **Green space initiatives are effective when they meet Latino community needs.**

- Researchers found that, when green space is accessible in neighborhoods with higher concentrations of Latino residents, greater park-based physical activity occurs.
- Several studies indicate Latinos desire:
  - A central community park, or “plaza,” to act as a hub for neighborhood social events (i.e., cultural music and arts festivals) and educational or medical programs.
  - Repurposing vacant lots into play space for children (and to deter crime).
  - Complete, safe sidewalks throughout the neighborhood to normalize walking.
  - Greenways as safe routes to school and as safe routes to public transportation.

### **Latino community involvement is important to improving environmental justice.**

- Studies of Latino communities in which green space initiatives have been successful reveal a shift in environmental justice; from changing the legal, bureaucratic, and technical “regulatory route” of governance, toward diversified networks with environmental groups, nonprofits, foundations, and a breed of “environmental entrepreneurs” who invest in revitalization projects.
- This trend of proactively restoring nature and producing new environmental “goods” in marginalized communities can spatially fix amenities such as parks, green spaces, bike paths, trails, and community gardens; it also can create new job opportunities, program funding, and investment options that revolve around the green economy.
- In L.A., community involvement led to a park creation in unique ways:
  - While the state parks agency, using funds from a special bond issue, ultimately purchased the land from a developer to create the park, the private Trust for Public Land brokered the deal and provided funds for environmental remediation.
  - Coalitions of smaller organizations provided legal expertise and grassroots support.
  - Networks of mostly Latino professionals collaborated to accomplish cultural advocacy that made the park possible. For example, Raul Macias of the Anahuak Youth Soccer Association worked to empower park-poor families to testify at community meetings.
  - Latino professionals served as “cultural brokers” between mainstream groups and working-class Latinos and immigrants. These brokers translate between groups who may lack experience or competence in communicating across cultures, and endorse acceptable community development projects.

### **Several opportunities exist to increase Latinos’ access to green spaces.**

*Note: The following actions come from our [2016 Research Review on Action Spaces](#):*

- Shared use agreements—formal contracts between a school and a city, county, or sports league, that outline terms and conditions for sharing existing physical activity facilities—have helped increase access to green spaces in some Latino communities.
- Improved park maintenance and safety increases Latinos’ use of green spaces, and potentially contributes to greater physical activity levels.
- Safer routes and streets improve young Latinos’ access to green spaces.

## **Policy and Practice Implications**

### **Increase Latino access to and use of green spaces:**

- Develop a central neighborhood park for social cohesion, social support, and community events.
- Repurpose vacant lots into recreational spaces to promote positive behaviors and reduce crime.
- Prioritize maintenance of existing green spaces and develop culturally-relevant programming to increase perceptions of safety, cultural relevance, and belonging.
- Prioritize investment in green spaces in low-income neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color.
- Construct sidewalks throughout the community to promote access to all green spaces.
- Build greenways and trails as safe routes to schools, safe routes to green spaces, and safe routes to public transportation to increase physical activity in children and adults.

### **Promote community-driven environmental justice:**

- Employ use of a “cultural broker,” a local resident who has access to community members, grassroots organizations, as well as official decision-makers and who can mediate agreements.
- Conduct a community survey and go door-to-door to get a sense of community composition.
- Bring residents together with ongoing, regular meetings at churches, community centers, or prominent local businesses.
- Distribute flyers and hold trainings to educate the community on specific issues of interest, and limit fears that green space improvements may result in displacement and gentrification.