

Washington County Parks Senior Usage Study



Presentation by

Alexander Lee, Delaney Stekr, Mahdi Surosh, and Olivia Huber
Students enrolled in PA 5041: Qualitative Methods for Policy Analysts

Course Instructor

Dr. Greta Friedemann-Sánchez
Humphrey School of Public Affairs

Prepared in Collaboration with

Connor Schaefer
Public Works Planner, Washington County





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Resilient Communities Project

University of Minnesota
330 HHHSPA
301—19th Avenue South
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455
Phone: (612) 625-7501
E-mail: rcp@umn.edu
Web site: <http://www.rcp.umn.edu>

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Introduction

- National trends predict that seniors will make up a larger portion of the population by 2030, with a 65% increase in residents over 65 by 2030 in Washington County specifically
- Washington County Parks wants to make their parks accessible to the senior population
 - Seeking feedback about their parks from senior Washington County residents

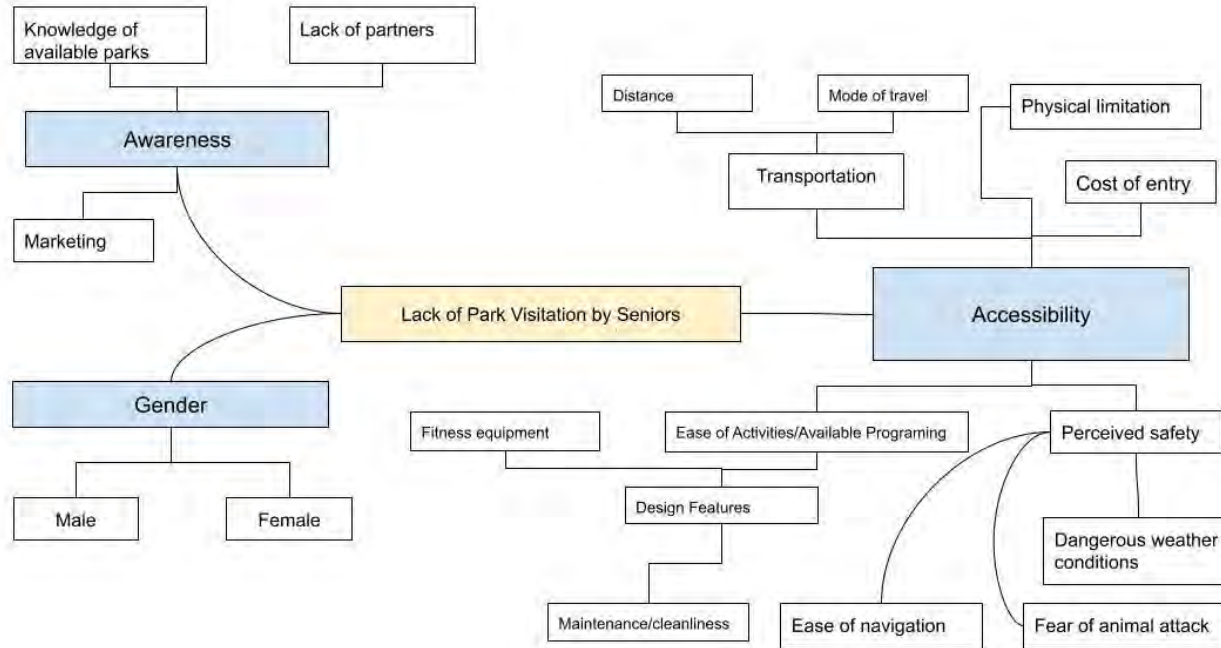
Literature Review

- Accessibility = proximity to parks, park quality, and park activities
- Seniors are more likely to use parks that are close to their homes
 - Accessible proximity: 15 minute commute time
- Park quality consists of: park maintenance, cleanliness and visitor's perceived safety
- Park priorities of seniors: easily accessible and longer trails, presence of natural vegetation and benches
- Gaps in non-urban spaces and different experiences of seniors

Research Question

- What are the structural barriers that prevent seniors from using the park system in Washington County?
 - How do they affect different groups of seniors?
 - Have they changed over time?
 - How can they be addressed?

Conceptual Framework



Methodology Overview

Our general methodology for the project can be followed by the outline below:

- Conducted research on senior park usage
- Developed a list of questions that served as the framework for all our interview
- Recruited seniors through the Vital Aging Network's Wellness 50+ Program and senior centers in Washington County, in addition to flyers posted in Washington County Parks
- Conducted eligibility screening with all participants via email
- Completed eleven interviews with seniors living in Washington County via Zoom or phone call
 - **Six** women and **five** men
- Analyzed the results and developed recommendations

Recruitment Criteria

Inclusion Criteria:

- Seniors age 60+
- Male or female (most efficient due to the small scale of the study)
- Seniors living in Washington County, MN
- Familiarity with Washington County Parks

Exclusion Criteria:

- Those under 60 years of age
- Those living in assisted living facilities (potential cognitive disabilities)
- Those living outside of Washington County, MN
- Not familiar with Washington County Parks

Sample of Interview Questions

1. Have your experiences with Washington County Parks been generally positive or negative?
2. What are some challenges you might experience in visiting parks?
3. What parks do you visit? And why do you attend those frequently?
4. Are the parks you visit well-maintained?
5. Have you been involved in any events or activities hosted by Washington County in their parks?

Challenges

- Technology issues for seniors taking up a portion of interview time
- Struggle to find men to participate
- Coordinating our schedules to be able to interview

Main Findings

Accessibility - Transportation

- Transportation to and from parks was done mostly by car.
- There were some instances of travel by means such as rollerblading, biking, and other physical activity, however this was very dependent upon distance and weather.
- All respondents lived within a 10 mile radius of a Washington county park.

Accessibility - Cost of Entry

- Throughout the interviews, cost of entry into the park was a topic that was frequently brought up.
- Concerns about prices stemming from many seniors being on a fixed income.
- Concerns about the increase in cost and knowing where the money for the passes is going.
- Interviewees comparing Washington County to Dakota County that does not charge a fee

Accessibility - Maintenance/Cleanliness

- Mix of responses on cleanliness
 - Depended on parks mentioned
- Issues with water not running during certain times of the year
- Dirty bathrooms
 - Some closed after Labor Day through the winter
- Trails in the winter not cleared
- Overall trail maintenance
- Buildings (Visitor Centers) not accessible to less mobile users

Awareness

- Name recognition of most parks
 - Greater familiarity with those in close proximity
- Lack of knowledge about park programming
- Desire to participate in park activities if they knew about them
- Cottage Grove Ravine and Lake Elmo mentioned the most by far
 - All parks mentioned at least once throughout our interviews

Male vs. Female

Male

- None mentioned concern for personal safety (but few concerned about the safety of their car)
- More likely to visit parks alone
- Interested in where the park pass costs are going
- Interested in music programs

Female

- More concerned about their personal safety than men
- More comments about concerns for seniors with less mobility
- More interested in participating in group activities
- More comments on keeping the cleanliness and accessible bathrooms

Recommendations

- Public transportation to parks
- Communication about events through an email list, Facebook, and the website
- More shade and accessible seating areas
- Passes with longer durations or free for seniors all together
- Adding cameras to parking lots for safety
- More paved trails
- Consistent park maintenance (bathrooms and trails)
- More senior-specific activities (shorter trails, walking groups, bird watching, conservation presentations, social events, etc.)

Potential Areas for Further Research

- Interviewing senior non-park users
- Comparative analysis of Washington County vs. Dakota County
- Having more stratification along racial or socioeconomic lines
- Experimental study of free passes for a group of seniors

Lessons Learned

- Senior population in Washington County is more active than anticipated
- Parks are not being utilized to their full potential
- Senior population was interested in improving the parks
 - Invested in their community
- Senior population as underutilized volunteer population
- Interview process was enjoyable
- Unique preferences of park communication, programming, etc.

Q&A

Thank you!