

The Value of Urban Open Space: Exercise and Health

THE HEALTHY LANDS AND HEALTHY ECONOMIES INITIATIVE

CASE STUDY



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CONTEXT

A significant body of research documents the links between physical activity and health — from maintaining healthy body weight to reducing the incidence and severity of a wide range of illnesses, including depression, anxiety, heart disease, diabetes, and several types of cancer. Healthcare providers across the U.S., including here in Sonoma County, are now writing “parks prescriptions” to encourage patients to engage in some form of physical activity and develop outdoor exercise habits.

Urban open spaces provide free or low-cost venues for exercise. In addition, recent studies show that the presence of nearby open spaces helps to improve motivation to exercise in the first place — increasing the rate at which people exercise.

Sonoma County’s **140 miles** of regional trails and nearly 300 parks include a large variety of urban open spaces. A recent report commissioned by the County of Sonoma Department of Health Services recommended increased access to parks as a key place-based intervention that would benefit the health of Sonoma County residents overall.

METHODS

To assess the value of the health benefits associated with exercise in Sonoma County’s urban open spaces, the consulting firm Earth Economics considered the number of residents who exercise regularly in these open spaces, and the average annual costs associated with physical inactivity.

Total annual healthcare and lost-productivity costs associated with physical inactivity among adults in Sonoma County was estimated at **\$274 million** annually, or \$699 per person (\$267 associated with health care costs, \$402 associated with lost productivity) in a 2009 study. The total value of health benefits from parks and trails was calculated by multiplying the estimated number of individuals who exercise in parks, approximately 10% of the urban population, by the estimated costs associated with physical inactivity for adults, seniors, and children.





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FINDINGS

Value: NATURAL BEAUTY

By exercising in urban parks, Sonoma County residents avoid a total of **\$17.5 million** in health care and lost-productivity costs each year. Not only do urban parks provide open space for Sonoma County residents to improve their physical health, numerous studies have shown that urban parks can improve mental health by decreasing anxiety and reducing symptoms of depression. A recent study showed that living near an urban park can result in the same mental health benefits as a decrease in local unemployment by 2%.



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SONOMA COUNTY

Sonoma County Ag + Open Space permanently protects the diverse agricultural, natural resource and scenic open space lands of Sonoma County for future generations. We are responsible for the perpetual protection of over 116,000 acres of land throughout our region. These agricultural and open space lands are protected through a quarter-cent sales tax approved by voters in 1990 and reauthorized in 2006. For more information, please visit www.sonomaopenspace.org.



THE HEALTHY LANDS AND HEALTHY ECONOMIES INITIATIVE

The Healthy Lands and Healthy Economies Initiative documents the economic value and community benefits of natural and working landscapes. This research helps to show that Sonoma County's investments in land conservation pay real dividends, now and into the future. This Initiative would not have been possible without contributions from the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation, and the California State Coastal Conservancy.

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To learn more, visit www.sonomaopenspace.org/HLHE

All images provided by **Ag + Open Space**.

FULL REPORT: Earth Economics. 2017. Urban Open Space: Essential to Physical and Mental Health. Report prepared for Sonoma County Ag + Open Space.

AVAILABLE AT: www.sonomaopenspace.org/HLHE

RESEARCH BY: Earth Economics — www.earthconomics.org