

Executive Summary – PhD Dissertation

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**Local Parks and Recreation Agencies Use of Systems Thinking
to Address Preventive Public Health Factors**

Within the United States, parks and recreation agencies (P&R) typically manage public facilities, spaces, lands, and recreation programs. Public health (PH) evidence has increasingly pointed to local P&R agencies as a critical setting for promoting preventive health. Addressing desired PH outcomes is a growing focus for P&R agencies. There are a variety of programs and potential strategies available, but most agencies have limited resources and lack proven strategies on which to base their actions. However, the research base is growing. The global research question has shifted from asking IF P&R agencies can positively affect PH factors, to HOW they can best do so with limited resources.

This research included a comprehensive thematic literature review, along with iterative exploration through a three-stage Delphi-Panel study with 17 public P&R agency Key Informants in the U.S and Canada. Each Informant had senior administration experience in P&R, representing agencies with interest in addressing outcomes for at least one primary preventive health factor, and some assignment of resources towards addressing these issues.

The study first examined which preventive PH factors appear to be most modifiable by P&R. Results indicated that there are seven primary factors: increased physical activity, improved nutrition, enhanced safety or perception of safety, increased social and parental engagement, improved transportation and access to locations (especially nature), and cessation or reduced overconsumption of tobacco and alcohol. However, the research indicated that the priority of factors varies by community, and community-specific data on the health factors are not usually readily available to P&R agencies.

The continuing challenge at the community level is determining the priority of the factors for agencies and their partners to address. The study explored methods, programs, strategies, sample policies, and related documents utilized by agencies. Thirty-one related national initiatives were identified from literature and web searches, and ranked in terms of number of the Delphi agencies using them. Eight key critical strategies for P&R practice were identified:

- 1) Leadership to create a strong organizational culture and allocation of staff and financial resources
- 2) Cultural ethics of inclusion and equity
- 3) Adoption of systematic assessment methods for PH in P&R
- 4) Equitable access to assets and programs
- 5) Collaboration with other governmental, for-profit and non-profit organizations
- 6) Utilization of crime prevention and design strategies
- 7) Increased health promotions and education
- 8) Centralized tracking and evaluation of feasible measures

Implications for future research include need for additional validation and dissemination of this research, evidence-based tools, and proven methods. Conceptual frameworks and suggested steps were refined and presented to both address management and practice implications for a systems thinking approach, and to help address the gaps in knowledge transferal between P&R research and practice realms.

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