Economic Inequality, Poverty, and Park and Recreation Delivery

Invited Paper

David Scott

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: This paper explores the nature of economic inequality in the United States and its implications for the delivery of park and recreation resources to poorer Americans. The first part of this paper shows that economic wealth and poverty are increasingly concentrated, resulting in persistent poverty among segments of the U.S. population. Growing economic inequality over the last 35 years is linked to the weakening of trade unions, the loss of high paying manufacturing jobs, declining tax rates levied on wealthy Americans, the erosion of unemployment benefits and public spending on social services, the loss of public sector jobs, and a scaling back of progressive government policies that have historically benefited poorer Americans. Growing economic inequality has led to the rise of an underclass, primarily minority, which is stuck in poverty. In the second part of the paper, six ideas are presented about how to better serve poorer Americans. Public parks and recreation leaders are encouraged first to develop positive relationships with influential allies when advocating for improved leisure service delivery. A related strategy is to work with allies to improve accessibility of park and recreation resources. Redressing access inequities may be couched as environmental justice and civil rights issues. A third strategy is to offer leisure education programs that include basic instruction associated with different recreation activities. The key here is provide poorer Americans formative experience in leisure activities; many of these experiences are taken for granted by more affluent Americans. Another tactic is to increase safety so that poorer Americans are more likely to access parks and community facilities. A fifth course of action is to ensure poorer Americans are made to feel welcome when visiting recreation areas. Principles of inclusion must permeate all levels of the organization so that every citizen feels welcome. A final and obvious consideration in these economically challenging times is to make services affordable. Professionals associated with recreation and parks and their allies must proactively work to change how agencies currently operate and implement inclusive systems and strategies to ensure that leisure services are available to all Americans regardless of their socioeconomic status.
In theory, public park and recreation amenities are available to all Americans regardless of their socioeconomic status. Early public park and recreation leaders sought to make facilities and programs accessible to people concentrated in low-income communities. The truth is that public park and recreation providers have struggled historically (see Nesbitt, Brown, & Murphy, 1970) to meet the leisure needs of Americans who are economically challenged. Problems of service delivery are exacerbated by the fact that economic inequality among Americans is on the rise. The purpose of this paper is twofold; first to provide recreation professionals a better understanding of the nature of poverty and rising economic equality in the United States. It is important to note that the focus in largely on urban poverty. Second, and in light of growing economic inequality, six ideas are put forward about how park and recreation professionals can better serve poorer Americans.

The Rise of Economic Inequality

Although all societies are economically stratified, they differ markedly in their degree of inequality. Small agrarian and foraging societies are relatively equal, while larger industrial and postindustrial societies are characterized by large disparities in wealth and power. Many sociologists believe that powerful groups have vested interests to perpetuate inequality over time. One way they do this, according to Tilly (1999), is through exploitation, which occurs when powerful people take possession of resources and goods produced by others and prevent them from fully benefiting from their labor. A second mechanism is what Tilly described as opportunity hoarding. As the term suggests, this is the process of powerful groups taking control of scarce resources and limiting less powerful groups from accessing these resources through fees, rents, and prohibitions. Together, these two mechanisms consolidate wealth, limit upward mobility, and perpetuate inequality from generation to generation.

Wealth and economic well-being predict what social scientists refer to as life chances—the opportunities people have to improve the quality of their lives (Fishkin, 1983; Weber, 1978). More simply, a person’s wealth is linked to the types of material and nonmaterial resources he or she is able to access. Poorer Americans are far more restricted in their choice and quality of employment, residence and neighborhood, schools for their children, access to food and health coverage, and modes of transportations (Neckerman, 2004). They are also far more likely to be victims of crime and family violence, experience drug addiction, mental illness, infant mortality, and obesity, and come from a broken home (Wilson, 1987). Simultaneously, they are more likely to be disproportionately homeless or close to being homeless (Trussell & Mair, 2010) and live in communities with high levels of environmental toxins (Evans & Kantrowitz, 2002).

Economic well-being likewise shapes Americans’ access to a wide range of leisure amenities. Chubb and Chubb (1981) vividly expressed this point over three decades ago: “The poor do not have the recreation rooms, landscaped backyards, automobiles, recreation vehicles, seasonal homes, and other amenities that enhance the recreation environment” (p. 94). Studies have since documented that poorer Americans are less likely than others to travel, spend money on leisure, participate in the arts and visit museums, participate
in outdoor recreation activities, and exercise during leisure time (Crespo, Ainsworth, Keteyian, Heath, & Smit, 1999; Manning, 2011; Upright, 2004). Poorer Americans are also less likely to use publicly funded park and recreation resources. A recent study reported that affluent Americans are three times more likely to visit national parks compared to poor Americans (Taylor, Grandjean, & Anatchkova, 2011). Other studies have documented similar patterns for state, regional, and local parks (Lee, Scott, & Floyd, 2001; Mowen, Orsaga-Smith, Payne, Ainsworth, & Godbey, 2007; Scott & Munson, 1994). The reality is that poorer Americans face formidable barriers and constraints to accessing public and private recreation amenities.

Opportunities for poorer Americans to pursue leisure and improve the quality of their lives is increasingly problematic because the last 35 years have witnessed a steady, if not inexorable, rise in economic inequality in the United States (Heathcote, Perri, & Violante, 2011; Neckerman, 2004). Incomes of middle class and poorer Americans have remained constant or shrank since the early 1970s, while the incomes of wealthy Americans have improved. Massey (2007) reported that from 1942 through 1972, the richest 10% of Americans controlled approximately 30 to 32% of all wealth in the United States. Today, that figure is approximately 40%. To put this in perspective, the top 300,000 Americans collectively earn as much income as the bottom 150 million Americans (Johnson, 2007). Simultaneously, income gaps between White Americans and Black and Latino Americans have increased over the last 35 years despite the presence of affirmative action efforts and antidiscrimination policies (Massey, 2007). Although economic inequality occurs in all countries, the United States holds the dubious distinction of having a higher rate of economic inequality than any other advanced industrial nation (Smeeding, 2005).

Several factors have contributed to rising economic inequality among Americans, including the weakening of trade unions, falling wages and the loss of high paying manufacturing jobs, declining tax rates levied on wealthy Americans, the erosion of unemployment benefits and public spending on social services, and the loss of public sector jobs (Massey, 2007; Wilson, 1987). Importantly, progressive governmental policies, initiated during the New Deal of the 1930s and the Great Society of the 1960s, have been systematically scaled back to the disadvantage of poorer Americans. The dismantling of these policies has been an economic boon to wealthier Americans.

A key mechanism that sustains economic inequality is the concentration of wealth and poverty. Massey (2007) argued that that the last 35 years has seen increased migration of wealth and potential tax revenues to affluent suburbs. Poorer Americans tend to be stuck in central cities and poorer suburbs. According to Massey, the concentration of wealth allows residents of affluent suburbanites to tax themselves at relatively low rates while yielding quality services to residents. Poorer cities and communities, in contrast have struggled mightily to provide residents’ basic services. Massey observed that the concentration of poverty creates a “high demand for services but yields low property values, thereby requiring higher taxes to support inferior services” (p. 196). Massey explained that this process ends in a “vicious cycle whereby taxes are raised in relatively poor municipalities to maintain deficient services, driving out families of means, which lowers property values further, causing more tax increases and additional middle-class flight, which further exacerbates the concentration of poverty” (p. 196).

The rise and concentration of economic inequality has led to the emergence of what Wilson (1987) referred to as an underclass—people who are caught in poverty with little prospects of escaping it. The underclass includes “individuals who lack training and skills and either experience long-term unemployment of are not members of the labor force, individuals who are engaged in street crime and other forms of aberrant behavior, and families that experience long-term spells of poverty and/or welfare dependency”

Sixty-nine percent of Americans with household incomes of over $150,000 said they visited one or more national parks in the last 12 months, compared to only 22% of Americans with household incomes of less than $10,000.
Massey (2007) noted that while members of the underclass surely lack material resources, their personal and extended networks are people who are also overwhelmingly poor. Although these networks provide emotional support, they constrict opportunities for upward mobility. Wilson observed that these networks limit poorer Americans “access to jobs and job networks, availability of marriageable partners, involvement in quality schools, and exposure to conventional role models” (p. 61).

It is important to note that poverty in America is concentrated among segments of the population. Table 1 summarizes poverty rates in the United States for 2000 and 2011. Poverty rates are highest among African-Americans and Hispanics. In 2011, African-Americans and Hispanics were nearly three times more likely to live in poverty compared to Non-Hispanic Whites. Poverty also varies by age. Younger Americans (less than 18 years of age) were 2.5 times more likely to live in poverty in 2011 compared to older adults (65 years and older). In 2011, an astonishing 31.2% of female-led households in the United States lived in poverty, compared to only 6.2% of households that included a married couple. While there are few social groups immune to poverty, data from Table 1 clearly indicate there continues to be an enormous racial divide in America between those who are well off and those who are poor.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of the U. S. Population Below the Poverty Line (2000, 2011)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islanders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whites (non-Hispanic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic origin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African Americans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 18 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-64 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65 years and older</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household Type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married couple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female led</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male led</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, and Smith (2012)

Some Americans move in and out of poverty. As poverty has become concentrated, however, some Americans find themselves living long stretches of their lives poor. A study by Ratcliffe and McKeran (2010) suggests that the impacts of persistent poverty fall heavily on the young, particularly African-American children. They defined children who had spent half of their lives in poverty as persistently poor. Their results suggest that 10%

---

*In 1964, the Social Security Administration provided an “official” definition of poverty which was the smallest amount of money it cost to feed a family. In 2012, the poverty line for Americans living in the continental United States was $23,050 for a family of four (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2012).*
of American children meet this condition. Moreover, African-American children are seven times more likely that White children to be persistently poor. Ratcliffe and McKeran noted that these results are significant because “children who are born into poverty and spend multiple years living in poor families have worse adult outcomes than their counterparts in higher-income families” (p. 6).

There is a human tendency to “blame victims” for their own circumstances. Many Americans believe that poor people live the way they do because they do not work hard enough or they are somehow morally deficient (Ryan, 1976). In fact, many people who are poor work long hours to make ends meet (Ehrenreich, 2001). They often do so without earning medical benefits, paid leave, and other fringe benefits that more affluent workers take for granted. Moreover, the federal minimum wage does not even come close to keeping poorer Americans out of poverty. In order for a minimum wage ($7.25) worker to earn enough money to support a family of four and be above the poverty line, he or she would have to work over 61 hours a week, 52 weeks a year. Poorer Americans struggle to make ends meet and many of the factors that keep them impoverished are beyond their control.

Serving Poorer Americans

The concentration of poverty and affluence is reflected in the quality of private and municipal recreation and park amenities that communities are able to deliver to residents. Over 20 years ago, Richard Kraus (1990) astutely noted that a two-tier system of publicly funded park and recreation provision has evolved in the United States. More recently, Kraus (2001) referred to this system as “recreation apartheid.” On the one hand, there are suburbs and wealthy communities that enjoy strong financial support for parks and recreation. Residents in these communities have relatively easy access to an array of park and recreation amenities that are safe and of high quality. Inner cities and poorer communities, in contrast, lack basic funding for municipal services. Simultaneously, because of land acquisition decisions made in the past, poorer communities are ones that have been historically deprived of parks and recreation amenities (Boone, Buckley, Grove, & Sister, 2009; Garcia, 2013). Poorer Americans are far more likely than more affluent Americans to live in cities and municipalizes where there is a dearth of quality and accessible park and recreation amenities. A variety of related constraints also conspire to make leisure participation problematic for poorer Americans. In the remainder of this paper, I outline six major strategies that park and recreation leaders will need to implement to facilitate leisure and healthy recreation among poorer Americans.

Developing Allies

A major challenge facing park and recreation leaders and agencies as they seek to create recreation opportunities for poorer Americans is political in nature. Many Americans firmly believe that publicly funded leisure programs and facilities are already available to all, and practitioners’ efforts to provide programs and services to people with low income are pointless and financially irresponsible. Indeed, many affluent Americans believe that if some people do not want to use park and recreation services it is simply a matter of their free will (Henderson, 1997). At the same time, many Americans are averse to sharing parks and other leisure spaces with people who are poor. Public park and recreation leaders will need strong and influential allies and advocates if they are to improve leisure service delivery. If political support is not obtained, many poor Americans will continue to encounter formidable obstacles to leisure.

Powerful and systemic forces in America have perpetuated poverty and the underclass over the last 35 years. Allies and advocates are needed because poorer Americans cannot be expected to solve inner city problems by themselves and create quality leisure opportunities on their own. Accordingly, allies must come from inside and outside areas where poor Americans reside and they must represent a broad coalition of stakeholders, including federal, state, county, and local governmental agencies; youth serving organizations and faith-based groups; legal organizations; non-profit conservation groups; schools and
universities; and corporations and businesses. Academics and researchers need to work collaboratively with poorer communities to highlight the recreation needs of marginalized populations (Scott, 1997).

A word of caution: Given the anti-progressive political climate in contemporary America, the programs we create to help poorer people access leisure and recreation opportunities will likely be ones, in the words of Wilson (1987), “which the more advantaged groups of all races [and classes] can positively relate” (p. 120). Natural resources agencies and conservation advocates, for example, recognize the long-term protection of protected lands and wildlife necessitates will require making them relevant to all Americans, regardless of their race and socioeconomic background. This has led to the creation of conservation outreach programs that target low-income and minority communities.

**Improving Access**

Researchers have established that poorer Americans’ leisure and recreation is stymied because they do not live close to recreation resources and they lack reliable transportation (Mowen, Payne, & Scott, 2005; Scott & Munson, 1994; Shores, Floyd, & Scott, 2007). Opportunity theory was derived from this simple maxim: recreation participation depends on the extent to which recreation resources are accessible (Hendee, 1969). Over the last decade, several innovative studies have documented the health benefits or consequences of living close to or far away from parks and recreation facilities. In a nutshell, walking and physical exercise are far lower in communities that are park poor and lack amenities (e.g., paved trails) that facilitate these activities (Kaczynski & Henderson, 2007). Higher obesity rates and other risk factors are also more prevalent in communities where parks and recreation amenities are lacking (Gordon-Larsen, Nelson, Page, & Popkin, 2006). Because many park-poor areas are located in low-income communities where ethnic and racial minorities reside, efforts to redress inequities have been couched as environmental justice (Taylor, Floyd, Whitt-Glover, & Brooks, 2007) and civil rights (Garcia, 2013) issues.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, “Environmental Justice is the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.” While the environmental justice movement was originally dedicated to assuring that unwanted land uses would not be systematically imposed on low income and minority communities, the framework has been used by scholars and practitioners to pinpoint disparities in health benefits that accrue from living close to or far away from recreation and park amenities (Johnson & Floyd, 2007; Taylor et al. 2007).

Robert Garcia (2013), the Founding Director of The City Project, a nonprofit legal and policy advocacy organization based in Los Angeles, argued that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is relevant to address disparities in parks, physical activity, and health benefits in low income and minority communities. He noted that numerical disparities must be fully documented to establish probable cause for discrimination, but cautioned that it is critical to utilize historical research to establish intent. The City Project’s research and legal work challenged long-standing disparities in park acreage in Los Angeles and has resulted in the investment of over $41 billion in underserved communities (The City Project, 2012). The City Project was instrumental in the creation of the Los Angeles State Historic Park and Rio de Los Angeles State Park. Both parks were built to remedy long-standing disparities between park-poor and park-rich Los Angeles neighborhoods.

Park and recreation agencies must address issues of access if they are to more effectively meet the recreation needs of poorer Americans. This can best be accomplished by clearly demonstrating how long-standing inequalities in park and recreation amenities are linked to (1) health and physical benefits disparities, and (2) historical patterns of exclusion and discrimination. Making these linkages will be hard work and require a strong coalition of allies.
Creating Formative Experiences

Early childhood experiences in leisure tend to carry over into adulthood (Scott & Willits, 1998). American who are relatively well off are in a far better position than poorer Americans to pass on to their children skills, knowledge, and appreciation of the outdoors, sports, music, literature, and the arts. They do this by enrolling them in classes, lessons, and club memberships; providing them necessary equipment and transportation; and supporting them via attendance and encouragement. They also vacation regularly with their children, providing them rich, formative experiences in the great out-of-doors and exotic destinations. Affluent Americans have the resources to introduce their children to a wide range of pastimes.

Children growing up in persistent poverty are unlikely to acquire the same skills, knowledge, and appreciation of leisure activities and leisure destinations (Erickson, Johnson, & Kivel, 2009). Consequently, poorer Americans often lack formative experiences in leisure activities that more affluent Americans take for granted. Working with poorer communities will necessarily entail basic instruction in different leisure activities. Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) does this by providing grants to municipalities and nonprofit groups that create programs designed to introduce outdoor recreation to low-income youth and families. Many of these outreach programs include overnight camping trips to state parks where people learn how to set up a tent and cook over a camp fire as well as learn about the natural history of the area. An evaluation of one TPWD program confirmed that participants acquire outdoor recreation skills, develop an appreciation for parks and outdoor activities, and have reduced fears about being outdoors (Scott, Floyd, Pepper, & Callahan, 1998). TPWD’s grant program was created with the understanding that poorer Texans do not participate in outdoor recreation, in part, because they lack necessary skills and interest.

Improving Safety

Most Americans worry little about being assaulted or harassed while pursuing leisure activities. However, for Americans living in low-income neighborhoods, crime and physical assault are all too familiar experiences (Stodolska, Shinew, Acevedo, & Roman 2013). Fear of crime is among the most frequently reported reasons why many poorer Americans do not make greater use of community leisure facilities near where they live. In a study of why people do not use parks in Northeast Ohio, a colleague and I found that over half of all low-income residents reported that fear of crime was very important in limiting their use of parks in the area (Scott & Munson, 1994). In contrast, only 16% of people with high incomes felt that fear of crime limited their use of public parks.

Poorer Americans are unlikely to use community park and recreation resources if they feel threatened on site or while traveling to the site. At a minimum, park and recreation agencies “must be committed to bolstering existing law enforcement programs, including highly visible car and bicycling patrols, facility surveillance, and strategic placement of telephones for receiving and responding to distress calls” (Scott & Munson, 1994, p. 93). In some low-income communities, park and recreation agencies work to eradicate gangs and others who make parks and facilities unsafe. They have done this through innovative programs that make parks and other facilities vibrant. Having visible and trusted adults onsite goes a long way to ensure safety (Stodolska et al., 2013). Parks and recreation facilities that are busy and full of people will be perceived as less dangerous than ones that are empty and lifeless. Finally, park districts may engage in selective brush and tree trimming to eliminate hiding places for criminals. This approach has been used by park districts in response to citizens’ concerns about public safety in parks (Scott, 1997).

Welcoming Leaders

All too often people who are poor are often made to feel unwelcome when they use community and recreation services (Baker Collins, 2005; Trussell & Mair, 2010). Recreation workers may provide them inferior treatment and monitor their movements and actions lest they engage in criminal behavior. Affluent participants frequently treat people
who are poor as outcasts and unworthy of civility. Public parks and recreation facilities in the United States are sometimes touted as being places where people of all classes, races, and ethnicities can mix equally and without fear of ostracism. Theory and reality are very different. History shows that affluent and middle-class Americans have sought to distance themselves from poorer citizens (Rosenzweig & Blackmar, 1992). Some affluent communities have put restrictions on who is eligible to use local park and recreation amenities. Many poorer Americans are often made to feel loathsome and inadequate by recreation workers and more affluent citizens (McCarville, 2008).

Recreation and park agencies must strive to be more welcoming to people with low income. Although most public park and recreation agencies provide employees diversity training, these efforts are often more symbolic than they are substantive (Allison, 1999). If agencies are to better serve poor Americans, principles of inclusion must permeate the organization from top to bottom. This means that all employees—from locker room attendants, custodial workers, facility attendants, recreation leaders and instructors, counselors, park rangers, and managers—must be committed to helping all visitors feel welcome. A guiding principle of inclusion is that visitors with low income are people first and deserve the same respect and treatment as other visitors; they have the same need as anybody else when it comes to feeling accepted and connecting to the broader community (Trussell & Mair, 2010).

Making Programs Affordable

Much has been written about the impact of fees and charges on limiting access to recreation and park programs among people with low income. The consensus is that fees and charges negatively impact lower income Americans’ access to leisure services (Burns & Graefe, 2006; More, 2002). Even a modest fee to a swimming pool or recreation center may be enough to deter low-income earners from using these facilities. Entrance fees, however, are the tip of the iceberg. In some leisure programs, participants are required to purchase equipment and uniforms. In youth programs, there are also informal norms about treating children to snacks after a game. Many children from middle class and affluent families are now involved in club (select) teams that require extensive out-of-town travel. All these “hidden” costs can be prohibitive for families and individuals who have limited means.

In these fiscally challenging times, it is understandable that there is resistance by recreation and park agencies to reduce fees and charges to make programs and services affordable to people with low income since many municipal recreation services are being called on to generate revenues via fees and charges in order to make programs sustainable. Although these trends have been criticized as they undermine social equity (More, 2002), fees and charges are likely to be a permanent fixture of how public park and recreation agencies do business. Nevertheless, there are at least three ways that agencies can make programs more affordable for people with low income. One way is to set aside times during the week when facilities and programs are available at no charge. Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, which is located in Northeast Ohio, does this on Mondays. Although the Zoo does not collect demographic information about its Monday visitors, comments from other sources indicate visitors are appreciative of the free Monday policy (S. Allen, personal communication, April 17, 2013). A second strategy is to allow customers to volunteer in exchange for a fee waiver. The latter method not only makes the program/facility affordable, but it also benefits the agency by providing valuable personnel in areas in which the agency is understaffed. A final strategy is to offer financial assistance programs for poorer residents. Financial assistance programs work best, according to McCarville (2008), when efforts are also employed to combat other barriers to participation (e.g., transportation constraints) and when they seek to ease the burden on participants. McCarville noted that the process of accessing financial assistance can be onerous and embarrassing to people living in poverty, particularly when interacting with front-line employees who lack sensitivity and/or knowledge about such programs.
Some Final Thoughts

Although leisure and recreation researchers have done a reasonably good job of identifying major constraints that stymie leisure among people living in poverty, they have been less successful in identifying “best practices” that facilitate participation. Most of what we know that works is anecdotal at best. McCarville’s (2008) study of fee assistance programs is a rare attempt to systemically evaluate park and recreation organizations’ efforts to serve people living in poverty. Researchers and practitioners need to partner to determine the efficacy of policies and agency efforts to moderate the myriad of constraints encountered by poorer constituents. Quasi-experimental designs seem particularly suitable to appraise the causal impact of outreach programs, improved transportation, policing, staff training, and fee assistance programs. While lacking random assignment and other control measures, quasi-experimental designs nevertheless provide a means of observing the effects of one or more changes in park and recreation delivery on increased participation and well-being among poorer residents. Research like this will require a strong commitment on the part of both practitioners and researchers.

Most people who are affluent can take for granted that the communities in which they live will have a wide-range of interesting, safe, and accessible leisure services. They can also expect to receive friendly and reliable treatment from recreation personnel. These people have reason to believe that they can affect change in program delivery by serving on park and recreation boards or simply making their viewpoints known to personnel or city officials. None of these things are taken for granted by poorer Americans. They remain largely invisible. If we are to take seriously the idea that leisure services are open to all Americans, irrespective of their socioeconomic status, then recreation workers and their allies will need to work vigorously at reducing long-standing practices of exclusion and facilitating safe, interesting, and accessible leisure opportunities.

References


