



## BRIEF AND CONSIDERATIONS ON PUBLIC PARK ACCESS

**Access to state, regional and local public outdoor spaces are important during our shelter in place order.**

Social Distancing is imperative to slowing the spread of COVID-19. At BARHII we share concerns of the lack of effective social distancing in parks and playgrounds across the Bay Area. With the closure of these spaces, we at BARHII want to express our concerns about the equity implications of this significant decrease in recreational space. It is well documented that access to open space has physical and mental health benefits, reducing anxiety and the risk of cardiovascular disease.<sup>1</sup> We want to balance ensuring low-income and communities of color have access to open spaces with ensuring people are respecting the public health need for Social Distancing. We know that all parks in Marin County<sup>2</sup>, playgrounds in San Jose<sup>3</sup> are closing and warnings from the East Bay Regional Parks District of park closures<sup>4</sup>. We want to balance maintaining access to open space for low-income and communities of color with ensuring people are respecting the public health need for Social Distancing.

### **Equity Concerns**

**Access to open space in low-income neighborhoods:** Historically, park authorities have not equitably distributed open space and low-income neighborhoods with a critical number of people of color have often had less park space. In 2003 the San Francisco Neighborhood Parks Council conducted a survey of the city's "usable" open space where usable was defined as

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<sup>1</sup> [https://generalplan.sfplanning.org/Recreation\\_OpenSpace\\_Element\\_ADOPTED.pdf](https://generalplan.sfplanning.org/Recreation_OpenSpace_Element_ADOPTED.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/03/22/marin-closes-parks-as-crowds-defy-coronavirus-order/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/03/20/coronavirus-san-jose-closes-all-city-playgrounds-parks-and-trails-remain-open/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mercurynews.com/2020/03/23/coronavirus-east-bay-parks-could-be-next-to-shut-down/>

within a 10 minute walk from people's homes. That study found a great need for accessible park space in low-income neighborhoods.<sup>5</sup>

It's important to consider people's access to outdoor space, regular physical activity, and fresh air during the statewide shelter in place and social distancing order continue for weeks. Many of our families and households live in overcrowded conditions and have little space in their own homes. California has one of the highest overcrowding rate in the nation, with approximately 8.3% of our households living in overcrowded homes while the nationwide average is only 3.4%. This issue is more pronounced in our low-income populations and for our people of color. Lower income households rent at a much higher rate than own homes and overcrowding in rental units is 13.3% in California -more than two times the national rate and the highest in the nation.<sup>6</sup>

While sheltering in place is critical, we must find effective ways for everyone to get space from overcrowded homes, be able to go for walks and be outdoors. Overcrowded homes tend to have higher indoor air pollutants and can induce stress and increased domestic violence.<sup>7</sup>

**Safety concerns related to domestic violence:** Access to open spaces becomes particularly important for those facing domestic violence. Cities across the country are seeing spikes in domestic violence with abusers isolating their partners with threats of contracting COVID-19. Related to the increase in incidents of domestic violence is a corresponding decrease in people calling domestic violence shelters and hotlines.<sup>8</sup> Given how instrumental parks and open space is to mental health, for those facing domestic violence access to park space is an important tool to manage anxiety and reduce isolation.

**Concerns about equitable enforcement of park restrictions:** As restrictions around access to parks increase, we at BARHII are concerned about inequitable enforcement. There is a wealth of data that shows minority communities are being overpoliced with higher rates of searches and arrests for black men in particular. In other instances of public spaces like public transportation, we see extreme racial disparities in issuing of citations.<sup>9</sup> On BART, while black riders constituent 12% of overall ridership, they received half of the "quality of life" citations for offenses such as panhandling, fare evasion, and loud music.<sup>10</sup> In order to address inequity in enforcement, we encourage training in implicit bias for park staff and law enforcement.

**OVERALL RECOMMENDATION: We believe park authorities need to balance health and mental health concerns with the concerns about the spread of COVID-19.**

Keeping our public parks, trails, and beaches accessible and available are important during the sheltering in place order. State and regional parks can be the only access points to open space for those with limited access to local parks. People must comply with the social distancing order

<sup>5</sup> . <https://shou.senate.ca.gov/sites/shou.senate.ca.gov/files/californias-future-housing-january-2019.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/SafetyGrowthEquity-ParksOpenSpace\\_final.pdf](https://www.policylink.org/sites/default/files/SafetyGrowthEquity-ParksOpenSpace_final.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2014-08/documents/sec\\_2.pdf](https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2014-08/documents/sec_2.pdf) air pollution; <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/intimatepartnerviolence/riskprotectivefactors.html#domestic-violence>

<sup>8</sup> <https://time.com/5803887/coronavirus-domestic-violence-victims/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/683abdaf32bb49338c29185f1c495a65>

<sup>10</sup> <https://sanfrancisco.cbslocal.com/2020/02/27/bart-board-report-racial-disparities-citations/>

even as they utilize public spaces. This must be taken seriously and education and social pressure should help support people's understanding of the importance of social distancing in public spaces.

Our specific recommendations include:

- Place signs with clear instructions on Social Distancing at park parking lots, trail heads and beach access points.
- Define the elements of Social Distancing
- Equity training for park and law enforcement staff to ensure that restrictions are equitably enforced
- Use incentive programs for effective Social Distancing in park space (like a rewards program) as opposed to punitive responses (like citations)
- During the weekends where patronage increases, consider a system of access based on your license plate or zip code.
- Consider closing down streets to traffic in order to create safe open space for people to walk and bike. This expands public spaces and enables people to spread out through the streets safely limiting the impact on existing parks and beaches.
- Consider requesting non-essential workers sheltering from home to park in nearby parking lots in shopping centers and schools that are closed for business yet in or near residential areas. People can park off the streets and we can keep safer, wider streets open for walking and biking during the shelter in place order