

## Socialisation is **ALIVE** in Parks Amongst Urban Dwellers

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### Community

A collection of people connected by their shared interest, characterised by interactions and a sense of belonging to that group.

### Overview

*With urban densification, parks in Singapore play the role of providing the physical setting for people to relax, hang out and meet people in an outdoor public space. This study seeks to quantify the level of “social-ness” in three parks- including details on demographics of users, level of social interaction at parks, and friendliness of park users.*

### Introduction

With the hustle and bustle of a modern lifestyle in Singapore, there is a need to step up urban enhancements to relieve stress on citizens’ psychological well-being and provide infrastructure to promote physical activities. Similarly, the social ties in our urban neighbourhoods have been impacted by the modern Singaporean lifestyle. As our society increasingly values privacy and the luxury of amenities associated with a “home”, social interactions may potentially diminish. A recent study by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) and National University of Singapore (NUS)<sup>1</sup> found residents’ interactions to be incidental and minimal- a sign that social functioning of the Kampong Spirit may be diminishing. Can parks, as an expanded outdoor public space, promote community building and provide opportunities for people to meet and interact with each other?

<sup>1</sup> HDB-NUS Study on the Impact of the Built Environment on Community Bonding (2014)

## Methods

We used two different instruments- observations and onsite surveys- to study the activities and socialization behaviour of park users. Three riverine parks- Bedok Reservoir Park, Bishan-Ang Mo Kio Park and Punggol Waterway Park- were selected to represent parks of different sizes and population densities living near the parks, which is closely related to the age of the housing estate (refer to **Box 1**). Riverine parks were studied due to the interest in the newly developed parks such as Bishan-AMK Park and Punggol Waterway Park, especially for future parks planning and design. Fieldwork was conducted in-house by CUGE researchers over a three-month period from April to June 2014, and yielded 3,989 observation data and 1,089 surveys. The survey included both “use” and “user” questions. Use questions focus on characteristics specific to a particular visit. User questions focus on characteristics not specific to a particular visit but that of a park user, such as the number of visits over a 30-day period. Data of both use and user will be presented in this report.

	Bedok Reservoir Park	Bishan-AMK Park	Punggol Waterway Park
Size	41 hectares	65 hectares	16 hectares
Age of housing	Developed pre-1980's	Developed in the 1980's and early 1990's	Currently undergoing rapid housing and infrastructure development
Adult population in adjacent district <sup>2</sup>	423,000	213,000	42,000

Box 1. Profile of the Three Parks Studied

<sup>2</sup> Census of Population 2010. Statistical Release 3, Geographic Distribution and Transport. Singapore Department of Statistics.

## Demographic Profile of Users

**Table 1** provides information on visits to users of a park, as well as information unique to user groups. Men are the dominant segment of park users, particularly at Bedok Reservoir Park. In terms of age group, users below 45 years old comprise the largest group of park users across the three parks. Proximity of residence played a significant role in park use, especially at Bedok Reservoir Park which has the greatest proportion of park users who either live adjacent to (18%) or within (50%) the same districts of the park. Punggol Waterway Park, located within a district currently undergoing rapid housing and infrastructure development, has the lowest proportion (7%) of park users residing adjacent to the park.

**Table 1.** Demographic Profile of Park Users

		Bedok Reservoir Park	Bishan-AMK Park	Punggol Waterway Park
Gender	Male	62%	51%	56%
	Female	38	49	44
Age	18-29 yrs	30%	28%	35%
	30-44 yrs	40	41	40
	45-59 yrs	22	23	21
	60 years +	8	8	4
Residency of Park Users	Adjacent to park	18%	19%	7%
	Nearby park	50	31	17
	Outside the district	32	50	76

## Community Use of a Park

Parks function as a place for families to spend time and interact with each other. **Table 2** provides data on park use. According to our survey data, a third of those studied in parks included family members, with their spouse or children. **Table 2** shows about half of park uses comprised solo visit, and the smallest proportion is with friends, neighbours or colleagues.

**Table 2.** Social Units of Park Uses

% of Parks Uses	Bedok	Bishan-AMK	Punggol Waterway
Alone	50% (76% men)	53% (73% men)	45% (77% men)
Family, incl. spouse or children	34	36	36
Friends/Neighbours/Colleagues	17	11	16

According to **Table 2**, most of those who visit a park by themselves are men. Our observation data also supported this finding; most of those who visit a park by themselves are men. Having a large proportion of solo users in parks highlights some characteristics which these studied parks possess. They include: (1) *convenience* for park users of all ages to get to parks from their homes easily, whenever they have time to fit into their schedule; (2) the feeling of *safety* which allows park users to be at the park by themselves; and (3) being a welcoming *social space*, providing a space for a person who may be living alone to be with other people.

## Friendliness of People in Parks

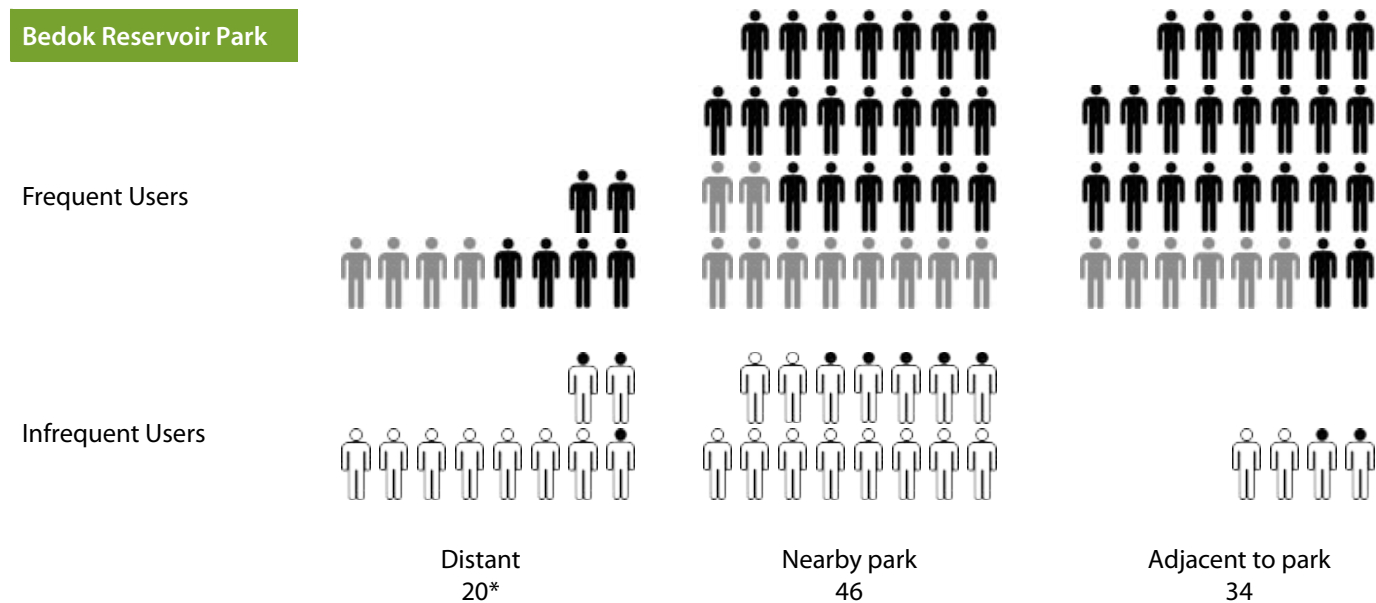
Exhibiting friendly behaviour is a sign that a place feels safe and is welcoming for its users, therefore a fertile ground for promoting social interaction. Social interaction in parks was examined using three different methods adopted in this study. The first method was to ask park users to rate how often they see someone they knew at the park they were intercepted in.

The results differed based on two factors: (1) frequency of park use and (2) proximity of the park to their homes. Results are presented for each of the parks and are conveyed as people figures as if 100 people are in a park at a given time. We expected those who live close and use the park for at least once a week on average to see people they know. This finding was evident for Bedok Reservoir and Bishan-AMK parks (see Fig. 1). As shown, those who use the park frequently were more likely to indicate that they “often” or “sometimes” see people they knew during a park visit than not seeing people they know. Those who use the park infrequently were more likely to indicate “infrequently” or “never” seeing people they knew over high levels of social interaction with other park users.

The third park studied, Punggol Waterway, had results that were different from the other two parks. A larger proportion of visits come from beyond the immediate districts of the park. This could be due to two reasons: firstly, the Punggol district is new and currently undergoing residential and infrastructural development, hence has lower percentage of residents living adjacent to the park; and secondly, the linearity of the park and its extensive connectivity with the Park Connector Network (PCN) draw high bike usage. Bike use leads to higher park use and a higher frequency of seeing a familiar face at the park.

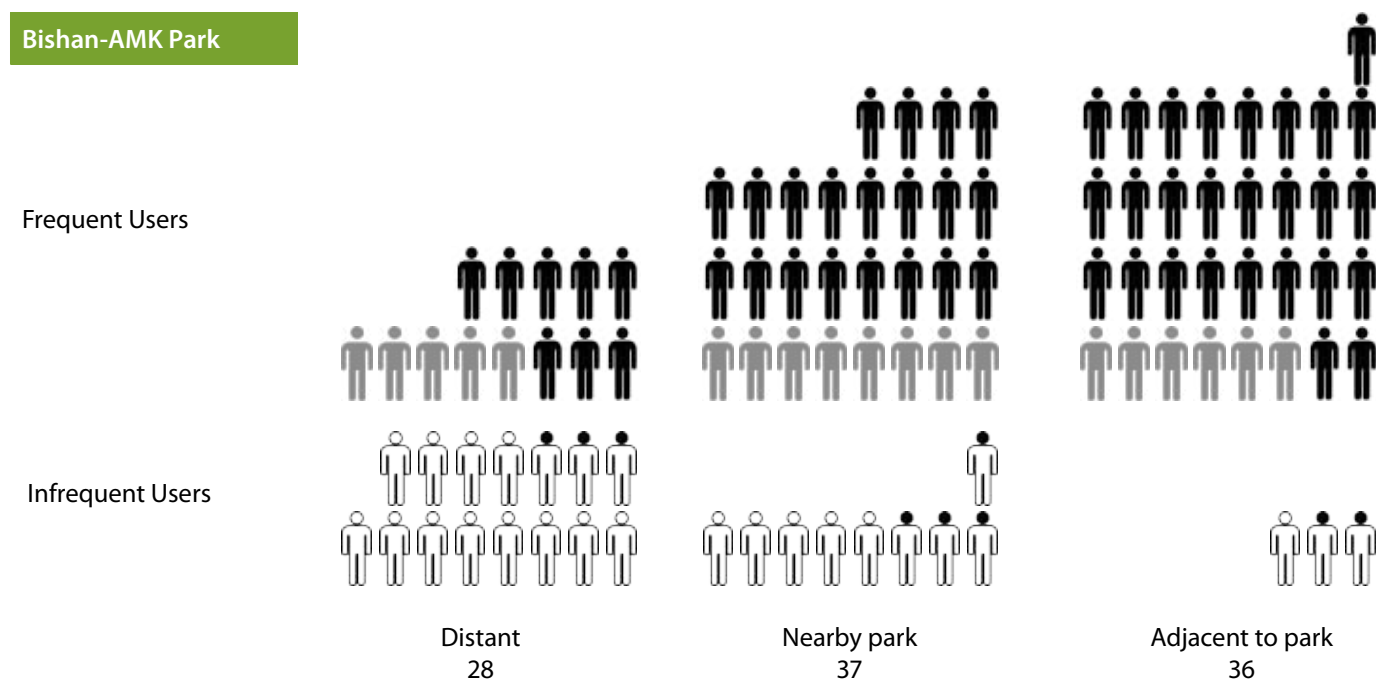
**Fig 1.** Social Interaction Levels Organized by Proximity to the Park from Users' Homes and Frequency of Park Use. Each park's graph represents 100 uses.

Legend Each person represents 1 out of every 100 park uses		Level of Social Interaction	
		Often/ Sometimes	Infrequently/ Never
Frequency of Park Use	Frequent User		
	Infrequent User		



At Bedok Reservoir Park, there is a high proportion of park users living nearby (46%) and adjacent (34%) to the park. Those who live adjacent were slightly more likely (76%) to know others at the park compared to those who live nearby (57%).

\*The figures indicate the number of people per 100 users according to their proximity of residence.



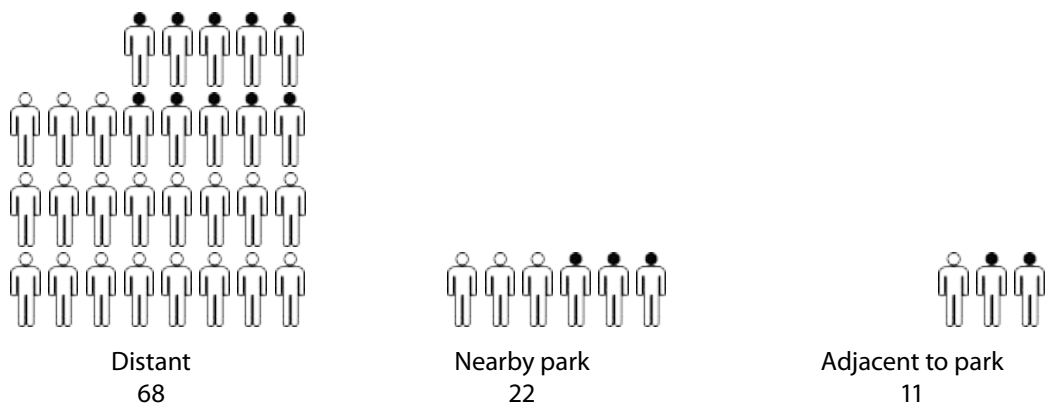
At Bishan-AMK Park, there is a high proportion of park users living nearby (37%) and adjacent (36%) to the park. Users living adjacent were slightly more likely (81%) to know others at the park compared to those who live nearby (65%).

Punggol Waterway Park

Frequent Users



Infrequent Users



Distant  
68

Nearby park  
22

Adjacent to park  
11

The largest proportion of visits comes from beyond the immediate district (68%) of Punggol Waterway Park. There is also a high frequency (53%) of park users seeing someone they know despite living beyond the district of Punggol Waterway.

A second method to study social interaction was by observing whether park users were talking with others at the park. Bedok Reservoir Park ranked the highest level (77%) of talking, followed by Punggol Waterway Park (69%), and Bishan-AMK Park (63%). We only recorded cases where park users directly spoke with each other. Park users who were by themselves or were talking on their hand phones were excluded from the research's talking tally, although they were observed.



**Photo A.** Park users participating in team games at Bedok Reservoir Park

Finally, we studied how friendly a park user would be to someone they did not know. The researchers made eye contact with a park user when walking in the opposite direction, and gently smiled, then recorded the response of each user as a positive, negative, or neutral gesture. During the entire fieldwork, some cues were in place to allow park users to understand what was going on; the researchers donned the NParks shirt, in addition to a signboard placed in the vicinity to inform park users that a park survey was in progress. Also, to ensure consistency in this exercise, the researchers calibrated<sup>3</sup> this observation technique which showed to achieve high consistency (90% to 97%). We found that parks are pro-social environments, with 6 out of 10 park users responding positively to the researchers' smile, by either returning a smile, a hand wave, or saying hello back. 2 out of 10 of the park users responded with a neutral expression; and 2 out of 10 responded negatively, by either looking away or frowning.

<sup>3</sup>The researchers conducted an inter-rater reliability test for six sessions early on in the study. This was to check for consistency in the response received from park users and how the response was coded.

## Shared Activities at Parks

Parks are spaces that encourage social interactions- for families to play and bond, for friends to hang out and have fun, and even for people to meet others with similar interests. This study examined facilities and activities which were found to be associated with greater social interaction.

Park users were asked in the onsite survey to indicate the activity(s) they participated in during a specific park visit. The activities with the highest percentages were ranked in Table 3, according to whether they were undertaken alone, with family, or friends. Activities in the survey ranged from those of vigorous level, including jogging, cycling, and exercising (including using the Fitness Corner and stretching), to moderate (walking or walking the dog) and sedentary levels (sitting/resting, eating/picnicking). The high level of vigorous and moderate activities in parks- jogging, cycling and walking- resulted in trails being the dominantly used facility.

Table 3. Most Popular Park Activities by Rank Order

Social Unit	Bedok Reservoir	Bishan-AMK	Punggol Waterway
Solo	Jogging Cycling Exercising Sitting	Jogging (T) Walking (T) Exercising Cycling	Cycling Jogging Walking Exercising
Family	Jogging Walking Exercising Playground	Walking Jogging Cycling Sitting	Cycling Walking Jogging Playground
Friends	Jogging Exercising Walking Sitting	Walking Sitting Jogging (T) Eating (T)	Cycling Jogging Walking Sitting

(T) - Similar percent of users who participated in the activity.

Solo users were more likely to be engaged in vigorous activities, while park users who were with their family or friends were more likely to engage in leisure activities. They include: walking, sitting to converse with one another, and playing at the playground, with the latter activity highest amongst families. The variety of activities participated by different user groups implies the drawing power of park facilities across user types.

We also observed which facilities were associated with talking or socialising activities in the park. Table 4 presents findings from only park users observed as a group and whether they were talk-

ing with another person while using a particular facility. Those who were by themselves were not tallied in this talking measurement. The playground was found to be the facility where most talking and socialising activity occurred. Kazmierczak's (2013)<sup>4</sup> work reinforced this by observing the role of children as an important ice-breaker, bringing people together and creating opportunities for parents at the playground to interact with one another.

<sup>4</sup> Kazmierczak, Aleksandra (2013). The Contribution of Local Parks to Neighbourhood Social Ties, *Landscape and Urban Planning* 109 (2013), 31-44.

Table 4. Park Facilities for Socializing Amongst Groups

Park Facilities	Bedok Reservoir		Bishan-AMK		Punggol Waterway	
	Talking	Not talking	Talking	Not talking	Talking	Not talking
Playground	81	19	87	13	90	10
Gazebo	47	53	57	43	73	27
Bench	37	63	43	57	51	49
Jetty	40	60	40	60	40	60
Trail-walking	29	71	32	68	21	79
Trail-cycling	16	84	14	86	16	84
Trail-jogging	5	95	4	96	5	95

## Conclusion

Encouraging social interactions in parks is vital in creating a sense of community as it nurtures a sense of belonging and neighbourhood identity. By providing green spaces for people to engage in leisure activities with family or friends, and facilitating social contact with people of diverse background, parks play a role in connecting people in our urban environment. To understand social interaction levels at parks, a range of indicators were utilised in this study. They included: (1) social interaction indicators such as park users' rating of how often they see someone they knew at the park, park users' talking/socialisation behaviour, and how friendly they were to an NParks personnel; (2) the proportion of park users who visited the parks with family or friends; and (3) the nature of shared activities users engage in.

Frequent park users rated themselves more likely to meet someone they knew at the park, while infrequent users were more likely to rate "never". This implies that frequent users, being more familiar with the other users, are more likely to develop a sense of community than infrequent users. Infrequent users at the parks we studied may be frequent users at other parks. The proximity of park users' homes to parks was also considered, which showed that users living adjacent to the park were most likely to see someone they know. Use of Punggol Waterway Park, which differed from the two other, illustrated that the PCN draws users into parks particularly those who live beyond the adjacent districts.

## Recommendations

Organizing and actively promoting programmes at parks is one way of drawing more women to parks. Having a weekly exercise programmes in parks such as the Health Promotion Board (HPB) - initiated *Sundays at the Park* programme, provides a platform for people to participate in activities together, thereby promoting greater social interaction.

To attract parents to bring their children along to parks, intergenerational use of a common space should be encouraged. Placing playgrounds near Fitness Corners has shown to be an effective method in attracting children while allowing parents to carry out their own physical activity. An-

other way would be having a picnic area near a playground by integrating the opportunities to relax and socialise, thereby accommodating the interests of children and adults. Since parks also serve as business spaces, for example as venues for outdoor children's classes, locating food and beverage outlets near to these areas allow parents to wait for their children. Such outlets could also double as spaces to increase social interaction amongst parents who would see each other on a regular basis.

With an increasingly fast-paced society, the competition for people's time and attention intensifies. Parks possibly face competition from more exciting entertainment and recreational options offered by private companies and other government agencies' efforts. However, as an extended public space, parks have a role in integrating leisure and opportunities for social interactions especially since privacy is prized with greater urban densification. With designs that facilitate spontaneous interactions, parks will appeal to a population which, increasingly, has more options in their neighbourhoods or across the island nation.