



Ontario Association of
Landscape Architects

A component organization of the
Canadian Society of Landscape Architects

Parks as Health and Wellness Infrastructure

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Landscape architects are the designers of outdoor spaces, with a particular knowledge of how to incorporate nature into non-natural settings such as cities. This paper outlines why nature in populated areas is critical health and wellness infrastructure.

Nature has long been understood to provide stress relief benefits, and research has concluded that measurable positive medical outcomes can be a result of even looking at nature through a window (Sherer, P.M., *The Benefits of Parks*). But recently, world events have brought new light to the importance of nature in towns and cities and parks should now be understood to be critical to Public Health strategies for healthy communities.

Research shows connections between low income neighbourhoods, lower rates of greenspace, and residents that were hardest hit by the pandemic ([Parks and an equitable recovery | Trust for Public Land \(tpl.org\)](#)), and more often impacted by increasing heat alert days and flooding (Sandifer, P., Sutton-Grier, A.E., and Ward, B.P., 2015). Those residents that had parks and trails near them could safely get outside to cool off in summer heat, keep active while safely distanced, and maintain social networks with friends in greenspaces, were shown to fare better through the worst waves of the pandemic. Anecdotally across Canada, managers of parks are seeing more engagement and priority by residents on improvements to their parks, huge increases in use, and Public Health officials have long advocated for equitable access to free recreation because it leads to better overall health for residents.

Cities across Canada are grappling with how to increase resilience against climate change, and the negative outcomes of extreme storms, extreme heat, and flooding in urbanized watersheds across Canada. Neighbourhoods with street trees and parks are considerably cooler, more absorptive, and has less polluted air than those without natural infrastructure (TD Economics, "Urban Forests: The Value of Trees in the City of Toronto, 2014). Health Day magazine reports that areas with lots of trees have residents with lower medical costs and better overall health ([Want a Healthier Neighborhood? Plant a Tree - Consumer Health News | HealthDay](#)). Ontario research published in 2018 linked 143 studies to conclude that people with regular exposure to green spaces had lower stress, blood pressure, HDL cholesterol, and other negative health outcomes. Not to mention the role that vegetation, particularly trees, play in sequestering carbon and therefore additionally combatting climate change.

Considering the overwhelming costs of the medical system, including hospital care and managing negative health outcomes brought on or exacerbated by heat events, pollution, or disease, the investment in preventative care should be considered a necessity for all levels of government in Canada. The lack of greenspace including parks and tree canopy poses a significant, immediate, and deathly Public Health threat to all Canadians, and almost all solutions can be found in the investment in greenspaces.

The prioritization of creating new, and enhancing existing greenspaces, particularly in urban areas across Canada, will have direct impact on positive health outcomes for Canadians. The health and wellness benefits of access to parkland, trees and nature, are well documented with both Canadian and world-based research.