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Study focuses on Latino use of city's open space & parks

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Juan Jose Sanchez presented his assessment of the recreation patterns and park utilization of Allston-Brighton's Latino residents at a recent Allston-Brighton CDC's Green Gathering. His thesis represented a microcosm of the larger issue of finding ways to integrate the Latino population into American society.

Sanchez, 31, a Costa Rican native, moved to the U.S. six years ago. He completed the majority of his undergraduate degree in Costa Rica, and finished his remaining semesters in the U.S. He's currently working toward his master's degree in urban environmental policy and planning from Tufts University. He conducted a quantitative case study of Latinos in Allston-Brighton to learn about their experiences with open spaces in parks.

Sanchez, an avid soccer fan, first became interested in open spaces when he failed to find soccer space in the city. He began questioning the urban and environmental issues in a city in relation to the limited amount of open space. He also noticed the lack of Latino input in community issues.

During the summer of 2009, Sanchez interned with the Allston-Brighton CDC, focusing on ways to incorporate immigrants into the city planning process with green initiatives. He immersed himself in the community by speaking with Latino residents to understand their level of involvement in city meetings and planning. Sanchez narrowed his thesis to open space.

The case study consisted of two focus groups, one with six women, and one with seven men, between the ages of 18-65 and who resided in the area for at least three years. Sanchez presented each group with questions about accessibility, safety, issues that prevent them from going to parks and their favorite activities to do at parks.

"It felt like more like a discussion than a study. Each person had a chance to talk, and people could agree and disagree with each other to spark further conversation," said Sanchez.

At the end of the study, Sanchez found that women favor spaces that support social interaction, passive uses and family activities.

"Culturally, socializing and making connections are extremely important in the Latino culture," said Sanchez.

Men, unlike women, focus on finding spaces for organized sports, such as soccer. The majority of the men in the focus group

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said the abundance of multi-use fields doesn't allow spaces designed for soccer, according to Sanchez.

Sanchez said both men and women limit their park visits to summer months. However, women are more likely to frequent parks than men.

Women generally do not feel safe in parks at night, which explains their day visits in groups. Men, on the other hand, do not view safety as an issue, and will visit parks alone or as part of an organized sports team.

Another determinant of park usage concerns accessibility. People consider a quarter-mile or less to be a feasible walking distance to a park, according to Sanchez.

"Unfortunately, park accessibility for people living in areas with the highest density of Latinos isn't the best," he said.

Sanchez found a link between diabetes and the use of park space.

"Latinos have the highest diabetes rate in the U.S. We need to address the issue by engaging the population in exercise year-round, not just in the summer," he said.

The lack of information severely impedes Latinos' use of park space, according to Sanchez.

"Latinos don't know how to navigate the system. Even if there is space, people aren't sure what office to go to and how to get a permit," said Sanchez.

The Latino community needs to be more connected to civic life, such as voting and city planning, he said.

"Hispanic people are becoming the largest minority in the nation. We need to find ways to integrate them into community life," said Sanchez.

Sanchez laid out four recommendations to address the issue. His first recommendation, the integration of Latinos into civic life with a focus on open space, requires the strengthening of the Latinos en Accion, a branch of the CDC that works with the Latino community in Allston-Brighton to tackle issues facing the population.

"It's essential that the group becomes more influential to be the voice of the Latino community. I think it'll help Latinos express their concerns about voting and planning issues," he said.

His second recommendation, the organization of culturally appropriate group activities, calls for local organizations or NGOs to help the population engage in physical activities. The third proposed idea involves the improvement of public awareness of park activities, such as more accessible information about the permit system.

His final recommendation calls for the development of facilities to support preferred activities.

"I know it may not be possible to put money toward upgrading facilities, but it might be possible to improve the permit system and add more soccer spaces," said Sanchez.

In the future, Sanchez said he hopes to work with open space and planning, and to help integrate immigrants into society with more civic engagement and economic development.