Urban green space, public health, and environmental justice: The challenge of making cities ‘just green enough’

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Abstract

Urban green space, such as parks, forests, green roofs, streams, and community gardens, provides critical ecosystem services. Green space also promotes physical activity, psychological well-being, and the general public health of urban residents. This paper reviews the Anglo-American literature on urban green space, especially parks, and compares efforts to green US and Chinese cities. Most studies reveal that the distribution of such space often disproportionately benefits predominantly White and more affluent communities. Access to green space is therefore increasingly recognized as an environmental justice issue. Many US cities have implemented strategies to increase the supply of urban green space, especially in park-poor neighborhoods. Strategies include greening of remnant urban land and reuse of obsolete or underutilized transportation infrastructure. Similar strategies are being employed in Chinese cities where there is more state control of land supply but similar market incentives for urban greening. In both contexts, however, urban green space strategies may be paradoxical: while the creation of new green space to address environmental justice problems can make neighborhoods healthier and more esthetically attractive, it also can increase housing costs and property values. Ultimately, this can lead to gentrification and a displacement of the very residents the green space strategies were designed to benefit. Urban planners, designers, and ecologists, therefore, need to focus on urban green space strategies that are ‘just green enough’ and that explicitly protect social as well as ecological sustainability.

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