

Access to Waterways and Public Health Benefits

- Learning more about the health and wellbeing of your town can help to think about what is going well in your town, and what needs to be different so that everybody can be happy and healthy.
- “Blue Spaces” are areas where community members can see and access waterways, rivers, lakes, streams, and ponds.

River point: Current – clarifying out roles and responsibilities for coalition members and partners is important to pull any Lever.

Strengths & Skills that can pull lever:

- Thinking & Strategy
- Executing & Doing

Decision-Making Power: Community

Research suggests that access to the outdoors can improve mental health and physical activity.

- “A growing body of research suggesting that outdoor environment helps to reduce stress, promote physical activity and social relationships, and improve human health and wellbeing” (Gascon, 2017).
- “Parks and greenspace improve physical health in many ways, often by creating environments that encourage active lifestyles and improve access to exercise opportunities” (Larson, 2022).
- “Contact with nature enhances cognitive functioning and emotional well-being by improving attention restoration and reducing stress. Nature-based experiences can decrease the incidence and severity of anxiety disorders, attention deficit and hyperactivity disorders, and depression” (Larson, 2022).
- “Proximity to parks and greenspace is associated with subjective well-being and happiness of urban residents... and Connection to nature also enhances positive youth development” (Larson, 2022).
- “Parks enhance social engagement and cohesion across neighborhoods. High-quality parks and built environment features may be particularly effective at fostering positive social interactions and social capital within historically marginalized communities” (Larson, 2022).

Much of the research that exists is about green spaces, however more frequently, research shows that access to waterways, (also referred to as “blue spaces”), can support health and wellbeing as well.

- “The body of evidence suggested a positive association between exposure to outdoor blue spaces and mental health and well-being, and the promotion of physical activity” (Gascon, 2017).
- “Research has provided evidence that water environments, like other natural spaces, deliver societal benefits for health and well-being in terms of mitigating heat stress, supporting physical activity, encouraging social interaction, and facilitating relaxation” (Wuijts, 2022).

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Access to blue spaces can positively impact mental health and wellbeing, potentially even more than green spaces.

- “Blue spaces were also shown to lower stress and anxiety, while boosting people’s mood and psychological wellbeing” (Georgiou, 2021).
- “We found positive associations between visits to canals and rivers and mental wellbeing ($p < .05$) when compared to being anywhere else and when compared to being in green spaces. Increases in mental wellbeing were still evident after the visit had taken place. These effects remained significant after adjusting for age, gender, ethnicity and education, and were consistent in people with and without a diagnosis of mental illness. (Bergou, 2022).

Access to waterways and “blue space” also positively impacts physical activity.

- “Multiple studies report increasing levels of physical activity with increasing exposure to outdoor blue spaces” (Gascon, 2017).
- “Living closer to and having more blue space within your neighborhood could significantly increase your physical activity levels” (Smith, 2015).
- One town studied the benefits of a new riverwalk in their area and found “a 25% increase in the number of people using the renovated area of the river after the intervention. There was also an increase in sedentary users and those engaged in moderate levels of physical activity. The growth of users in the renovated area was mainly driven by females, adults, children, and the non-Caucasian population. Resident interviewees reported being happy with living near the river, where they usually go for a stroll, and thought living near the riverside area might benefit their health and wellbeing” (Vert, 2019).

Not surprisingly, individuals need to be able to access the waterway to experience health benefits.

- “Like green spaces, the health potential of blue spaces depends on people being aware of their existence and the extent to which they are accessible, so that people can actually use them.” For instance, the opening up and regeneration of waterfronts has resulted in greater use of the water environment” (Wuijts, 2022).

When opening up waterways, it’s important for communities to problem-solve and mitigate or disrupt potential harms to waterway access, including gentrification and pollution.

- “Neighborhoods with a large proportion of low-income or racial/ethnic minority residents typically experience limited access to parks and green spaces. Even when parks are located in low-income communities of color, they tend to be of lower quality and are often used less frequently... This reality highlights the need to consider equity and environmental justice issues when assessing the positive and negative impacts of the built environment” (Larson, 2022).
- “Because waterfront land is so valuable for housing and commercial development, gentrification is a common byproduct of the redevelopment of formerly industrial and low-income residential waterfronts... This may provide a public good by increasing the city’s tax base but can also contribute to displacement of low-income populations currently living in the waterfront zone.” It is imperative to take specific and intentional actions to plan for, monitor, and mitigate impacts on these communities. (Smith, 2015).
- “Economic regeneration of blue spaces, changes in property prices and the privatisation of areas

JUSTICE prone to blue spaces, may lead to gentrification and potentially increasing inequalities in access to blue spaces” (Wuijts, 2022).

- “Water environments can also pose specific health risks such as illness caused by water contamination, drowning, or stress related to (the threat of) sea-level rise or flooding” (Wuijts, 2022).
- “Because water quality is affected by runoff from and pollutants discharged through the entire watershed” (Smith, 2015), it may be very difficult to understand the health of the entire watershed. There exist a number of ways to provide education around the health of the watershed, particularly after large rainfall or event.

There are health disparities in many communities that access to waterways and blue spaces could help lessen.

- Many residents in Environmental Justice towns experience higher rates of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, COPD, Heart Disease, Diabetes, Depression, and Obesity as compared to other census tracts (CDC, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, and the CDC Foundation, 2022).
- The federal government, through the [Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool](#), identifies communities as an Environmental Justice community by using data to demonstrate the unequal burden of heart disease and low-life expectancy for residents who are low-income and have not enrolled in college, university, or graduate school. This screening tool can open up federal funding opportunities that help support waterway access through the [Justice40](#) initiative.

Through proactive problem-solving to mitigate or disrupt potential harms to waterway access, access to blue spaces and waterways could contribute to community’s improved mental health, physical health, and social cohesion. This could help lessen health disparities related to heart disease and depression currently seen in many Environmental Justice communities. Being identified as an Environmental Justice community according to the federal government also can open up federal funding possibilities to help support waterway access through the Justice40 Initiative.

Resources & References

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