

“The few green havens that are public parks” is a phrase from the Supreme Court’s opinion in the *Overton Park* case. The case involved a plan to build a highway through the middle of a major park in Memphis. The Court put a heavy burden on the government to justify the project:

“The few green havens that are public parks were not to be lost unless there were truly unusual factors present in a particular case or the cost or community disruption resulting from alternative routes reached extraordinary magnitudes. If the statutes are to have any meaning, the Secretary cannot approve the destruction of park land unless he finds that alternative routes present unique problems.”

Going to the park is a long way from unmediated contact with Nature, but for many city dwellers, it may be their first and most accessible taste of nature. Some children on school tours of the Oakland parks have rarely seen trees before. Besides giving people some sense of contact with the natural world, parks are also important because they offer unique opportunities for exercise and recreation.

A new [study](#) by RAND shows that we have a long way to go in bringing the public into the parks. It’s also a trove of information about parks. There are a lot more parks than you might imagine. RAND reports that “[m]ore than 9,000 park and recreation departments manage more than 108,000 public parks and 65,000 indoor facilities across the United States.” There’s a gender gap among the young — girls are only 40 percent of children and 35 percent of teens in parks. This is only one of the disparities in park use: Seniors are 20% of the population but only 4% of park users. Parks are less in low-income than in high-income neighborhoods, largely explained by fewer supervised activities and marketing/outreach efforts. RAND found that relatively small expenditures on park equipment and outreach could have big benefits.

The relative neglect of parks is especially unfortunate because there seems to be significant evidence of positive health effects of green spaces, including mental health effects. A major epidemiological [study](#) found that people living in green places — that is, people who had the most vegetation within 800 feet of their homes — had a 12% lower mortality rate from any non-accidental cause than people living in the least green places. They attributed the difference to improved mental health, social engagement, and level of physical activity, combined with lower exposure to air pollution.

By all means, let’s save wilderness. But let’s not forget the parks. There’s some [evidence](#) that people who use parks more place a higher value on forests and wilderness, too. So there could be some real synergy here.

