The Issue

The link between physical inactivity and an increased risk for a variety of health conditions is well established. As many health conditions are most common in older adults, it is critical that older Canadians are being as physically active as possible to reduce their risk of disease. However, as reported in Colley and colleagues (2011), only 13% of Canadians aged 60-79 are meeting the Canadian guidelines for physical activity (150 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity a week), making them the most inactive segment of Canadian adults. These activity levels are concerning and policy makers should explore ways to facilitate physical activity in older adults.

Background

Recent research has shown that the availability and quality of neighbourhood greenspace is positively related to health, and that increased walking and exercise behaviours are mediators in this relationship. The relationship between levels of neighbourhood greenspace and physical activity may be a result of the synergistic benefits that occur when being physically active in green environments. Pretty, Peacock, Sellens, & Griffin (2005) defined ‘green exercise’ as physical activity in natural areas, including but not limited to the countryside, parks and beaches. Pretty and colleagues found that viewing images of pleasant natural environments whilst exercising on a treadmill led to lower blood pressure, increased self-esteem, and increased mood compared to when viewing urban scenes. These findings were expanded in a study by Coon and colleagues who compared exercising in natural compared to indoor environments. Researchers have also found that being physically active in green environments leads to greater enjoyment, satisfaction, and greater intention to repeat the activity at a later date. The positive impacts that result from ‘green exercise’, as highlighted above, are especially important for older adults given the prevalence of mental health issues in that age group. In fact, 80-90% of seniors in long-term care facilities are affected by depression and men over 80 years of age are the population segment with the highest suicide rate. Providing access to greenspace provides a promising solution for increasing the physical activity and mental health outcomes of older adults.

Current Status

Currently, individual municipalities are responsible for the provision and maintenance of parkland. Although municipalities are responsible for the actual provision of parkland, it is provincial legislation that outlines the regulations for this process. In Ontario, the Planning Act outlines a process called parkland dedication, in which a maximum percentage of a plot of land must be set aside by the developer for parkland. In Ontario, this maximum percentage is 2% for industrial or commercial developments, and 5% in residential neighbourhoods.

Key Considerations

The park dedication process that is outlined in the Planning Act falls short in several ways; for example, it should be updated to reflect the importance of providing our older adults with accessible greenspace for physical activity and mental health promotion. The first problem with parkland dedication is that it is not mandatory for municipalities, but only provides a legislative basis for parkland provision if a municipality chooses to use it. There is little incentive for municipalities to choose to enforce this regulation. Particularly in built-up urban areas, the value of real estate may be a large barrier for providing greenspace instead of maximizing profits with residential or commercial developments. Therefore, the first recommendation of this brief is to make parkland dedication mandatory for municipalities. However, making this aspect of the Planning Act mandatory is not enough to ensure the effective provision of neighbourhood greenspace. The provincial regulations only state the maximum allowable...
percentage that a municipality can require a developer to set aside for greenspace. Therefore, the second recommendation is that the province of Ontario additionally set a minimum percentage of land for dedication of parkland. Ontario has the smallest maximum percentage for parkland dedication of any of the provinces and territories in Canada. \(^\text{10}\) Alberta, Saskatchewan, Quebec, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland, and the Territories have maximum parkland dedication percentages of 10%, compared with Ontario’s 2% for commercial and industrial developments and 5% for all other developments. \(^\text{10}\) The third recommendation is to increase Ontario’s maximum percentage dedication to meet the other provinces at 10% and set the minimum required percentage at 5%.

Although making changes to the parkland dedication process is important, there are other considerations that must be addressed. Parkland dedication, as outlined in the Planning Act, is tied to land development; as such this legislation is of little use for built up urban areas that are becoming denser as opposed to expanding. Due to the fact that no new area is being developed, there is no new space that can be allocated for parkland. Additionally, denser areas are usually made up of housing units with no backyards, and as such the need for public greenspace is even more important in these environments. \(^\text{10}\) There are many older adults that live in dense living spaces like long-term care facilities; consequently they are a population that is especially in need of policy solutions that are tied to population growth instead of just geographic expansion. The fourth recommendation is to implement another regulatory mechanism that takes into account the intensifying of populations in a given area. It is suggested that Ontario include a statement in the Planning Act that specifies a mandatory number of hectares of parkland that a municipality must supply in an area per number of residents. This way, greenspace provision will be tied to population growth caused by densification, not just geographic expansion.

Another crucial problem with the Planning Act is that it only outlines the provision of parkland; there is no legislative basis for the regulation of aesthetics or accessibility for physical activity. \(^\text{10}\) These are all important qualities, as both quantity and quality of neighborhood greenspace is related to health. \(^\text{11}\) The final recommendation is that Ontario should outline in the Planning Act a certain percentage of the municipal budget that must be used to maintain the aesthetics and design of its greenspace areas.

**Conclusion**

The Planning Act, the current provincial legislative mechanism for providing municipalities with the power to create parkland, is inadequate. The recommendations of this policy brief are that: regulations be made mandatory for municipalities; a minimum value for parkland dedication be instituted; that this minimum percentage be set at 5%, and the maximum in Ontario be increased to 10%; another provision should be implemented that ties the amount of greenspace to population density; and a percentage of the municipal budget should be set aside for the maintenance of these areas. These changes may help to facilitate the availability of greenspace for older adults.

**References**


