



The Schuylkill River Park and the Health of the Neighboring Community

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ABSTRACT

In 1998, construction on the Schuylkill River Park began converting the neglected area along side the Schuylkill into a scenic riverfront park and trail. **This study uses 16 interviews with residents of the 19103 zip code in Philadelphia, PA to assess how the development of the Schuylkill from 1998-2006 influenced their mental health, social health, exercise habits, and ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle while aging.** Grounded theory analysis revealed that the development of the river had a positive impact on residents' exercise habits by making exercise more convenient and enjoyable. The development also resulted in some mental and social benefits, such as increased neighborhood attachment, more community, and mental restoration. Almost all participants believed that the development helped them maintain a healthy lifestyle while aging, but a few felt the overcrowding of the trail posed health risks and made it less enjoyable to use. This project supports previous research by highlighting how greenspace can provide mental and physical benefits, while also emphasizing the need for wider paths and speed limits in order to accommodate users of all ages.

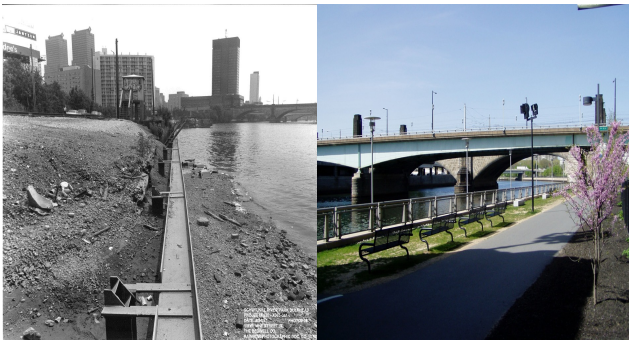


Figure 1 (Left): Image depicting the Schuylkill prior to the development, as the bulkhead was being built. Source: Schuylkill Banks. 16 February 2022.
Figure 2 (Right): Photo of the Schuylkill River Park shortly after the development. Source: Vinocur, Jeffrey M. 20 April, 2006.

BACKGROUND

- The older adult population and the urban population are growing at unprecedented rates, making it extremely important to explore how green infrastructure can influence the health of these populations.
- Smaller scale restoration projects in Philadelphia, like vacant lot clean ups, have been associated with improved mental health and decreased gun violence, but no change in exercise habits
- More research is needed to better understand which type of greenspace provides the most benefit to older adults and other urban populations
- There is evidence of bluespace providing mental restoration, but significant research is lacking
- To our knowledge, there has been no study examining the impact of such an urban river rehabilitation project on health

METHODS

Research Question: How did the development of the Schuylkill River from 1998-2006 influence the exercise habits, mental health, social health, and ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle while aging of residents of the 19103 zip code?

Data Acquisition: Participants were required to have lived in the 19103 zip code from 1997 to 2007. Four interviewees were initially recruited through a neighborhood organization, and the snowball sampling was used to recruit the remaining participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted until thematic saturation was reached.

Data Analysis: Grounded theory analysis was used

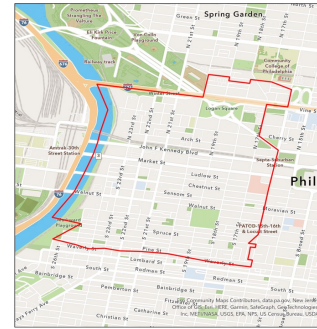


Figure 3: Map depicting the study site (Zip Code 19103) outlined in red. Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau

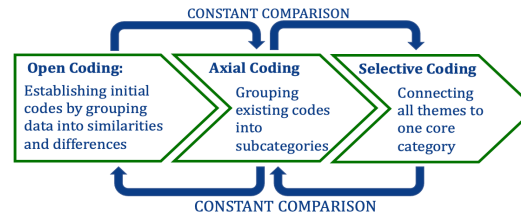


Figure 4: Image showing the grounded theory analysis process

RESULTS

The largest benefit the development provided was encouraging physical activity. The river also provided more minor but still significant mental and social benefits to the community. Most residents believed the river influenced their ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle while aging, but a few participants avoided the trail due to overcrowding.

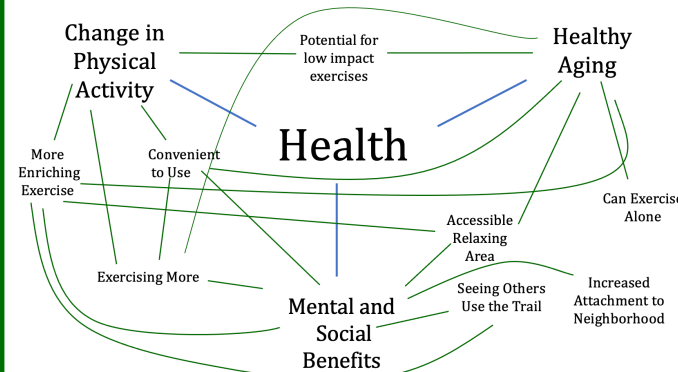


Figure 5: Theme map depicting the major findings of the study. Many of the benefits and changes related to the development affect multiple themes, as seen by the green lines connecting many themes in the map.

DISCUSSION

- Differences from existing studies may be due to the different sociodemographic characteristics and baseline health of study populations
- This study adds to existing literature by describing some of the mechanisms through which greenspace encourages exercise and provides mental and social benefits
- City planners should invest in green infrastructure and urban river restoration project, while ensuring these spaces are usable for older adults by creating wider trails and speed limits
- Future research should *quantitatively* assess the health effects associated with the Schuylkill River Development

Limitations: small and homogenous sample size, non-random sampling, biases in self-reported health, interviewer's preexisting relationship with some participants and the Schuylkill River Development

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study demonstrates that the development of the Schuylkill River from 1998-2006 did affect the wellbeing of 19103 residents – by encouraging physical activity, providing mental and social benefits, and influencing participants' ability to maintain a healthy lifestyle while aging for. While this research demonstrates the diverse health benefits that urban river restoration projects can provide to adults and older adults, it also emphasizes changes that can be made to make such greenspaces more accessible to older adults.



Figure 6: Photo of author at event during the development of the Schuylkill Riverbanks. Author is in a blue and white dress holding the sign. 18 April 2004. Author's Personal Collection.

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