



Constraints to Visiting Parks

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Leisure behavior researchers have a long history of investigating what constrains people from taking part in leisure activities. The findings from dozens of studies I have seen always reports “lack of time” as the most frequently reported or highest ranked constraint on leisure. Much has been written about time-scarcity in America—there is so little free time for us to do the things we want to do. These essays coexist with results from other studies that tell us that Americans spend 2.7 to 4.5 hours on average in front of the TV each day--depending on whose data you want to use. A 2010 study of 8 to 18 year olds found that they spend an average of 7 hours and 38 minutes using entertainment media to include TV, computers, video games, internet surfing and other miscellaneous technology.

In the 2011 Cleveland Metroparks general population study the results about constraints to leisure was little different from other studies. A question in the survey asked what prevented households from using parks more often. “Lack of time” was the most frequently selected reason (56%). The second and third reasons were “too busy with other activities” (28%) and “too busy with family responsibilities” (25%). Of course, these two reasons lead to a “lack of free time”. Responses fall to 10 percent for the 4th ranked item: “No one to go to the parks with” followed by “poor health” (8%) and “fear of crime” (8%).

People must allocate their time to work, subsistence activities and leisure. They have less control over the amount of time they spend at work and the most control over their leisure time. When some people state that they do not have the time to take part in an activity what they are politely saying is that other uses of their time are more important to them. Almost 30 percent of respondents who responded that they had a lack of time to go to parks, also indicated that they did not want to visit parks more often.

In Table One, “lack of time” is cross-tabulated with how often respondents reported visiting park reservations in Cleveland Metroparks. The “lack of time” respondents are over represented in the “Less than once a month” and the “Once a month” categories. The striking difference is in the category “Almost daily”. Over twice as many people who acknowledged “no lack of time” (15.1%), visited “almost daily” as the “lack of time” group (6.8%).

Table One. Lack of time to visit parks responses cross tabulated with how often visits occur responses.

| | Once or twice a year | Less than once per month | Once per month | Once a week | Almost daily |
|----------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|
| Lack of time is not a constraint | 28.6% | 13.0% | 22.2% | 21.1% | 15.1% |
| Lack of time is a constraint | 25.0% | 19.7% | 27.1% | 21.4% | 6.8% |
| Total | 26.5% | 16.8% | 25.1% | 21.3% | 10.3% |

The number of leisure activities that each respondent participated in was summed to see whether there was a difference in the number of activities participated in between the two groups. Those reporting a “lack of time” participated in an average of 4.7 activities while the “no lack of time” group reported a mean of 4.0 activities. While the difference is small it is statistically significant ($t=-3.48$, $p<.001$). This finding suggests that the perception of “lack of time” comes partly from having more diverse leisure interests and desires. Wanted to do more activities requires more time?

Additional tests found no differences or relationships between “lack of time” and the type of social group the respondent typically visits the parks with such as family or friends. One might expect families to be constrained than other social groups. People with higher income were more likely to report “lack of time” as a constraint. Golfers were more likely (67% of golfers vs. 60% of non-golfers) to report “lack of time” as an issue.

- Park staff seeking input from park visitors may wish to probe for more details when they are told by someone that he or she does not have the time to participate. In some instances, “I don’t have the time” may be a polite way of saying “I am not very interested”.
- Park visitors who feel time pressure may be want to participate in a greater diversity of activities, as opposed to simply not being able to participate in an activity as much as they want.
- Playing golf takes 3 to 5 hours and was the one activity that was associated in statistical tests with respondents reporting a “lack of time”. Shorter programs and experiences regardless of the activity or content, may be more doable for time-strapped tax district residents.
- The data used for this analysis came from a question about general park visits. Park staff must make decisions about when and where to offer programs or special events that will occur at a specific date and time. The ability of an interested person to attend these events often depends on negotiating situational constraints--issues that arise at a certain date or time of the week, month or season. Park district staff are already aware of major conflicts such as major professional sporting events and the start and end of the school year. Staff who are curious, ask visitors that they expected to show up from a program why they did not, and maintain impact logs should, over time be able to assemble a litany of strategies for reducing constraints.

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