

How our parks can mend communities

Community. It's a fuzzy term, but it represents an important ideal that has been severely tested in recent years in the United States. We see it in our politics, in the culture wars that rage on social media, and in segregated neighborhoods and cities. While there is no easy antidote to this polarization, there is a place — a physical locale — where we can begin to repair our fraying social fabric: the local park.

Parks remain neutral public gathering places where community members can play, socialize, collaborate, and become involved in decisions about their communities. They welcome everyone, regardless of race or ethnicity, income, ideology, or age.

A recent study by [Trust for Public Land \(TPL\)](#), a national nonprofit that connects everyone to the outdoors, of which Tamar is the New York State director, found that residents of cities with high-quality parks were more socially connected with their neighbors than residents of cities with less robust park systems. The analysis was part of TPL's annual ranking of the park systems of the nation's 100 most populous cities, known as the ParkScore® index.

The analysis also found that in the 25 top-ranked cities (New York City ranked 12th) individuals in different socioeconomic groups were 26% more likely to have social connections than in lower-ranked cities. The study also revealed that residents were 60% more likely to volunteer in high-ranked cities in lower-ranked cities.

City leaders can bridge divides among residents by overseeing and adequately funding a well-run, inviting, accessible, and attractive park system, and parks agencies can deepen those connections through intentional programming and partnerships with nonprofit organizations. In New York City, children and adults can take part in a multitude of activities in parks, including team sports, free concerts, and movie nights.

Experts say parks have a special role in addressing the historic levels of loneliness, polarization, and distrust in institutions that pervade American life. More than three-quarters of major cities were more racially segregated in 2019 than in 1990 and half of adults report feeling lonely.

Fortunately, local investment in parks has risen across the country due to the two landmark federal infrastructure bills. Total public and private spending on parks and recreation in the 100 most populous cities climbed to \$11.2 billion, up from \$9.7 billion in 2022. That said, New Yorkers are pining for greater investment in their parks, with a goal of 1% of the city budget going to the Parks Department (it is currently less than 0.6%).

To increase New Yorkers' equitable access to parks, TPL is partnering with elected officials and the Departments of Education and Environmental Protection, to

transform asphalt schoolyards into beautiful play spaces that absorb stormwater and reduce the heat island effect. The schoolyards provide a safe and joyous place for children to play, and are kept open after school hours for the enjoyment of all community members.

In addition, TPL is working to transform an abandoned rail line into a 3.5-mile park in partnership with [Friends of the Queensway](#), the mayor's office, the Department of Parks and Recreation and the Economic Development Corp. (EDC). This park will have places for play, sport, and relaxation, and will better connect Queens residents to nature and to each other.

For the 27 schools located near the Queensway, teachers will have a place to take their students for physical activity and education. Importantly, the Queensway will support Vision Zero with safe walking and biking routes to schools, stores, and workplaces.

Shekar, as the chair of the [City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation](#), is proud of these efforts to fund, steward and grow a park system that serves as the heart of our community. Efforts such as the Queensway not only increase access to green space but also build human connections, fostering a sense of belonging and providing residents with a safe walking and biking pathway. By investing in our parks, we are investing in the future of New York City.

More can be done to strengthen local parks and, in turn, our sense of community. At the federal level, support for the Outdoors for All Act would strengthen the Outdoor Recreation Legacy Partnership, a grant program run by the National Park Service that provides funding for communities that need parks the most.

An investment in parks will pay dividends far beyond new basketball courts or expanded trail networks. It will make good on our national motto of "E pluribus unum" — "out of many, one" — a concept we'd be wise to embrace now more than ever.

Krishnan is chair of the City Council Committee on Parks and Recreation. Renaud is the NYS director of Trust for Public Land.