

PROUD TO TRAIL **THE CIRCUIT TRAILS**

**Circuit Trails Justice, Equity, Diversity,
and Inclusion (JEDI) Task Force**

**Equity of Access to Trails:
Market Research Conducted Fall 2020**

Final Report

OPINIONWORKS
PUBLIC SPIRITED RESEARCH

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W I L L I A M P E N N
F O U N D A T I O N

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

This research was inspired by the Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI) Task Force of the Circuit Trails, with funding from the William Penn Foundation. In calling for this study, the JEDI Task Force cited this challenge:

We build trails for the benefit of everyone, regardless of race, age, gender, gender identity, ethnicity, and economic means by providing safe access to the outdoors; health benefits; recreation; alternatives to automobile travel, thereby reducing negative environmental impacts; and ways of connecting with neighbors. Unfortunately, observational data indicates there is little diversity on many of the Circuit Trails and among the Circuit Trails Coalition's audience, including trails that pass through predominantly non-white neighborhoods, which historically have been subject to systemic racism and disinvestment. Extending the enormous benefits of trails to everyone is central to the overarching vision of an equitable and inclusive Circuit Trails Network. For this vision to be a reality, the use of Circuit Trails must be representative of the communities through which they pass.

Research Objective

This study has been conducted in response to the imperative offered by the JEDI Task Force. It was designed to identify the motivators and barriers to trail use in diverse and underserved neighborhoods that are adjacent to Circuit Trails, to explore the perceptions of trails and the motivations of nearby residents, and to recommend the actions that would better connect and engage these residents with their trails.

The research sought to address these core questions:

- What are the needs, interests, and apprehensions of people who live near trails that pass through underserved neighborhoods?
- Who is using the trails currently, and do trail users differ from nearby residents?
- How can nearby residents in these neighborhoods be engaged, motivated, and welcomed onto the trails, and what can trail advocates and other interested stakeholders do to encourage that?
- How can the results in several focus communities be generalized onto a much broader population of potential trail users across the region?

The output of this study will benefit the trail advocates, planners, designers, and other practitioners in the non-profit, private, and public sectors by generating specific insights about local needs and conditions, and the barriers to and motivators of trail use in adjacent neighborhoods. This report lifts up specific actions and approaches that trail organizations can take to better connect with surrounding communities.

Beyond identifying those tactics for trail programming and outreach, this report should also serve as a call to action to address larger structural issues that are confronting these communities and inhibiting not just trail use, but in a fundamental sense, residents' quality of life. As this study was planned, it was anticipated that this work would bring to the surface underlying community issues that may not be directly germane to trail organizations, but which need attention. These could be issues of public safety, public health, injustice and inequity, or economic security, for example. Indeed, participants in this study raised such issues vividly and emotionally, and considerable energy is invested in this report to summarize what they said. This broader set of findings has implications for community partners,

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funders, and others who are concerned about the health and well-being of these and similar communities.

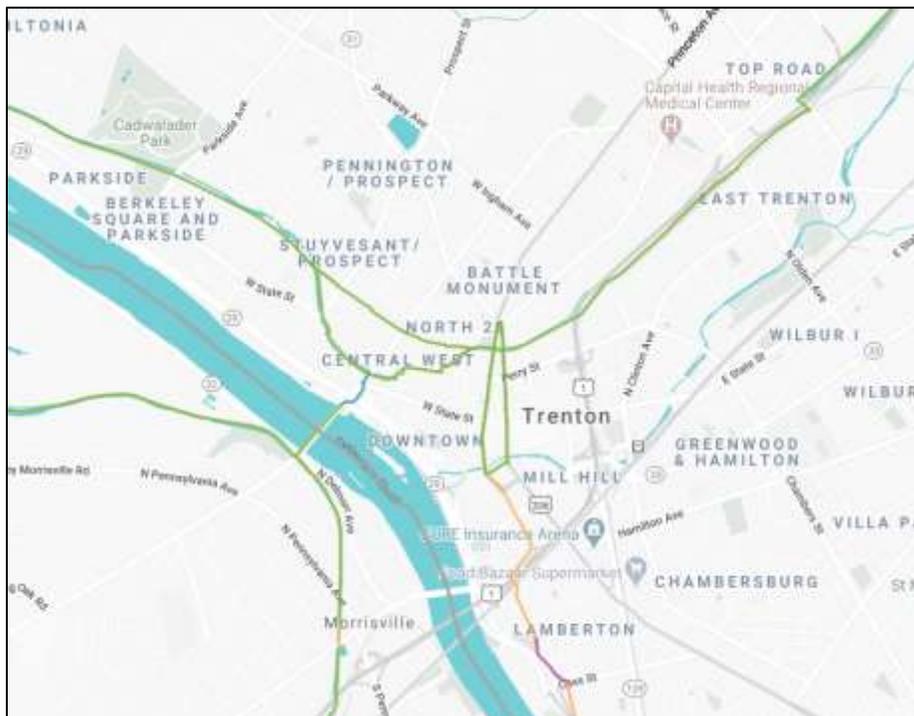
Research Methodology

The study's sponsors selected four communities as the focus for this work, based on these criteria:

1. A Circuit Trail running through underserved neighborhoods, where advocates believe the trail is under-used or its users do not reflect the characteristics of the surrounding residents.
2. A trail organization or public sector trail owner that is willing to be engaged to act on the findings of this study.
3. The presence of a broader set of community stakeholders who are willing to be engaged in an ongoing conversation about how the trail and surrounding public areas fit with and could help advance community objectives.
4. Taken together, four local communities that represent a diversity of conditions so that the project will be useful throughout the Circuit, and possibly to trail advocates elsewhere.

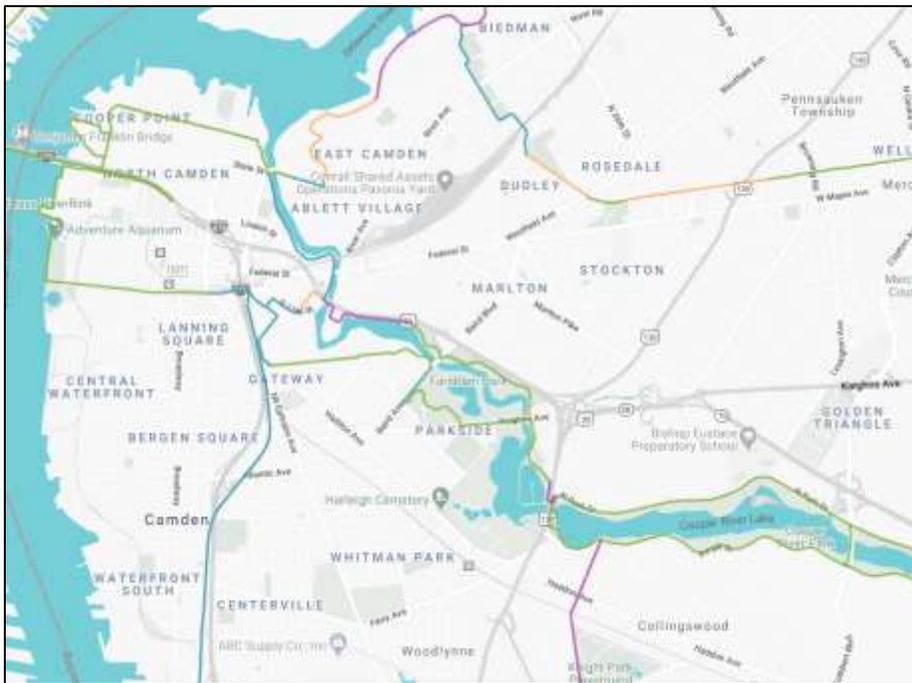
The communities are:

- The urban core of Trenton, NJ (adjoining the Delaware and Raritan Canal State Park Trail)
<https://circuittrails.org/find-trails/delaware-raritan-canal-state-park-trail>

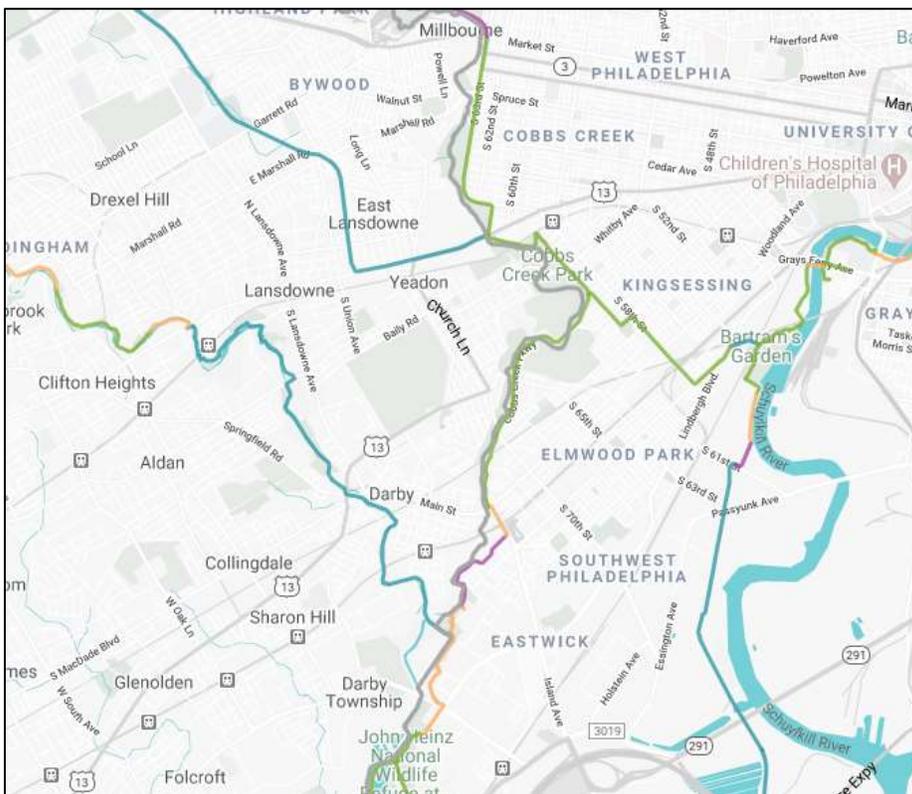


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- Camden and Pennsauken, NJ (Cooper River Trail, Gateway Park and the Waterfront Promenade)
<https://circuittrails.org/find-trails/cooper-river-trail>
<https://circuittrails.org/find-trails/ulysses-wiggins-waterfront-park-promenade>

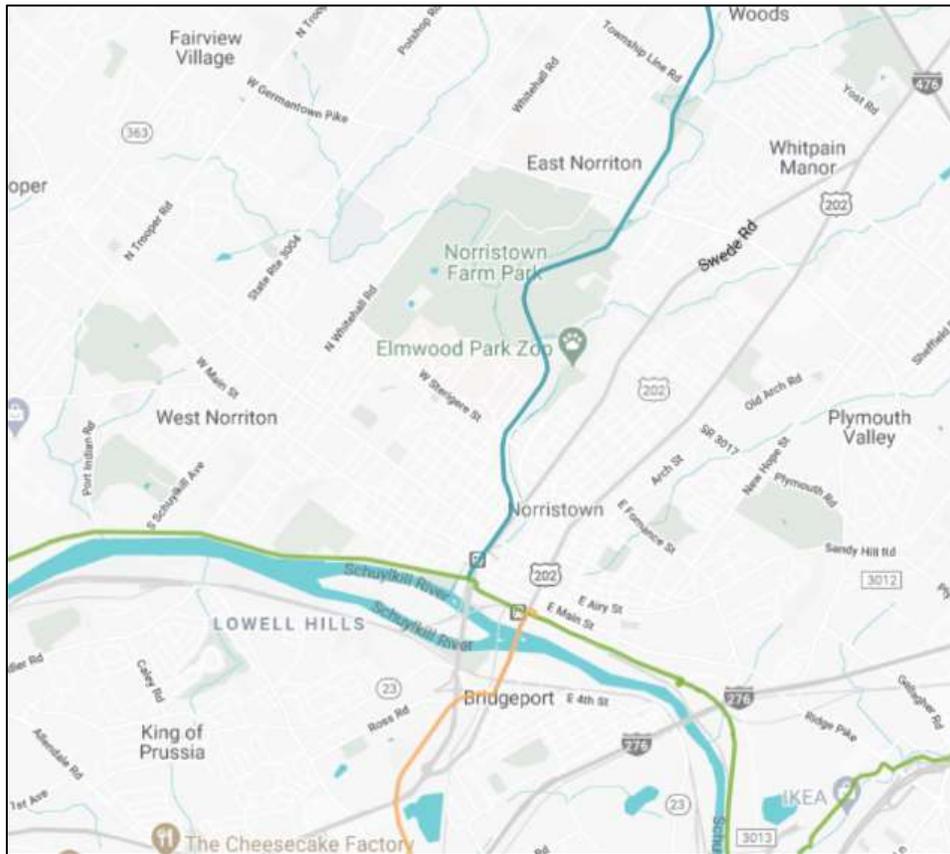


- Southwest Philadelphia and nearby areas of Delaware County, PA (Cobbs Creek Trail)
<https://circuittrails.org/find-trails/cobbs-creek-trail>



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- Norristown, PA (Schuylkill River Trail).
<https://circuittrails.org/find-trails/schuylkill-river-trail-srt>



A committee was formed to steer this project, composed of representatives drawn from the Circuit Trails’ JEDI Task Force and Data Task Force. This steering group met weekly during the data collection process to oversee and weigh in on the work. The research design, and the technical aspects of this project, were the responsibility of OpinionWorks LLC, a research firm located in Annapolis, Maryland.

This research was conducted in four phases:

1. Community Stakeholder Meetings

Understanding that this inquiry about trails lives within the context of a broader framework in these neighborhoods, the steering committee for this project invited a diverse cross-section of community stakeholders in each of the four locations to meet and offer their perspectives on the community’s needs and expectations, and the conditions in the community that impact trails. These discussions were held virtually on the Zoom platform September 29 and October 2, 2020.

Participation was strong, numbering as many as 22 participants in a single community, providing a foundation of hypotheses to test and observations to help guide the inquiry. This strong participation, and high level of engagement by the community leaders and advocates who attended, suggest the possibility that these participants can be re-engaged for ongoing conversation about how the results of this work can be applied in their communities.

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2. Trail Survey: Intercept Survey of Trail Users

Sixteen field interviewers, recruited from these local communities, intercepted 237 trail users between October 17 and November 8, 2020 and administered a short survey about their activities on the trail that day, their attitudes and perceptions, and their demographic and other personal characteristics. Responses were collected on interviewers' personal electronic devices or on paper. COVID-safe practices were followed during these interviews.

Due to limitations on the ability to conduct face-to-face interviews during the pandemic and the short timeframe for this project, the sample size for the Trail Survey is relatively small. Therefore, the Trail Survey findings should be treated as broadly directional only. Future replication of this work should seek a deeper sample collected along the trails through a more sustained effort over time, and hopefully without the difficulties introduced by the pandemic.

3. Community Survey: Survey of Neighborhoods Surrounding the Trails

A survey of residents of the four focus communities surrounding the trails was conducted October 23 through November 29, 2020. A total of 718 residents participated, either online or by mail. Randomly selected households within approximately 10 blocks of the trail were mailed postcards inviting them to take the survey online or request a printed copy, and a survey link was pushed out through social media and listservs by local community-based organizations. In addition, consumers in this geography who belong to commercial survey databases known as online "panels," in which participants receive a small incentive for completing surveys, were also invited to take part. This multi-mode approach to data collection was key to achieving broad participation in the Community Survey and to helping ensure that it was representative of the neighborhoods surrounding the trails.

4. Focus Groups among Residents

Eight focus groups of residents, two groups in each of the four study areas, were conducted virtually using the Zoom platform between November 22 and 27, 2020. All focus group participants were people of color, with a primary focus on people who are not using the local trail actively.

These groups were professionally moderated, following a discussion guide that had been developed in consultation with the project steering group, based on the preliminary results of the two surveys. The groups were intentionally kept small, usually numbering three or four participants, to make best use of the virtual platform. Each session lasted two hours, and was recorded and transcribed for later analysis.

This method allows for a deep discussion of attitudes, perceptions, and motivations, and allows participants to explore deeply felt emotions, and brainstorm approaches and solutions. The result is a rich discussion which reaches an emotional and perceptive level, with participants speaking openly and honestly in a trusting environment. This qualitative approach is the key to many of the most important observations offered in this report.

For additional context on the neighborhoods that were the focus of the study, as well as surrounding neighborhoods, view the Equity Analysis for the Greater Philadelphia Region from the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission.

[Equity Analysis for the Greater Philadelphia Region - v2.0 \(dvrpc.org\)](https://www.dvrpc.org/equity-analysis)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This listening project posed four large questions:

1. What are the needs, interests, and apprehensions of people who live near trails that pass through underserved neighborhoods?
2. Who is using the trails currently, and do trail users differ from nearby residents?
3. How can nearby residents in these neighborhoods be engaged, motivated, and welcomed onto the trails, and what can trail advocates and other interested stakeholders do to encourage that?
4. How can the results in several focus communities be generalized onto a much broader population of potential trail users across the region?

We will answer each of these questions in turn.

Question 1: What are the Needs, Interests, and Apprehensions of People Who Live Near Trails that Pass through Underserved Neighborhoods?

The effort to engage residents with the trails that run nearby begins with understanding their perspectives, their significant worries and aspirations, and the conditions of their daily lives. How can trails relate to that daily reality, and how can trails help residents achieve their aspirations, large and small?

More than most projects, this study focuses heavily on these questions of condition and perspective. We found that people's circumstances had a dramatic impact on their interest, their ability, and even their *need* to interact with trails.

All of us have traits and experiences that bind us together with others in our community who have similar lifestyles and backgrounds. Understanding the persona of the audience will enable those who want to engage with a community to do it well, listening empathetically and speaking relevantly. In this study, participants tended to fall into three broad archetypes, based on their daily experiences and the way they related to, or were impacted by, their surroundings. Broadly, we describe these archetypes as follows:

- **Besieged:** These residents are directly impacted by violence, and are very often a direct victim of deep personal loss. They tend to see the outdoors as a place of threat and danger. Money is a constant worry. Life offers them very little respite. They often have a yearning to get out of this community altogether and go anywhere that might be better. They express feelings of anger, resentment, fear, or resignation.
- **Juggling:** Perhaps the largest of the three segments, these are essential workers, gig workers, students, and parents. Life presents many competing demands, all the time. The day is never long enough to get everything done. They have to steal a little time for relaxation in their day. They are economically challenged, and feel they have no choice but to venture out in the COVID-infected world. They are stressed, stretched, worried, but holding it together. Life is hard, but they are making a go of it.
- **Empowered:** The community around them may be challenging or dangerous, but they have found a way to feel safe and even nurtured. These residents tend to be retirees, students, activists, or highly

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educated professionals. They see the problems around them, but do not feel overwhelmed by them. They are often community-engaged, with the capacity to give of themselves.

These archetypes illustrate the difficult challenges many residents are experiencing, and the strain on their personal capacity – as well as the opportunities that exist for engagement. For many, a trail through their neighborhood does not offer an invitation, but rather a potential threat, or a demand on their limited time. Residents badly need to find respite in the outdoors, but for many of the people we interviewed, a park or a trail offers just the opposite.

In this work, we encountered three principal barriers to spending time outdoors:

Barrier 1: Anxiety about COVID-19

Regardless of archetype, COVID-19 is a harsh reality that hangs over the residents of these neighborhoods. Many people are experiencing severe anxiety related to COVID-19, and that impacts the amount of time they spend outdoors. Often reliant on public transit, living in crowded neighborhoods, often unable to work remotely due to the nature of their jobs, residents of these neighborhoods feel under constant threat from COVID. This anxiety is causing many people to feel less comfortable *outdoors*, where they are worried about coming into contact with others.

A phenomenon that has been much discussed since the early days of the pandemic is the surge of people spending time outdoors walking, running, and biking on trails and in public spaces. The impression is that everyone is spending more time outdoors, and that many more people than is typical are coming into contact with nature. In fact, though, we found that the opposite is true in these neighborhoods. Almost half of the study participants said they are spending *less time* outdoors in parks or on trails now than they were before the pandemic, while only about one-quarter are spending more time outdoors. Furthermore, as measured in this study, this phenomenon disproportionately impacts people of color, where the disparity is much more dramatic.

Barrier 2. Deep Concerns about Public Safety

Another profound barrier to spending time in outdoor spaces was the deep concern felt by so many people about public safety in the areas we studied. Many people said they felt nervous about spending time outdoors. Some were actively worried about being caught up in violence on the streets of their neighborhoods, and many expressed a concern that dangerous or desperate individuals or groups of people could threaten them when they are outside. Women described concerns about being followed. Many people described an active drug culture on the streets. The discussion of public safety was pervasive.

But the answer is not increased police presence on trails, most people said. Particularly in the wake of the events of 2020, many people said that police make them feel unsafe. Rather, they would welcome more informal ambassadors or park rangers, who would bring a welcoming presence. When walking in their neighborhoods, especially on a trail, focus group participants said they feel safer when they are with one or two others, or a small group of their friends. They want to see a populated trail, but not a busy trail.

Barrier 3: A Neglected Neighborhood and Lack of Welcome in Outdoor Spaces

Many of the people we interviewed felt that their neighborhood was neglected. Streets, sidewalks, parks, playgrounds and other public amenities are poorly maintained, or completely lacking, in contrast to nearby areas that are wealthier. Residents said they are sometimes made to feel unwelcome in parts

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of their own communities, and they long for the same care and respect afforded to wealthier – and possibly whiter – areas nearby.

This concern is amplified by the perception many residents have that their neighborhood offers little to do, making it less likely that they would want to venture outside. It became clear in conversation that activities and amenities that do exist in the neighborhood were sometimes unknown to them. Some expressed a deep suspicion that these things were being kept from them, reserved for people who were wealthier or more privileged.

Gentrification concerns were evident in Camden and Southwest Philadelphia. Some residents expressed sadness or anger that they no longer felt welcome in areas that were redeveloping. Community advocates who participated in the stakeholder meetings at the outset of this project expressed a broader concern that residents of color simply did not feel welcome at all in public spaces, that there is a widespread feeling in the community that these spaces do not belong to them. Many residents agreed with that idea, especially those in the Besieged and Juggling archetypes. Other residents, particularly the Empowered, rejected the idea that they were not welcome in these public spaces.

Question 2: Who is Using the Trails Currently, and do Trail Users Differ from Nearby Residents?

Getting Past Barriers: Spending Time Outdoors Brings Emotional Release

Despite their profound concerns about COVID, personal safety, and neighborhood neglect, people said they *wanted* to get outdoors. The simple act of spending time in natural spaces brings rejuvenation and emotional release. There was overwhelming agreement with the statement, “Being outdoors in parks or on trails makes me feel happier.” Focus group participants used words like “rejuvenating,” “soothing,” “centering,” “peaceful,” and “refreshing” to describe the impact on their emotional state.

The presence of water near a trail only adds to these feelings. People described the sights and sounds of water, and more than two-thirds of those surveyed said, “Having a river or canal next to a trail makes it a nicer place to be.” The impact of water seemed to be especially powerful for the archetype we called “Besieged,” bringing solace and new perspective. As one person described it, being near water brings “purification...re-strategizing my mind, re-organizing my thinking.” Another participant in the Besieged archetype, who had described great personal tragedy and was particularly emotionally contained throughout the focus group, became animated and excited when he described jumping off a rock into a swimming hole in a Philadelphia park. He said he felt “invincible” in that moment. Proximity to water can be transformative, people said.

But the personal connection to water is limited. One-quarter of the people interviewed for this study who live near trails – which are often near water – could not even picture in their minds a river or stream close to where they live. The number who could not picture water near them surpassed 40% in some neighborhoods.

Fewer than two-thirds of residents located within our four study areas were aware that there is a trail close to where they live, indicating that the first job in many neighborhoods may just be to raise awareness of the trails, and their proximity to water. When the specific trail name is mentioned, awareness of the trail increases.

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How People are Connecting with the Outdoors

Given the great emotional benefits they described, many people in these neighborhoods are connecting with the outdoors, despite the barriers. Walking and just relaxing are among the most frequent activities in parks and along trails. About two-thirds of survey respondents said they have walked in a park or along a trail near where they live in the past year, and about four in ten said they have just sat and relaxed. About one-quarter said they have biked in a park or along a trail, and a similar number have jogged or run.

This study offers ample evidence that trail users are whiter than the neighborhoods that surround these trails. People of color are more than 20 percentage points less likely than white residents to agree with the statement, “When I am in the parks or on the trails around here, I see other people like me.” The Trail Survey, which intercepted people along the trails over the course of several weeks, identified far fewer people of color on the trails compared to the composition of the surrounding neighborhoods in two of the four communities we studied.

There are also differences in activity along the trails based on race and ethnicity. White residents are almost twice as likely to bike compared to people of color, while there is almost no difference along racial or ethnic lines when it comes to jogging or running, picnicking or barbecuing, or taking children to run and play.

The majority of people who are actually on the trails in these neighborhoods are using them for low-intensity activities, and not traveling very far. In response to the intercept survey, trail users were most likely to say they were on the trail to walk. A number of others had come to the trail as a destination, to picnic or barbecue, fish, enjoy nature, birdwatch, meet a friend, or take their child to the playground. About a third of trail users had come to the trail to bike, and one in five had come to jog or run.

In fact, we observed an overall theme from residents of a trail as a place to *be*, not necessarily to move from place to place. In their comments when they discussed the type of trail that would attract them, most study participants focused on activities or amenities like food trucks or music festivals or places to sit and enjoy the natural setting. Asked what they were on the trail to do today, only 10% of trail users said they were using the trail for transportation, while 78% said exercise and 61% said recreation. (People could mention more than one.)

When shown a map of the Circuit Trails, focus group participants were surprised that such a trail network existed, and many were excited. Some liked the idea of people and parts of their community being connected together, joining their neighborhood to parks, and joining neighborhoods to each other. These residents found the concept of the Circuit to be unifying and hopeful. Many suggested adding the word “Network” in the branding of “Circuit Trails,” making the concept easier for them to relate to, and providing a better description of what the Circuit was offering.

For some, knowing that there is a large, connected network of trails aroused a desire to explore. They wanted to see how far they could go. Others, the majority, just wanted to know that the Circuit Trails will give them an experience with fresh air and nature, *close* to where they live. They did not want to have to travel to a distant trailhead to come into contact with nature. Several people focused on the urban sections of the Circuit near them and could not imagine there would be anything interesting there to see or do. Their comments reinforced the idea that the trail, for them, should be a place of respite from their urban environment, giving them a break from the heavily built, blighted, and crowded

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surroundings they see every day. The trail should offer glimpses of nature, and relaxing activities. It should not be just a walk or bike ride along a busy city street.

Question 3: How Can Nearby Residents in these Neighborhoods be Engaged, Motivated, and Welcomed onto the Trails, and What Can Trail Advocates and Other Interested Stakeholders do to Encourage that?

The focus groups concluded with an invitation for people to imagine the trail that would welcome and attract them. What amenities would it have? What programs would it offer? What would it look and feel like? Their recommendations fall into the broader categories of Security, Greening, Physical Infrastructure, Programming and Welcome, and Outreach. They are discussed briefly here, and in more detail at the conclusion of the report.

SECURITY

1. An Appropriate Security Presence

People want to feel safe on the trail. But with few exceptions, people insisted they did not want to see a police presence on the trail. Most people would welcome “ambassadors” or “park rangers,” who they felt would probably use a more friendly approach, or simply callboxes along the trail in areas where safety is a concern.

GREENING

2. A Green Oasis

Residents want trails that will provide them with a respite from the urban environment. They are not talking about traveling to a trail access point miles outside of the city. Rather, they want a creatively designed trail that offers glimpses of water, urban greening, the sound of birds, splashes of color. Residents hope for accessible places where they can dip out of their normal world and dip in to a peaceful, green environment, even if only for a short time.

PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

3. Places to Gather and Relax

Numerous people asked for amenities that would allow them to gather with family and friends, entertain their children, or just sit and read a book or enjoy nature. These could include places to picnic and barbecue, playgrounds, and benches and other places to sit.

4. Trail Maintenance and Amenities

People hoped for better maintenance of the trail surface, lighting in certain areas, and easier or safer access points including adequate parking. In addition, they hoped for amenities along the trail, such as bikeshare, restrooms, sports courts or fields, and boat rentals.

5. Signage

Study participants asked for signs in their neighborhoods to point the direction to the trail. It was also suggested that signage could tie into the Circuit Trails Network, not just pointing the way to the local trail, but also indicating further destinations that could be accessed through the regional trail network, to enhance that thirst for exploration.

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PROGRAMMING AND WELCOME

6. An Invitation to Have Fun

The best way to overcome a subtle lack of welcome into public spaces, focus group participants said, is to offer compelling and irresistible activities and events and actually invite people into those public spaces, wholeheartedly. Make the space vibrant, and gear it towards the tastes of the audience, and people will come, they said. They suggested live music, festivals, crafts and other family-oriented activities, pop-up shops, local artisans and vendors, historical and cultural commemoration along the trail, and food trucks. Ideas abounded.

7. Overt Welcome

Imagery can be meaningful. Stakeholders suggested that public art at trail access points feature people of color, and posting the message “Black Lives Matter” in key locations would also convey a sense of respect and welcome.

8. Organized Group Activities

Many people want to be on the trail with a friend or in a group, both for fellowship and to alleviate their safety concerns. Post-COVID, they would welcome opportunities to join up with other people along the trail to pursue similar interests, with activities such as guided nature hikes or birdwatching walks, yoga along the trail, exercise groups, and activities for children.

OUTREACH

9. Show People Enjoying the Trail

People want to see images of people who look like them, enjoying the trail. They want to imagine themselves on the trail, and know that they belong there. The Circuit’s website, and any outreach, should feature people – real people from these neighborhoods – having fun on the trail.

10. Leverage Local Social Media and Traditional Door-to-Door

A number of study participants mentioned local social media influencers or bloggers who focus on music, public safety, food, or a variety of other topics. Getting those influencers out to the trail and curating images to their local followers would help create a new impression of the trails and a new constituency, participants said.

Many people in these focus groups asked for more traditional and interpersonal means of communication propagated in the neighborhood – flyers handed out door-to-door, conversations, and traditional mail.

A Longer-Term Approach: A Community-Supported Trail and Sense of Pride in Place

There is an eleventh, more ambitious recommendation to consider. This research indicates that there is the potential to engage neighborhood residents to care for their own section of trail, to help maintain and design it to their liking. Focus group participants insisted they would be willing to be engaged in this way, increasing their sense of ownership and use of the trail. Residents want to have pride in their neighborhoods. They want to feel a sense of ownership, and feel that they are part of making the neighborhood better. Once accomplished, they said they would show off the trail to others as a point of neighborhood and personal pride.

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Question 4: How Can the Results in Several Focus Communities be Generalized onto a Much Broader Population of Potential Trail Users across the Region?

This project concentrated on underserved neighborhoods, with a particular focus on people of color in those neighborhoods. Our goal was to understand the barriers to trail usage among this audience, and to provide a trail experience that would truly welcome and engage these residents.

But many of the observations offered by these study participants are universal human desires, which could be applied to trail design and programming well beyond the communities we studied. We suggest these big ideas drawn from this study be considered and applied elsewhere:

The trail as a place to be, and not always to be in motion.

Though we tend to think of a trail as a transitway, a means to move from one point to another, in fact many people are thinking of trails as a place to be: to walk, to sit quietly, to visit a playground, to barbecue and relax with family and friends. The bubbliest conversation that occurred as people imagined the ideal trail always related to festivals, food trucks, and music. People in this study thought of the trail as a destination, a place to be. This does not preclude people from being in motion on the trail, of course. But it does offer keen insight into how many local residents want to relate to the trail.

Immersion in a natural experience, close to where I live

People want to come to the trail to escape their everyday experience. For urban residents, that may mean traffic, noise, people, and a heavily built environment. They are looking for a respite, a brief immersion in a more tranquil, natural setting. Proximity to water is a plus. Trail design should include these green oases and include natural splashes of color.

The impact of a connected trail system

Knowing that the local trail belongs to a larger network has benefits, connecting the neighborhood to places of interest like parks, and connecting different parts of the community to each other. A trail network is inherently an invitation to explore, and a statement that the broader region values being connected to this neighborhood.

Exuding a sense of welcome

Creating events on the trail that match the sensibilities and tastes of the neighborhood will invite people to come there. Fostering public art along the trail that captures the essence of the people who live nearby will encourage them to feel like they belong there. Recognizing cultural and historical sites along the trail that are relevant to nearby residents will create a sense of honor and respect. These principles will apply no matter where the trail is located.

Not assuming that people who live near the trail know about the trail

The thought of cultivating a local following for the trail can be replicated anywhere. Engaging local social media influencers to post about the trail, particularly those who typically focus on other subject areas, can expand the audience and help people imagine themselves having fun along the trail. More traditional means of marketing should be employed, too, to the extent that resources allow.

This project is rich with findings. Detailed discussion follows.

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DETAILED FINDINGS

The Study Participants

Many projects benefit from gaining an understanding of the persona of the audience. Knowing the structure of their day, their likes and dislikes, how they relate to their family and their community, the hopes and pressures that animate them as they move through their day – these understandings enable those who want to engage with a community to do it well, listening carefully and speaking relevantly. Though we are all individuals, all of us bear traits and have experiences that bind us together with others in our community who have similar lifestyles and experiences and backgrounds. Finding these common threads is a key to successful engagement.

As we moved through this study, we found that participants tended to fall into three broad categories, or archetypes, based on their day-to-day life experience and the way they related to, or were impacted by, their surroundings. Understanding people in these categories will be helpful in developing and promoting effective interventions to increase trail use. We describe these three categories as: Besieged, Juggling, and Empowered. They are described below.

Archetype 1: Besieged

- These residents are directly impacted by violence and drugs in the neighborhood. They are very often a direct victim of deep personal loss.
- They tend to see the outdoors as a place of threat and danger.
- Life offers them very little respite, but when they find respite, it is a source of great joy and release.
- They often express a yearning to get out of this community and go anywhere that might be better.
- They frequently expressed feelings of anger, resentment, fear, or resignation.

This archetype is illustrated by Donnell, a 21-year-old African-American male in Southwest Philadelphia, who described the devastating personal toll street violence has had on him, and on his friends. Violence has touched him so frequently it has become normalized, and he bemoans that. His demeanor in the focus group was flat and guarded, and he only occasionally showed flashes of strong emotion. This, in part, is how he introduced himself to his fellow focus group participants:

“Just making it out of the trenches. I just want to make it out of the hood, get my mom out of the hood, make sure me and my little brother ain't got to die here. That's it. ... I mean, to think that I'm still here. I mean, I lose a lot of friends that I grew up with. I lost a friend today ...” (Moderator responds): “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry to hear that.” (Participant continues): “It's crazy. It's just... I don't know. It's so normal now. It's just like... I ain't going to say it's normal, but it's like... I don't know. I just grateful that it ain't me or my little brother, for real. So we could get out of here, that's all you got to do is get out of there. It's a war right now.”
– Southwest Philadelphia Participant

Such comments were echoed by others. Kevin, a 37-year-old barber, who lives with his wife and four teenage children in a very small apartment in downtown Camden, and struggles to support his family while trying hard to steer clear of the drugs and violence on the streets and find little bits of relaxation where he can. Isatou is a 16-year-old girl who lives in Southwest Philadelphia, who loves volleyball and her friends, but is scared to walk outside for fear of violence. She hunkers down in the house. Such stories were all too common in these focus groups.

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Archetype 2: Juggling

- These are essential workers, gig workers, and parents.
- All are economically challenged, and feel they have no choice but to venture out in the COVID-infected world. They feel tremendous COVID anxiety and economic uncertainty.
- Many are reliant on public transit or carshare to get from place to place, and that presents its own worries in a COVID world.
- Life presents many competing demands, all the time. The day is never long enough to get everything done. They have to steal a little time for relaxation in their day.
- They often hearken back to better times, either for themselves or their communities.
- They are stressed, stretched, worried, but holding it together. Life is hard, but they are making a go of it.

This archetype is illustrated by Eric, a 30-something in Trenton who has his own podcast offering life tips, and describes his typical day this way:

“Actually, I have two jobs. One of the jobs I do, I actually go Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, because I get paid to watch an autistic kid who’s highly functioning. I watch him while he does the Chromebook, and his father goes to work... And also, I’m a recovery coach, so I work from home...offering wellness tips. People call me, and I just give and provide encouragement.” (Moderator): “So you are probably more busy than you’ve ever been ever. Because it sounds like the podcast, you’ve got the two jobs, you’re busy, busy, busy, busy. So that’s amazing. What worries you? What are the things that are on your mind?...” (Participant continues): “You know what? Failure is something that I’m ... Some people, they’re afraid of success. Me, I embrace the opportunity, I embrace the challenge. I’m afraid of failure. I’m afraid of not living out my potential. That causes depression.” – Trenton Participant

He works hard every day to keep the wheels of his life turning. This is how he describes his transportation situation:

“I’m fortunate enough to have family and friends that transport me around. I’m in the process of actually purchasing my own vehicle. But that’s what I’m utilizing right now.” – Trenton Participant

Eric is typical of many other people we met in this work: Saima, a middle-aged woman who has worked in restaurants and done gig work in the entertainment industry in New York; Yolanda, a young grandmother who lives near Cobbs Creek Park and is the primary caregiver for her grandson while working full-time at the University of Pennsylvania; and Oscar, a freelance photographer in Camden. Time is a precious commodity, and the ability to disengage is an aspiration.

Archetype 3: Empowered

- These participants live in an environment where they feel protected or empowered. The community around them may be challenging or dangerous, but they have found a way to feel safe and even nurtured.
- These residents tend to be retirees, students, activists, or highly educated professionals.
- They see the problems around them, but do not feel overwhelmed by them.
- They are often community-engaged, with the capacity to give of themselves.
- Never pollyannish, nonetheless they feel optimism and believe that things in their community could get better.

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- Though COVID concerns are prevalent now, they can see themselves soon jumping into engagement with their neighbors, pitching in and helping to inspire others to make things better.

This archetype is illustrated by Lynn, a mother of three children in Philadelphia, whose husband is a florist, running a business that has been in the family for three generations. Lynn is a dedicated Girl Scout leader, finding satisfaction in being involved in the girls' lives, and giving them good experiences in the city.

"My mother was a Girl Scout, and she had five girls so she might as well have started a troop, which she did, right? Yeah. So I just followed her because we had so much fun." – Southwest Philadelphia Participant

This archetype also describes Ronald in Norristown, a young man who grew up in Philadelphia but moved out and left behind his old neighborhood where he had lost both a close friend and his brother (three months before the focus group) to start a new life and gain a new perspective in Norristown. He feels welcomed in Norristown, is starting a business with his girlfriend, and is looking forward to the opportunities that are ahead for him. This is him describing his old life, a testament to the fact that things can change, and people like Ronald can embrace the opportunities of their new situation.

*"I'm from Philadelphia so it's a lot of murders and killing. And I know this is why I came to Norristown. I came to Norristown in March because when I was at home, before the COVID, it was a lot of killings around my way, a lot of shootings around my way. And I had this say, I basically had to shelter myself in the house."
– Norristown Participant*

These three archetypes open a window into the lives and perspectives of the people we met through this research. Understanding this context will help us better meet the needs and expectations of these audiences.

(continued, next page)

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The Overwhelming Impact of COVID-19

Summary finding: Many people in these neighborhoods are experiencing severe anxiety related to COVID-19. This is causing many people to feel less comfortable outdoors, where they are worried about coming into contact with others. On balance, people in the focus areas for this study are spending less time outside due to COVID, including in parks and on trails.

This study was animated by anxiety about COVID-19. People are viewing the outside world as a dangerous place, and the home as the one place where they can escape that danger.

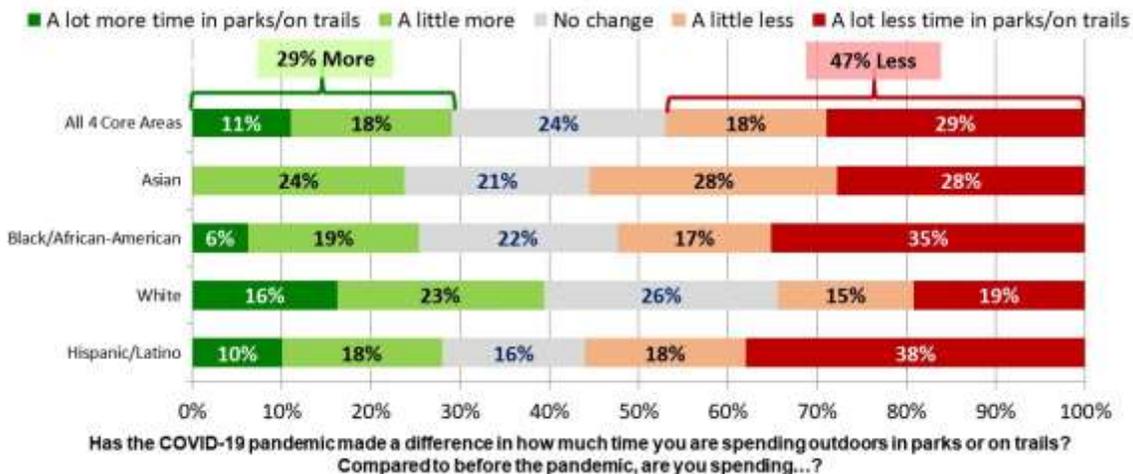
“I’m petrified to go out of the house. I completely stopped going to the grocery stores and everything because through the conditions I have, if I would contract the COVID-19, that would just take me out of here. So I’m just hunkered down in my house right now.” – Trenton Participant

A phenomenon that has been much discussed since the early days of the pandemic is the surge of people spending time outdoors walking, running, and biking on trails and in public spaces. The impression is that everyone is spending more time outdoors, and that many more people are coming into contact with nature and outdoor recreation. Advocates for outdoor spaces are asking: Will this continue when the pandemic ends?

This study of urban residents indicates that in fact the opposite is true in these neighborhoods. Almost half (47%) of the people we interviewed said they are spending less time outdoors now, compared to only 29% who are spending more time in parks or on trails, based on the Community Survey.

Among people of color, though, the impact is even more dramatic, as illustrated in the chart below. By about two-to-one, people of color in these neighborhoods are spending less time outdoors. Among African-Americans, 52% are spending less time in parks or on trails, compared to only 25% who are spending more time there. Among Latinx residents, the numbers are 56% less vs. 28% more. Among Asian residents, 56% and spending less time outdoors compared to 24% who are spending more time there.

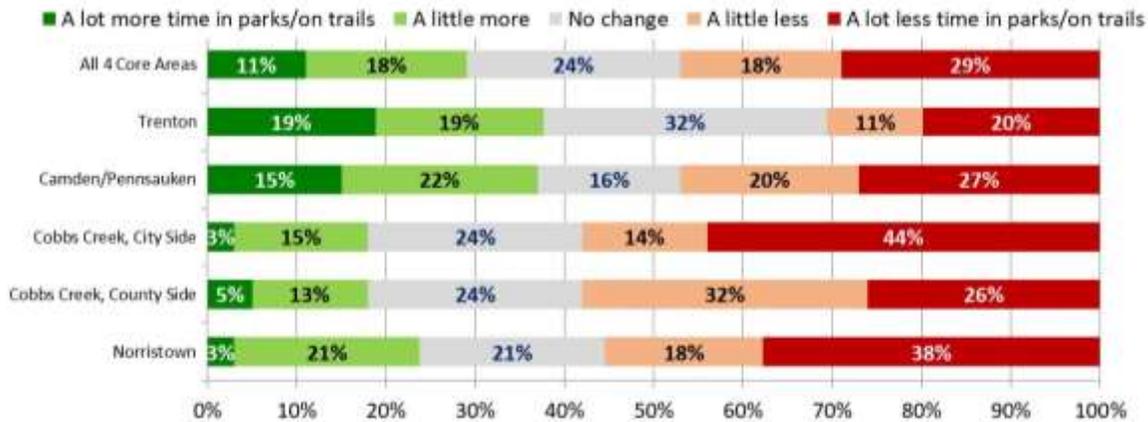
Change in Time Spent Outdoors in Parks or on Trails Due to COVID-19
 Community Survey



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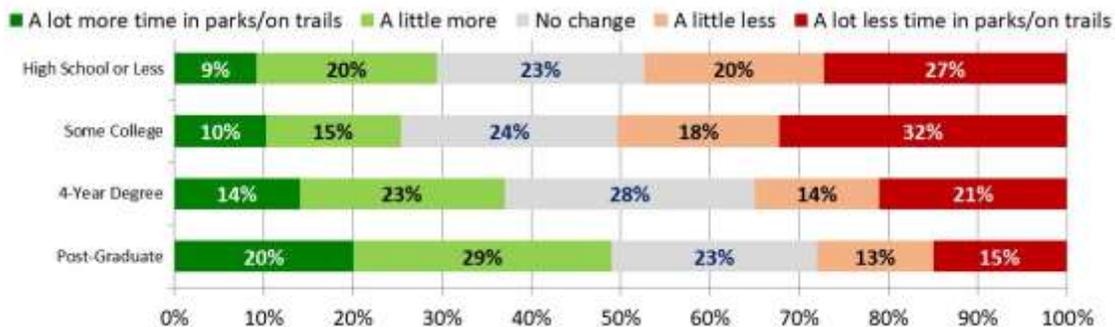
This phenomenon varies somewhat across the study areas, but is it most dramatic on the Philadelphia side of Cobbs Creek, where residents are three times as likely to be spending less time outdoors (58%) compared to more time (18%). Nearly half (44%) of the residents we interviewed in Southwest Philadelphia are spending “a lot less time” outdoors in parks and on trails.

Change in Time Spent Outdoors in Parks or on Trails Due to COVID-19



Socio-economics may be in part a driver of this behavior change, as illustrated in the chart below. Given the strong correlation that exists between educational attainment and socio-economic status, one can see the difference in experience as one reaches higher levels of socio-economic status.

Change in Time Spent Outdoors in Parks or on Trails Due to COVID-19



Among people who said they walk, run, or bike “frequently” on a trail near them, 48% said they are spending more time in parks or on trails now than they were before the pandemic, while only 28% said they are spending less time there. Though the finding is not conclusive, one could infer that some people who were already connected with parks and trails before the pandemic became even more connected with them, while other people withdrew and spent even more time indoors – suggesting the importance of building a relationship between people and these spaces in good times, so they become a refuge for them during hard times.

Focus group participants shed light on the impact of COVID. They do see more people outside, they said, which causes them to retreat inside their homes to stay safe. Several focus group participants

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suggested that as gyms and other indoor venues empty out and close down, those people come outdoors – which pushes *them* indoors to steer clear of the virus.

Though some of the people we interviewed can work or attend school from home, most did not have that luxury. A number of our focus group participants were essential workers, whether in healthcare or service industries, who felt that they assumed significant COVID risk just to meet their daily obligations. Often, people are reliant on public transportation, where they come into close contact with others who are not complying with masking or social distancing rules. The anxiety about COVID is very high among these residents, with palpable worry that they may themselves become sick, or bring the virus home to family members. Once home, they said, their inclination often is to shelter in place, treating their home as a sanctuary against the pandemic that is raging outside their walls.

Whether there are indeed more people on the sidewalks and on the trails near their homes, or their sensitivity to being near other people has just been raised because of COVID concerns, residents of these urban neighborhoods find it difficult not to come in contact with others when they leave their homes.

This Cobbs Creek resident explained how she has cut down on what she does outdoors, eliciting audible agreement from others in the group as she spoke.

"I used to also (walk to) the art museum in Philadelphia, which is...so busy because the reduced (capacity of)... gyms and stuff like that. So even though they say you can't get (COVID), you reduce the risk when you're outside, when any area's that busy, you're going to walk by somebody. So I just don't do those things that I used to do before. I went to the gym one time since the spring. So now I try to do things that reduce the risk."
– Southwest Philadelphia Participant

She went on to explain:

"...before the pandemic started, I got a stroller so that I can walk with (the baby) ...(but) we don't get to use the stroller because it really is a busy park and it became busier with the pandemic because people don't have access to other ways of working out. And I even see workout groups meeting up on the Cobbs Creek Parkway."
– Southwest Philadelphia Participant

Many participants in the focus groups talked about wanting to spend more time outdoors, but said they have cut back on their outside time because other people they encounter are not observing proper safety measures, and that makes them feel uncomfortable.

"Because people tend to not listen as far as being out in public like that. They will just walk, instead of keeping the six feet distance, they would just walk up on you and just, they don't respect your space. ...I don't think they realize we're in an epidemic. So respecting a person's space is very important right now."
– Norristown Participant

In contrast, a Camden participant is spending more time outdoors, but mainly in the oasis of her back yard, where she has space to sit outside and have a garden. She is able to work from home.

"Since I'm working from home I spend a lot of time outside in my back yard, doing my calls and things like that. So I've been spending more time outside, especially on those nice days, the Indian Summer in September. Even yesterday, I didn't have to work but I still sat out back. But before COVID we were out somewhere in a store or just somewhere else, not home. So we would be in a mall or something like that. So I think I'm spending more time outside now during COVID, just in the neighborhood. ... just staying outside and then watching the bees pollinate my vegetables and things like that. My flowers, 'Oh, look, there's another flower blooming.' It was very peaceful, very peaceful." – Camden Participant

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Even when overcoming their fears about COVID, people are thinking about it constantly and finding ways to adjust to it.

“The first time I went out, it was crowded because gyms were closed. So people were out walking, exercising, and it was a little intimidating to me. I just put my mask on and music and I walked and I got used to it. You know, that little bit of fear went down, but I did wish that everybody would go the same direction, so I wouldn't have someone huffing and puffing because they're running and sweating coming towards me. And so then I'd come home and take a shower, to make sure all the germs are coming off.” – Camden Participant

In summary, the pandemic is exerting a significant influence over the amount of time people spend outdoors and imposing stress. It remains unknown whether people will return to the outdoors as health concerns begin to ease, or whether these anxieties will remain in place for some time to come.

An Overview of the Four Communities of Focus

Summary Finding: We observed deep concerns about public safety in most of the areas we studied, making people feel nervous about spending time outdoors. Some were actively worried about violence on the streets of their neighborhoods, and many expressed a concern that dangerous or desperate individuals or groups of people could threaten them when they are outside. Beyond this concern, there was a perception by many that the neighborhood offers little to do, making it less likely that they would want to venture outside.

The geographic focus of this study is the urban neighborhoods that adjoin trails and that are predominantly populated by residents of color: The Delaware & Raritan Canal State Park Trail in Trenton, the Cooper River Trail and Waterfront Promenade in Camden, the Cobbs Creek Trail in Southwest Philadelphia and adjoining areas of Delaware County, and the Schuylkill River Trail in Norristown.

Based on the Community Survey, each of these study areas exhibited variations in attitude and experience based on exactly where one lives. Views were shaped by factors like the gentrification pressure a neighborhood feels, the proximity to water, the amount of crime on neighborhood streets, and of course how close to the trail one lives.

Nowhere, though, did we find these differences more striking than in the Cobbs Creek area, where people who live on the Delaware County side of Cobbs Creek Park often expressed a different set of attitudes compared to those on the Philadelphia side. Consequently, this report breaks out many findings separately for the City and the County sides of Cobbs Creek.

The Community Survey measured the four study areas broadly, based on distance from the trail, zip code, or municipality. Across the four areas, with its sample size of 718, the Community Survey sample can be segmented to isolate the responses of people who live closer to the trail, or with specific racial or ethnic characteristics, or of various ages, genders, or education levels. Significant individual data points will be noted in this summary. The full data set is found in the appendix material that accompanies this summary.

As a starting point to understand these neighborhoods, participants in the Community Survey were asked two open-ended questions: “What do you like about living in this neighborhood?” and “What do you most wish was different. Responses were captured verbatim and categorized. Charts illustrating the categorized responses are found on the following page.

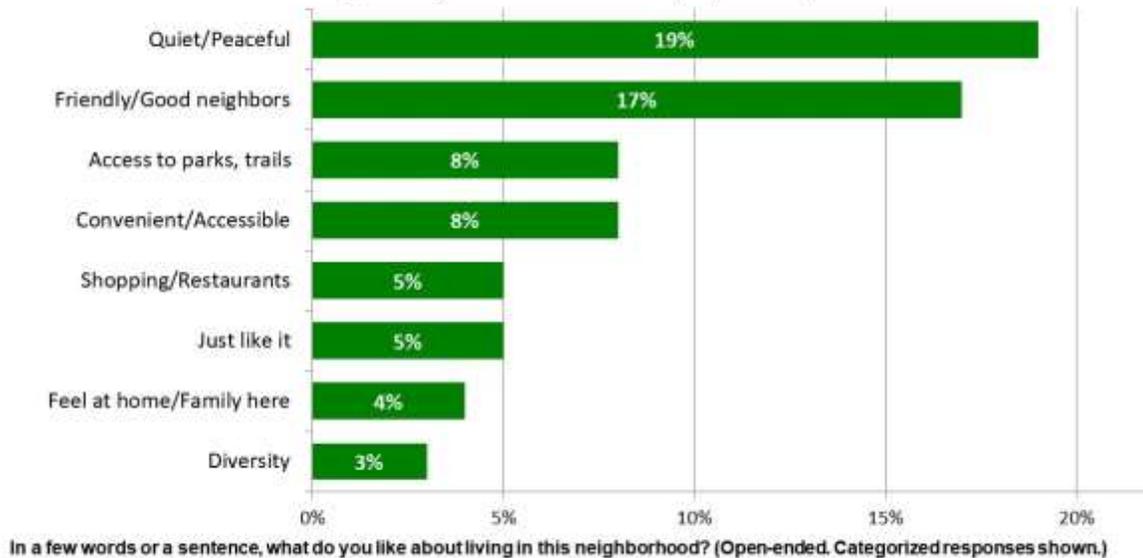
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In many ways, the responses are mirror images. While 17% said they like their neighbors and find them friendly, 10% said the biggest negative is the unfriendly people and lack of a sense of community. While 8% said they liked the access to parks and trails – the third leading response – lack of green space in the neighborhood was mentioned as a negative.

Generally, the top positive attributes mentioned were quietness, friendliness, familiarity, and accessibility.

What Do You Like about Living in This Neighborhood?

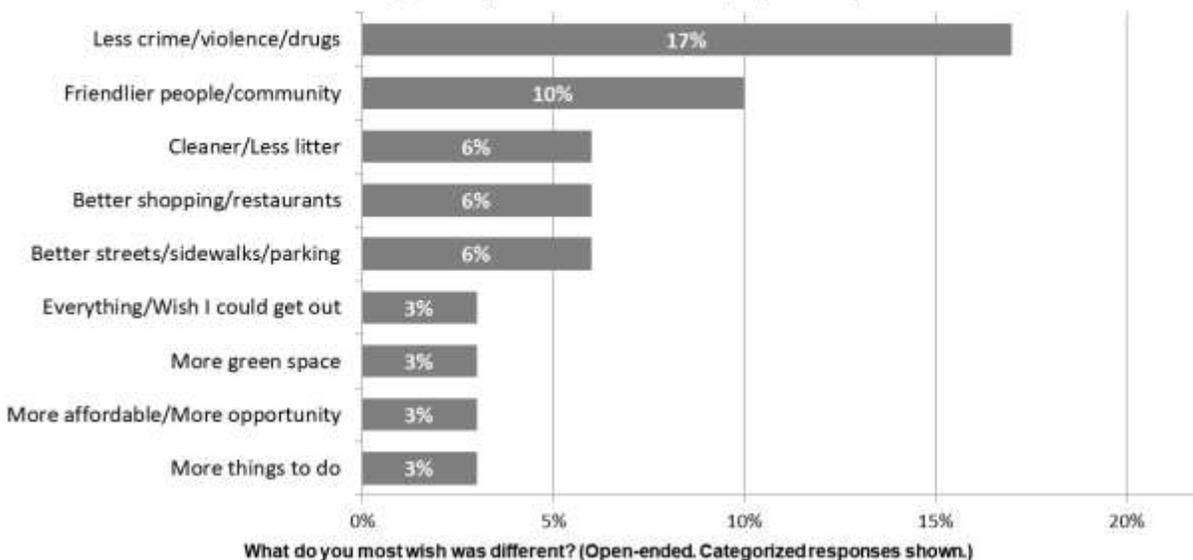
Community Survey. 4 Areas Combined; Top 8 Responses



On the negative side, concern about crime, violence, and drugs was most often mentioned. Also prominent on this list are concerns related to neglect and blight: litter, poor streets and sidewalks, lack of opportunity, and lack of things to do.

What Do You Wish was Different about This Neighborhood?

Community Survey. 4 Areas Combined; Top 9 Responses



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To better understand people's relationship with their neighborhoods and the trails that pass through, we asked them to grade their neighborhoods for five relevant characteristics:

- How safe it feels.
- Access to nice parks and green spaces.
- Neighbors are friendly and look out for each other.
- Well-maintained and accessible sidewalks, trails, and other places you can walk.
- Interesting things to do.

We asked residents to grade these attributes on a traditional A to F scale. Scores can be calculated using the familiar 4.0 "grade point average," where A=4, B=3, and so on.

Three of these five areas emerged as serious deficiencies of their neighborhoods in the eyes of residents. Focus group conversation reflected these poor grades and provided depth and context as illustrated below. The three worst-scoring were these neighborhood attributes:

1. Interesting things to do, for which almost 60% of people gave their neighborhood a grade of C or lower (scoring 2.09 on the 4-point scale).
2. How safe the neighborhood feels (2.24)
3. Well-maintained and accessible sidewalks, trails, and other places you can walk (2.29)

Slightly better-performing were these characteristics:

4. Access to nice parks and green spaces (2.51)
5. Neighbors who are friendly and look out for each other (2.60)

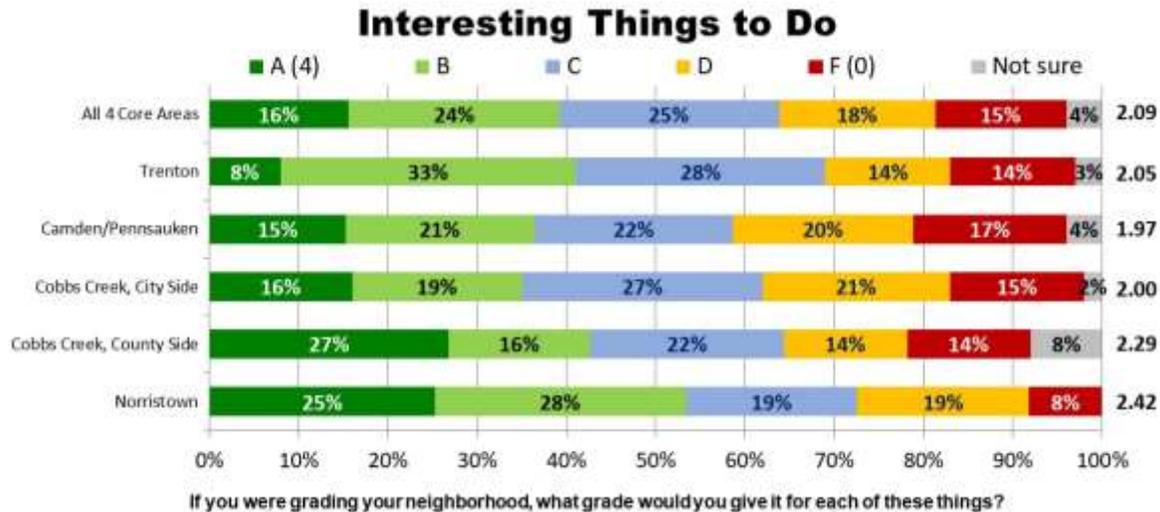
None of these grades could be characterized as positive. Following is the detail on these ratings.

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A Lack of Things to Do in the Neighborhood

Only 40% of the residents of these four study areas gave their neighborhoods a grade of A or B for having “interesting things to do.” Nearly as many (33%) graded their neighborhoods D or F.

Residents of Trenton, Camden/Pennsauken, and the Philadelphia side of Cobbs Creek offered the poorest grades. Grades were slightly higher on the Delaware County side of Cobbs Creek, and in Norristown.



It was typical that representatives of the Besieged and Juggling archetypes who attended the focus groups had very little awareness of events or activities in the community. They generally did not know about educational or recreational programs in local parks. Sometimes another member of the focus group would let them know about an outdoor opportunity, and the reaction would typically be surprise, and occasionally anger that good things were available so close to them, and they did not know.

Finding out from another participant that there are free activities in Camden, such as canoeing to Petty Island, this participant had a strong reaction:

(Moderator): “How does that make you feel?”

(Participant): “It make me feel angry. Very, very angry. Very angry.”

(Moderator): “That you didn't know this was available to you?”

(Participant): “At all! And I've been living in Camden, for now, about 12 years, 13 years. And I never heard none of this information.” – Camden Participant

Later in the focus group, after learning about local trails and the effort to expand the Circuit Trails, his anger had turned to appreciation that someone was trying to make the community a better place. But his comment was tinged with lingering sadness over a sense of loss of recreational activities that he said used to be a staple of his life.

“Me personally, I'm very proud (to know that trails are being built in Camden). It means that some people are starting to take pride in the community and wanting the community to actually look better. And having more activity for the kids, because that's what it's really about. At the end of the day. I must say, we need a lot more than just trails. ...You need more things that's involving the kids. Actually bring the kids in. Things that they like. Like rec centers. The Kroc Center is not free. And people don't have the money to actually pay for this type of stuff. It should be free for the community. I come from a place where I remember the community center was

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free. And that's something that we looked forward to every day. Even adults getting off work, eight o'clock at night going to the gym is free. Go workout, go swim, go play ball with your boys. We ain't got none of that."
– Camden Participant

Similarly, Trentonians expressed a sense of loss and decline in their community. Several long-time Trenton residents thought of Cadwalader Park as a psychic centerpiece in West Trenton, but expressed a sense that it had gone downhill in recent decades. Older participants talked of the Cadwalader Park of old and wished it could be restored. These are the reflections of a 55-year-old maintenance worker and lifelong Trentonian:

"When I grew up, Cadwalader Park, that was the main park in Trenton. We had boat rides, we had the animals, we had a monkey house... We used to have shows there, families come out...We need to bring it back. They took everything away. Bring back the fishing in the park. Get the little boat rides that we used to have there. And this is in a nice neighborhood. Well, one side is a nice neighborhood. When I ride through there when I was a kid, you could see the boat ride, the little area boat ride. Now, that is a mess."
– Trenton Participant

Two women in a Norristown focus group talked about how the parks used to be better, and that in recent years playground equipment has been "taken away." They talked longingly of neighboring communities where it seemed to them much more was available for children to play outdoors. They wished someone would care that much about Norristown.

"It was kind of hurtful, because it's like, you got a community up there (Jeffersonville), and it seems they care about what's going on in their neighborhood. And we have people here that have the money, but don't act like they care. It's like, they could care less if our kids have anywhere to play and they could care less if we have anywhere that we can relax at. It's depressing." – Norristown Participant

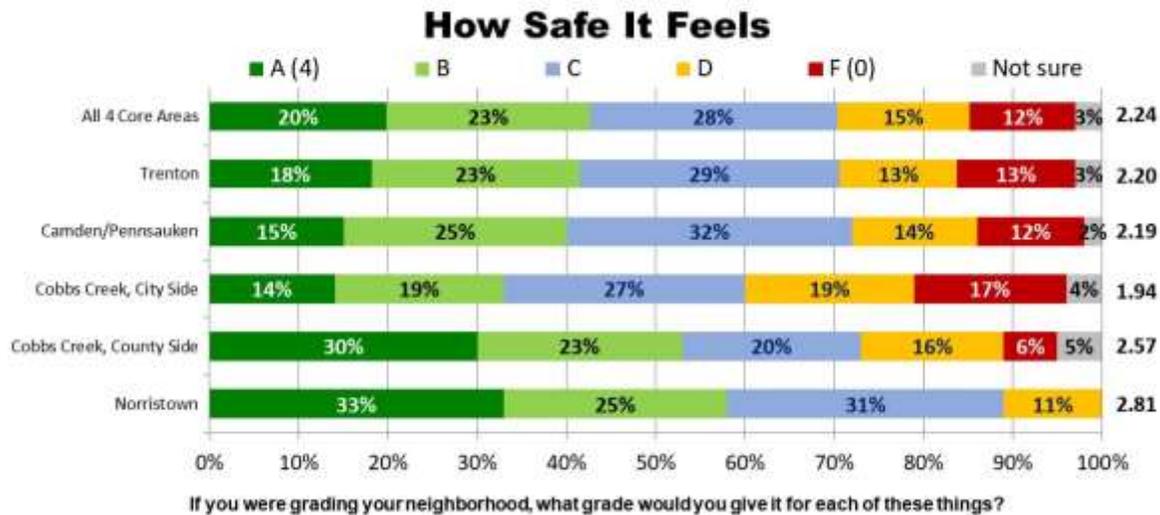
In the poor rating on the Community Survey, and throughout their comments in the focus groups, there was evident hunger for more things to do in the neighborhood.

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Deep Concerns about Public Safety

Public safety concerns are pronounced nearly everywhere in these study areas. They are particularly acute in the neighborhoods on the Philadelphia side of Cobbs Creek Park, where nearly two-thirds of residents gave their neighborhood a grade of C or lower for how safe it feels. Concerns about public safety are nearly as severe in Trenton and Camden/Pennsauken. Though there are concerns on the County side of Cobbs Creek and in Norristown, they are noticeably less intense.



What the Concept of Safety Means to People

Asked what they meant by safety, focus group participants usually talked about an imminent feeling of personal danger: a person or group of people following you, the presence of people who are drug addicted or acting strangely, or the possibility that you could get caught up in random street violence. The comments were many, and the emotional toll on people who live with this constant worry is significant.

Participants in two focus groups described what safety means to them:

“It means that I can basically mind my business and nobody would come up to me or try and talk to me to try and get anything from me. I can just walk somewhere and I can be by myself and then that’s it. That’s what safety means to me.” – Trenton Participant

“Safe to me means less people who want to do stuff to other people. If you can understand that. Because where I’m from it’s like, all right, he might be beefing with him, and he might be beefing with him so you caught in the middle of all of their problems. So it’s like, even if I don’t got nothing to do with it, it’s like, I’ll walk outside and he might shoot at him. Or he might...” – Norristown Participant

A Camden participant talked about the “walking zombies” in the streets, which he later described as drug-addicted people who he considered unpredictable and possibly dangerous.

“I’m keeping it straight up honest with you. Most people that live here in Camden, we travel outside of Camden, just to have fun. Or to go and get some relaxation. Or outside time. I go to Atlantic City and walk the boardwalk with my wife. ...We go to the waterfront and we just sit there and watch the water. We don’t even walk the (Camden) waterfront. Because...Because we just know Camden? I don’t even know. But we get excited to go to Atlantic City to walk the boardwalk when we did it a million times.”

(Moderator): But why?

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(Participant continues): That fresh air. It's that ocean breeze. It's the little bit of all that. Zombies not walking around in the streets.

(Moderator): "What are we talking about when we say zombies?"

(Participant): ... At any time of the day, you got people that walk across the street without even looking. I mean they don't even look. And these are people that's from Camden... They don't even care about their life. We call them walking zombies." – Camden Participant

Similar concerns were echoed in the other Camden group by two women who live near each other in Waterfront South. They described being constantly worried that they are being followed when they walk outside. One described drug addicts shooting up in broad daylight in a park by a school near where she lives, and near a trail that she likes to walk – a place she does not feel safe.

"During COVID I was walking it more like daily, pretty much. I stopped walking it because I don't feel safe all the time. Sometime there's people behind me and I don't feel really safe. There's a lot of drug activity in this area, prostitution, and I don't know who these people are walking behind me. And I think there may be cameras there, but I'm not taking my chances." – Camden Participant

She went on to say that she confines her walking to an open area of a small park, rather than walking farther as she would like, because she is so concerned about who might be following her.

"If it's one person, okay, fine. But if it's a group of guys that's walking behind me, I've just walked around Liney Ditch Park, which is no path, it's just grass. So I've walked around the grass of the park just to get some steps in to clear my mind. So I won't go through that little quarter-mile walkway to the other park ...I wouldn't want to feel like my heart is pounding. I didn't want to keep looking behind me." – Camden Participant

When walking in their neighborhoods, especially on a trail, focus group participants said they feel safer when they are with one or two others, or a small group of their friends. They want to see a populated trail, but not a busy trail. Two Norristown participants even went so far as to say they felt safer in an open area, without heavy vegetation where people could hide. They had a strong perception that the SRT was an unsafe place to be.

"You better have somebody come with you. Because some people down there they'd be jumping people and stuff. Robbing people on a bike trail and stuff down that one." – Norristown Participant

Similarly, a Camden participant said a walkway following a fence line near where she lives lacks a sense of openness and makes her feel unsafe. Meanwhile, a 42-year-old African-American male in Trenton said he carries a taser when he runs to "increase my level of confidence and safety."

Perceptions of safety can matter as much as actual safety on the trail. In this exchange, a Girl Scout leader who lives a bit further from the Cobbs Creek Trail explains that she never takes her Girl Scouts there because of safety concerns. A fellow participant who lives across the street from the park (and the rail) can barely contain herself and jumps in to set the record straight.

(First Participant): "We don't go to Cobbs Creek. That's kind of more of a dangerous area for us, as far as we're concerned. We just stick to Wissahickon and Fairmount Park and a few that are up in Mount Airy and Chestnut Hill, other parks there. ... It's a lot of shootings."

(Second Participant): "...Hold on. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I was muted. I'm sorry. I live across the street and my daughter has a Citizens app, so Cobb's Creek Parkway, there's nothing bad going on. I mean, I see old ladies walking and everything. I think she's referring to the neighborhood. So the closer you get to 60th Street and the City of Philadelphia, it's bad. I mean, but not Cobb's Creek Parkway. There's nothing going on there.

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(First Participant): "Okay. Thank you." (Later in the group): "I feel like I want to check it out now. Especially since they said it was safe. I didn't know." – Southwest Philadelphia Participants

Where it can be done with integrity, setting people's minds at ease about safety on the trail could help lower a major barrier to trail usage.

Concern about Inequities and a Neighborhood That is Not Well Cared-for

Many of the people we interviewed felt that their neighborhood was neglected. Streets, sidewalks, parks, playgrounds and other public amenities are poorly maintained, or are lacking, in contrast with nearby areas that are wealthier. They wished that they would feel more welcome throughout their community, and that their own neighborhood would be treated with the same care and respect afforded to wealthier – and possibly whiter – areas nearby.

In both the Cobbs Creek area and Trenton, the stakeholders assembled to advise this project at the outset predicted that this would be a major concern of neighborhood residents. Because of gentrification pressures or outright discrimination, they said that people of color would not always feel welcome in the public spaces close to where they live. They were right. The subject came up in all four groups, but was perhaps most acutely expressed in Camden.

"Me personally, I can't say that I can claim something that's not mine. I have no say so in what goes on in my neighborhood. Just being honest. And it's sad. Because I should have say so. But I don't have say so."
– Camden Participant

In the other Camden focus group, a young woman, now in her early 20s, recalled a time not long ago when she used to hang out with her friends in a parking lot down by the water and look at the Philadelphia skyline across the river. No one bothered them. Now she does not feel welcome there, and does not even recognize the area.

"But as far as when you go all the way down to the waterfront, the actual waterfront, that whole area has definitely changed to where I definitely feel like I don't belong. They built a hotel down there, they built, I believe there's little stores. ...Before that it literally used to be two parking lots. And then you still had the little park area and you could see Philadelphia and all of that. Because I'm among the younger folks, we would actually go down there and just park in those two parking lots and that was our hangout spot. We would just hangout out there. Everybody would be outside their cars and stuff. Nobody would be fighting or anything. Literally, that was the place to go for us to get out and just enjoy ourselves. And the next thing you know, it was like, 'Oh, they're taking this away.' or, 'They're building this hotel right here. They're building this or they're building that.' And then it's stuff that's not even really geared towards us. It's more so now like, 'Oh, Camden is rising.' And this is for the people that they want to move in, or when people come through."
– Camden Participant

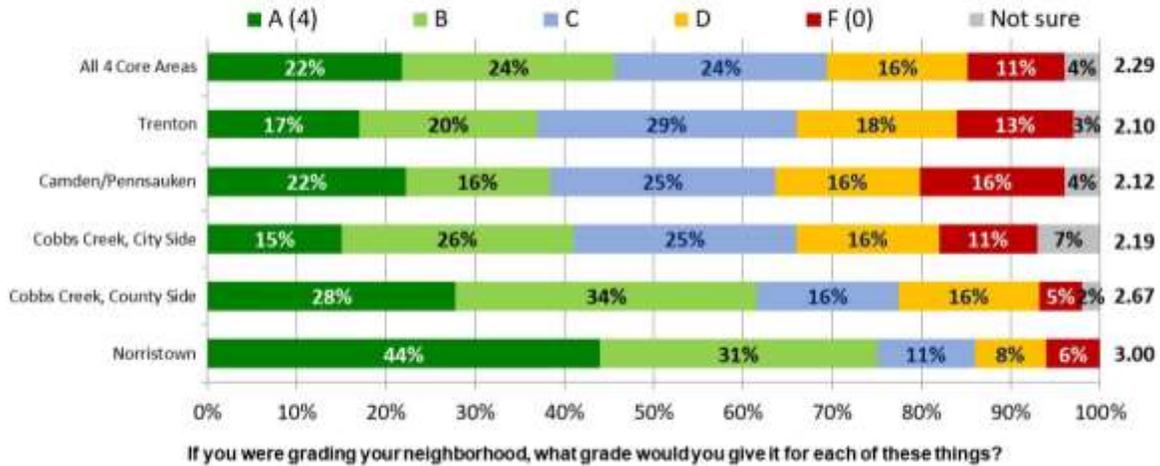
The moderator asked her to imagine "a space or a place...that you would like to designate as the new hangout spot." But the young woman just wants to be able to go to her old spot and be welcome there.

"We want to go down to the waterfront, too. We want to sit down there and look at the Philadelphia skyline."
– Camden Participant

When asked to grade their neighborhoods for "well-maintained and accessible sidewalks, trails, and other places you can walk," grades on the Community Survey were mixed. Three-quarters of Norristown residents gave their neighborhood an A or B for walkability, compared to only about 40% in Trenton, Camden, and the Philadelphia side of Cobbs Creek. Meanwhile, about one-third of residents in both Trenton and Camden gave their neighborhoods a grade of D or F for walkability.

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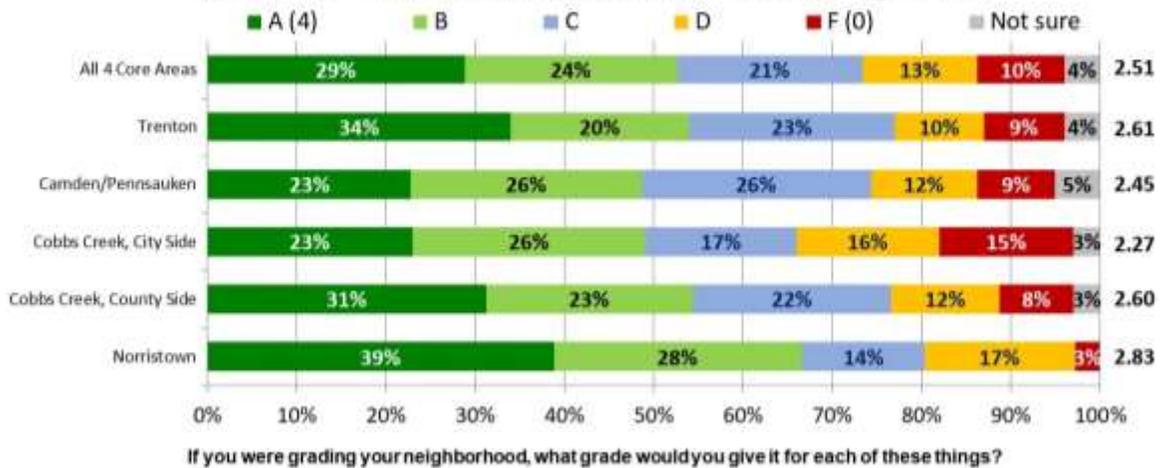
Well-Maintained and Accessible Sidewalks, Trails, and Other Places You Can Walk



Mediocre Grades for Parks and Green Spaces

Grades are slightly better for “Access to nice parks and green spaces.” More than half of residents across the four study areas offered a grade of A or B, with residents of Norristown particularly positive. Residents on the Philadelphia side of Cobbs Creek were the least positive about their access to green spaces, with nearly half giving a grade of C or lower. Camden/Pennsauken was also quite negative.

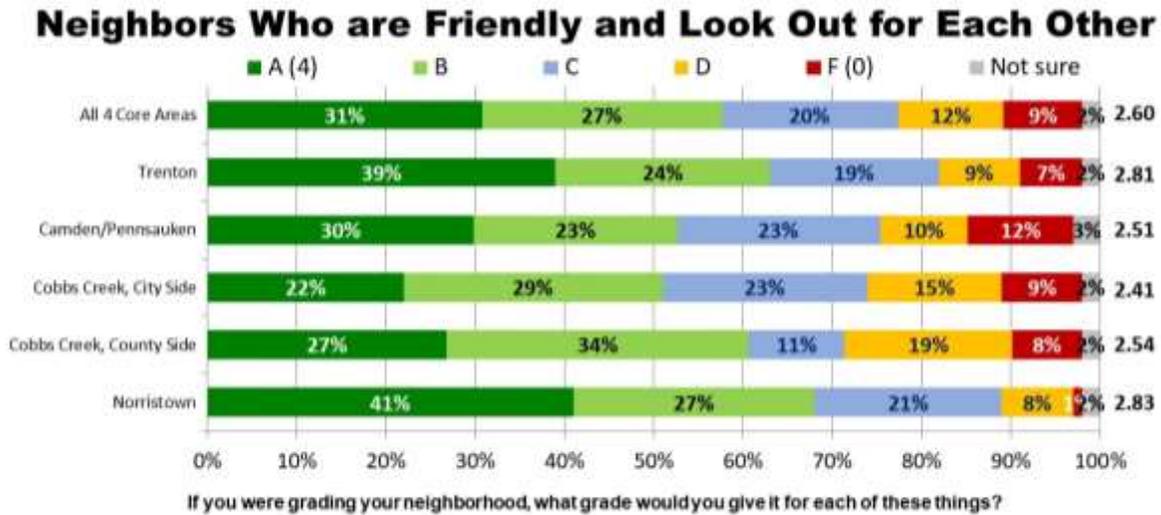
Access to Nice Parks and Green Spaces



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Neighbors Who Look Out for Each Other

Social cohesion in these neighborhoods, in the sense of neighbors who are friendly and look out for each other, is the most positive of these five attributes, earning an A or B from 58% of people across all four areas. Norristown and Trenton were most positive about their neighbors, while the Philadelphia side of Cobbs Creek once again suffered the lowest grades.



Relating to the Outdoors

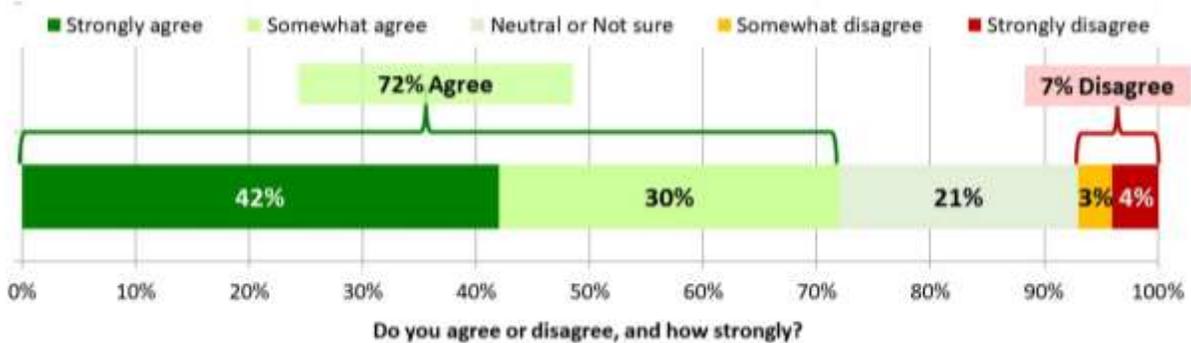
How It Feels to be Outdoors

Summary Finding: Despite all of their concerns about COVID, the safety of their neighborhood, and more, the simple act of spending time outdoors in natural spaces brings rejuvenation and an emotional release for people who really need that.

There is a widespread feeling that “being outdoors in parks or on trails makes me feel happier.” Asked on the Community Survey whether they agree or disagree with that statement, 72% agreed, and only 7% disagreed. Almost half of survey respondents *strongly* agreed with that statement.

Being outdoors in parks or on trails makes me feel happier.

Community Survey



When asked what feelings they experience when they are outdoors experiencing nature, focus group participants underlined this finding. Emotional words like these jumped out of the groups like popcorn:

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“Rejuvenating”
“Exhilarating”
“Soothing”
“Stimulating”
“Relaxing”
“Calming”
“Centering”
“Grounding”
“Peaceful”
“Refreshing.”

Focus group participants described how it feels to walk outside in the midst of a stressful day. Access to natural spaces in the outdoors lifts their spirits and relieves their stress, they said. This simple discussion about their emotional response to the outdoors provides a healthy contrast with the almost overwhelming worry people expressed about COVID-19 and public safety.

“So to walk out of my door sometimes, I could walk out of my house and have an attitude and just feel the fresh air. Or the sun rays. And it triggers something else inside my brain and it actually calms me down.”
– Camden Participant

“I love going outdoors and especially in the summertime when it's warm, and when it's spring when it's cool. ...It just calms (me) down and everything, keeps you peaceful.” – Norristown Participant

“I go (to the trail) just when I need to get away and walk a little bit. There's bike riders and things like that. There's people fishing and canoeing and whatnot there. I go because I just need to commune a little more with nature.” – Trenton Participant

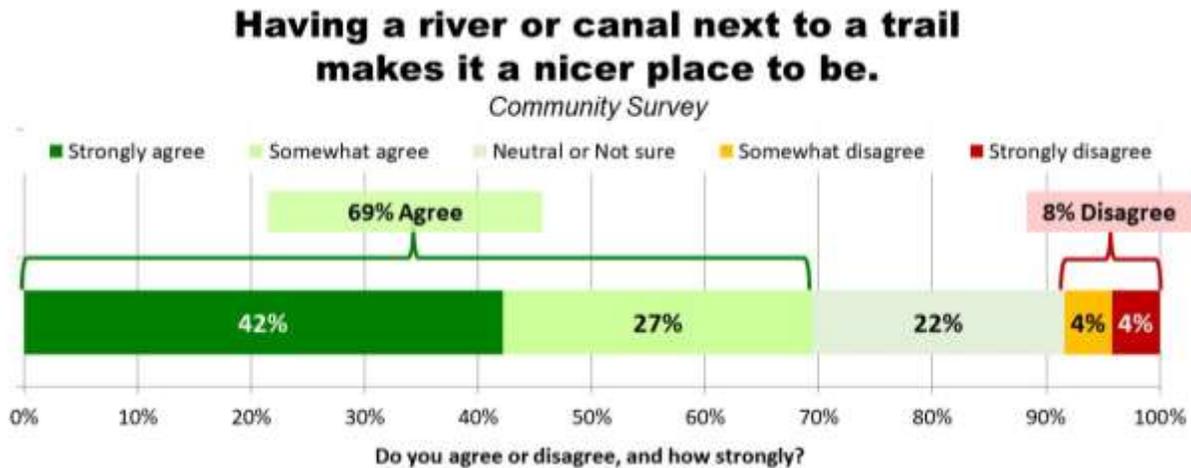
“In a city like Camden, which has its challenges, it is almost life affirming. And I really mean this. It lifts your spirit. It validates you when you see nature.” – Camden Participant

Connections to Water

Summary Finding: People want to be near the water. Like being in nature, being close to water can bring a powerful sense of relaxation and renewal. But many people in these neighborhoods cannot picture water near them. This offers an opportunity for trails to promote and leverage their proximity to water.

The Community Survey measured the impact of having water near a trail. Sixty-nine percent of people responding to the Community Survey said that having water near the trail makes it a nicer place to be, while only 8% disagreed with that idea.

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The response to water is powerful. Focus group participants described an emotional response – almost bordering on spiritual at times – when they thought about being near water. A representative of the Besieged archetype, an individual who was particularly overwrought about the conditions of his life, described walking along the water as bringing “purification.” He finds solace there, and a new perspective. This is how he put it:

“Purification, for me, it means re-strategizing my mind. Reorganizing my thinking. Coming up with new plans and new ideas. And sometimes water does that for me.” – Camden Participant

Another Besieged participant, the young man who had lost a friend to gun violence that afternoon, said he felt “invincible!” when he jumped off rocks into a natural pool of water. This participant, who was measured and controlled in his responses throughout the focus group discussion, lit up with excitement as he described jumping into the water at a spot called “Devil’s Pool” in the Wissahickon Valley Park.

“...it's surrounded by a bunch of rocks and people go there and they'll be jumping off the rocks into the water and stuff like that. ...I like it there, you feels like you're really in the jungle or something. I don't know, I don't know how to explain it, but it was fun though, right?”

(Moderator): “Come up with one emotion that you felt when you jumped off those rocks.”

(Participant): “I felt like the man, because it was a high jump kind of. So, I felt like, I don't know. I felt like invincible, you could say I felt invincible!” – Southwest Philadelphia Participant

A high school-aged girl in far Southwest Philadelphia who expressed many concerns about being outside because of worries about violence in the neighborhood, described her feelings when being near water:

“It makes me feel a bit empowered, relaxed. A feeling of relaxation. I just feel calm. Hearing the water is just, I don't know, hearing the water tickle down rocks and stuff is just really relaxing.”

– Southwest Philadelphia Participant

A Camden resident feels relaxed and transported when she is near the water:

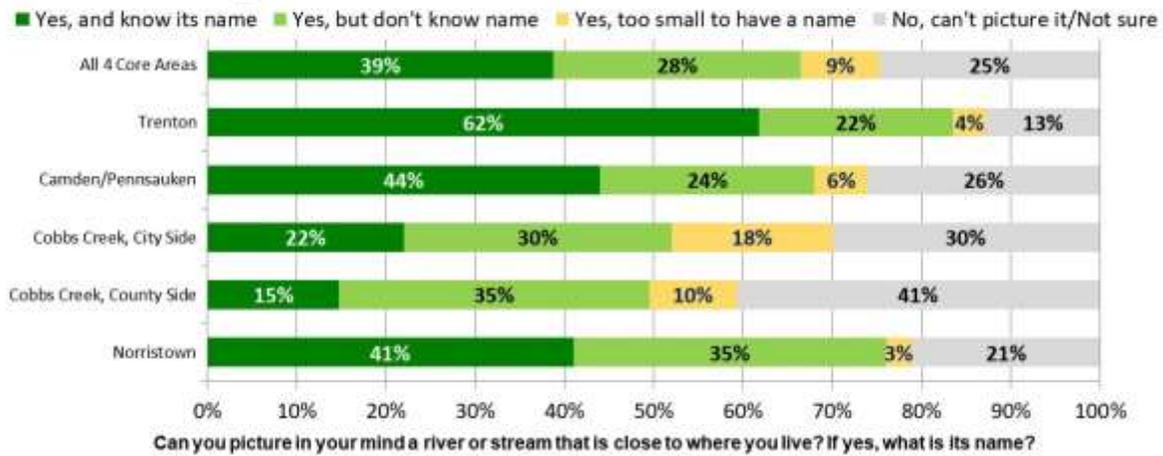
“I would like to see, hear birds, see birds, water. ...You're walking along the water, see boats and different things like that. Just something else besides buildings and people and trash. And I like to see nature. I like to hear nature. I like to see water.” – Camden Participant

Despite strong emotional responses to the water, residents of these neighborhoods sometimes have a hard time picturing water close to them, even though water flows near or through all of these

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neighborhoods. About three-quarters of Community Survey participants said they could picture in their minds a river or a stream near where they live, and about half of those said they knew its name. The remaining 25% could not picture any water near where they live.

Picturing a River or Stream Close to Where You Live



The relationship with water is strongest in Trenton, followed by Norristown and Camden. Residents living on both sides of Cobbs Creek Park have the weakest connection to water, with a substantial 41% of residents on the Delaware County side of the park unable to picture water near where they live.

(continued, next page)

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What People are Doing Outdoors

Summary Finding: Despite all of the barriers and concerns, many people in these neighborhoods are connecting with the outdoors. Walking and just relaxing are among the most frequent activities in parks and along trails, surpassing even biking and running for recreation and exercise.

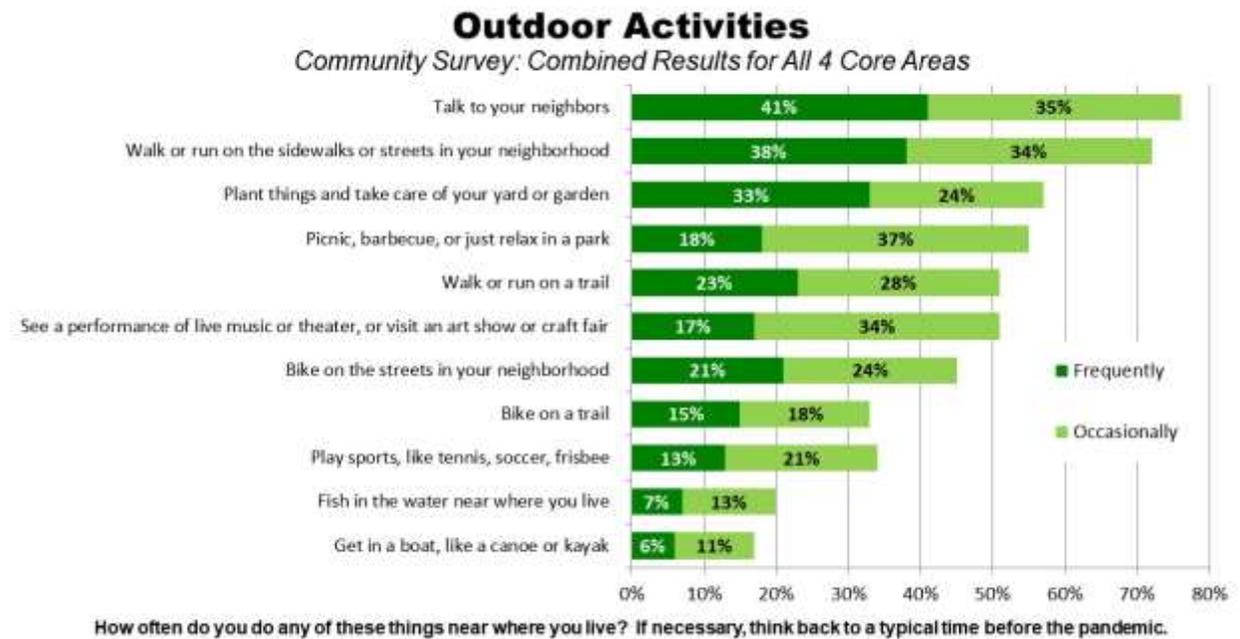
The Community Survey measured what people are doing outdoors. Respondents were offered a list of 11 activities and asked how often they “do any of these things near where you live,” using the scale frequently, occasionally, rarely, or never.

This chart below summarizes the responses of participants in the Community Survey, across all four study areas. The leading activity is talking with neighbors, which about three-quarters of people said they do frequently or occasionally.

Walking or running on sidewalks or streets in the neighborhood is a close second, with 38% frequently and 34% occasionally doing that. Looking further down the list, 51% said they frequently or occasionally walk or run on a trail.

Biking is somewhat less frequent in these neighborhoods, with 45% biking on the streets of their neighborhood frequently or occasionally, and 33% biking on a trail.

Planting things and taking care of a yard or garden is third on the list, after talking with neighbors and walking in the neighborhood. Picnicking, barbecuing or just relaxing in a park is fourth.



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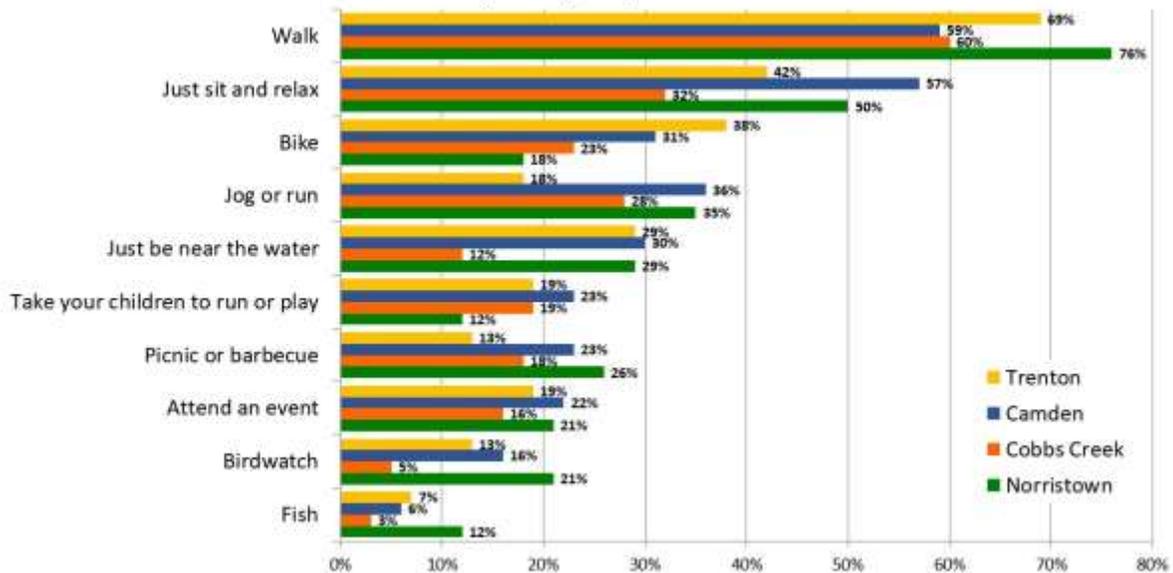
Later in the survey, respondents were asked to choose from a similar list of activities, and indicate which they had done during the past year in a park or along a trail near where they live. It was a simple yes or no to each activity, rather than a scale of frequency. These activities are split out for each of the four areas in the chart below.

This illustration shows the prevalence of walking, which is the number one activity in all four study areas, and an activity we heard a great deal about in the focus groups. The second leading activity in all four areas is just to sit and relax in outdoor spaces. Taken together, these top two responses indicate that residents in these neighborhoods are most interested in just walking or relaxing, rather than focusing on getting from place to place on trails. Only a little further down the list is the passive activity of just being near the water. Notably, Cobbs Creek is much lower on this activity, and also, as we saw, much less likely to even be aware there is water near them.

The more active pursuits of biking and running are next, practiced by roughly one-quarter to one-third of respondents. These may be people who are primarily interested in exercise and recreation.

Activities in a Park or along a Trail Near Where You Live

Community Survey: Top 10 Activities



Which of these things have you done in a park or along a trail near where you live in the past year?

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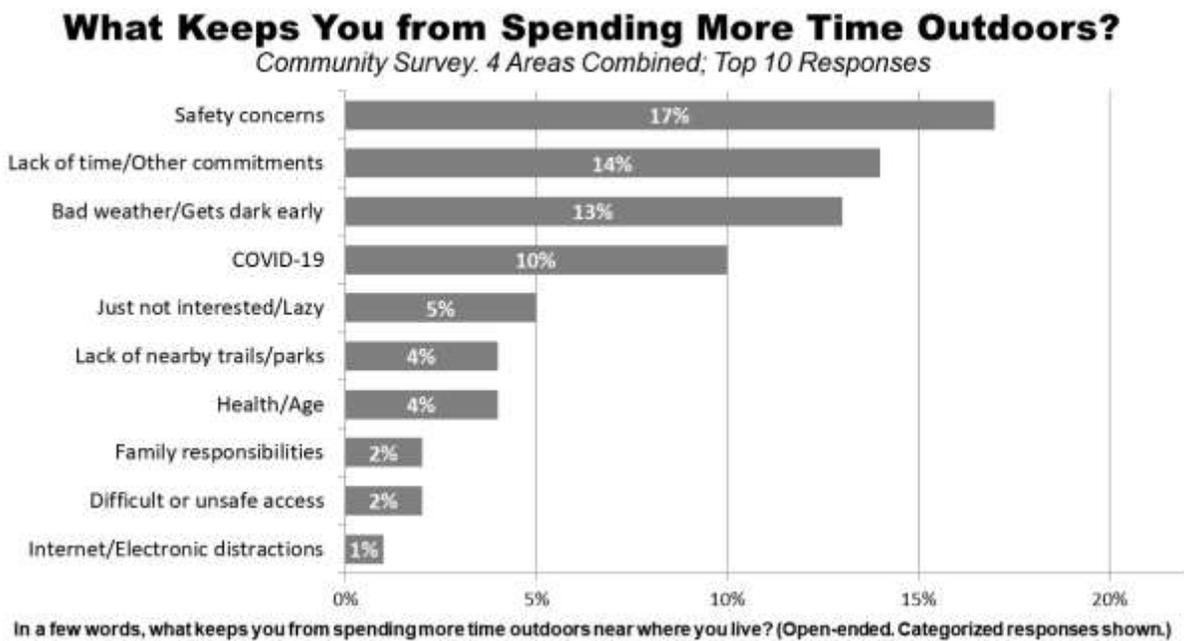
Barriers to Spending Time Outdoors

After they indicated the activities they are currently doing outside, participants in the Community Survey were asked the open-ended question, “What keeps you from spending *more* time outdoors near where you live?” Responses were recorded verbatim and categorized. As has been noted elsewhere in this report, safety concerns are paramount, and they top this list, mentioned by 17% in response to this open-ended question.

As we have observed, people are leading busy lives and managing many demands on their time and energy. Lack of time, or the press of other commitments, is the second leading response at 14%, and could be combined with the 2% who specifically mentioned family responsibilities as keeping them indoors. Weather and darkness were third at 13%. COVID, a major worry for many people, is next on the list at 10%.

Five percent said they are just not interested in being outside, or described themselves as “lazy.” Four percent cited health concerns or advanced age, while another 4% said they do not know of nearby parks or trails, and 2% said the access to those places is too difficult or unsafe.

The remainder of the study will explore how to overcome these barriers.



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Trails

Awareness of Local Trails

Summary Finding: Fewer than two-thirds of residents located within our four study areas are aware that there is a trail close to where they live, indicating that the first job in many neighborhoods may just be to raise awareness of the trails. When the specific trail name is mentioned, that bumps up recall of the trail between five and 20 percentage points.

Stakeholders, in the foundational community meetings at the outset of this process, expressed concern that many residents may not even be aware of nearby trails. The Community Survey validated that observation. Awareness of nearby trails was measured generically, “Are you aware of any trails that are close to where you live?” and followed up with a more specific aided question, “Have you heard of the {name of local trail}?”

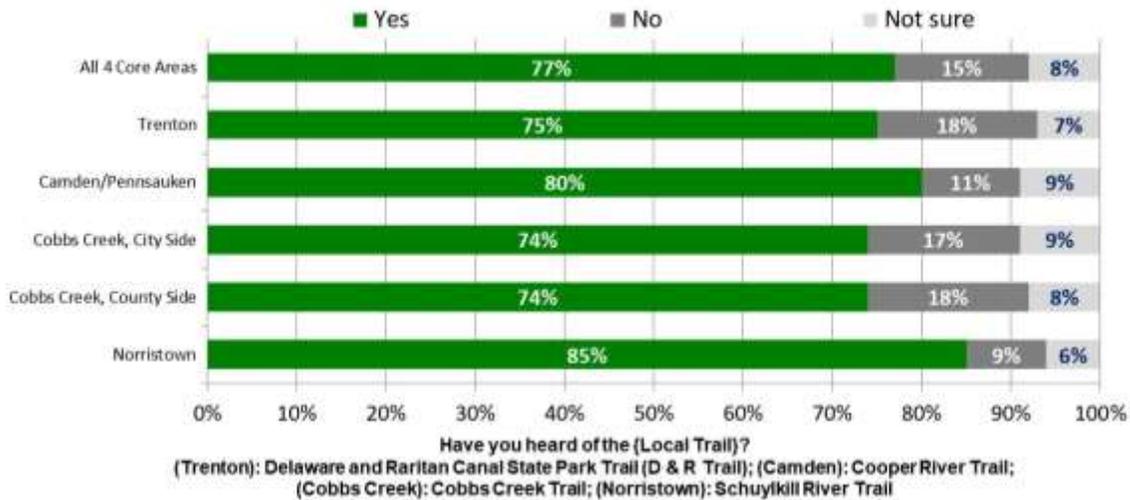
In the generic question, residents were given a basic definition of a trail as “a path that is dedicated to walking, running, or biking. It might run through a park, or along a city street.” About two-thirds (64%) of residents across the four study areas said they were aware of a trail close to where they live. Awareness ranged from a high of 80% in Norristown and 70% in Trenton to a low of 53% on the Philadelphia side of Cobbs Creek Park, as illustrated below.



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As is often the case, aided awareness, where the name of the trail is mentioned, prompts more people to recall they have heard of it. Aided awareness ticks up five percentage points in Norristown and Trenton, and makes more dramatic gains in Camden/Pennsauken and Cobbs Creek. The large jump in the two latter areas suggests a much softer top-of-mind awareness and lower level of connection to the trail.

Awareness of the Named Trail Close to Where You Live



(continued, next page)

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Who is Using the Trail?

Summary Finding: The Trail Survey, though its sample size is relatively small, identifies two of the four trails (Cobbs Creek and the SRT in Norristown) as having a substantially larger share of white trail users compared to the makeup of the surrounding neighborhoods. People of color are more than 20 percentage points *less* likely than white residents to agree with the statement, “When I am in the parks or on the trails around here, I see other people like me.”

A foundational question in this work was who is using the trails that pass through underserved neighborhoods? Further, do the users of the trail resemble the residents who live near the trail? The concern of the JEDI Task Force was and is that the users of the trail do not reflect the surrounding community. These are characteristics of the people who were intercepted along these trails over a three-week span in October and November 2020:

	Trail Users (Intercept Survey)
Black or African-American	32%
Hispanic or Latino	15%
Asian	1%
Caucasian or White	49%
Mixed race or other race/ethnicity	2%
Not sure or prefer not to say	2%
Under age 18	5%
18 to 29	17%
30 to 39	20%
40 to 49	18%
50 to 59	18%
60 to 69	12%
70 or more	7%
Prefer not to say	3%
Female	47%
Male	52%
Prefer not to say	1%
On the trail alone	45%
With one other person	30%
In a group of 3 or more	26%

While the gender and age distribution of trail users who were interviewed for this study appear to reflect a fairly normal representation of the surrounding neighborhoods (taking into account the fact that children were unlikely to be surveyed), the race and ethnicity breakdown of trail users is not representative of the neighborhoods. In fact, about 49% of the Trail Survey sample were people of color, compared to 71% of the neighborhoods surrounding the trails, based on an analysis of Census data (American Community Survey, 2018 5-year averages).

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Looking more closely, trail users in Camden and Trenton who were intercepted were *more* likely to be people of color than the Census would identify in surrounding neighborhoods, while on the Cobbs Creek Trail and the SRT in Norristown, they were substantially less likely. These are the specifics:

Percentage Who are People of Color

	Trail Users (Intercept Survey)	Neighborhoods (Census Data)
Camden	74%	69%
Trenton	79%	55%
Cobbs Creek	54%	84%
Norristown	16%	47%

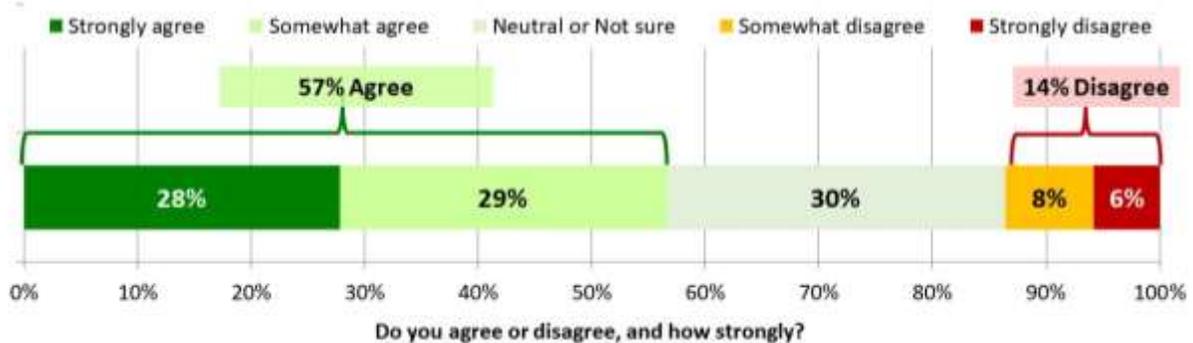
Some caution is advised in drawing firm conclusions from the Trail Survey data, as the sample size was small, and the people intercepted reflected the specific locations where interviewers stood, and the people who were willing, or were comfortable, to stop and take part in the survey. It is likely, for example, that through riders may be less represented because they were less likely to stop, and Latinx residents may be underrepresented because only some of our interviewers were bilingual.

By recruiting and training interviewers who live in these neighborhoods and encouraging them to visit the trail multiple times on different days and in different locations, we sought to make the survey as representative as possible. But the pandemic played a role in how many people we could safely intercept, and how comfortable both trail users and interviewers felt during this process. A more stringent methodological approach, staged at more sites and over a longer period of time, and without the complication of a public health crisis, would be advised in a future study to gain a truer, more reliable picture of who is on the trails. Such a future study could also examine not just the characteristics of the people who are on the trail, but also how many people are on the trail, as a trail that closely reflects the neighborhood’s demographics may still be underutilized by nearby residents.

As a measure of the community’s perception of this issue, neighborhood residents were asked on the Community Survey how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “When I am in the parks or on trails around here, I see other people like me.” Overall, 57% of residents agreed and 14% disagreed. A large number (30%) said they were neutral or not sure about this question.

**When I am in the parks or on trails around here,
 I see other people like me.**

Community Survey

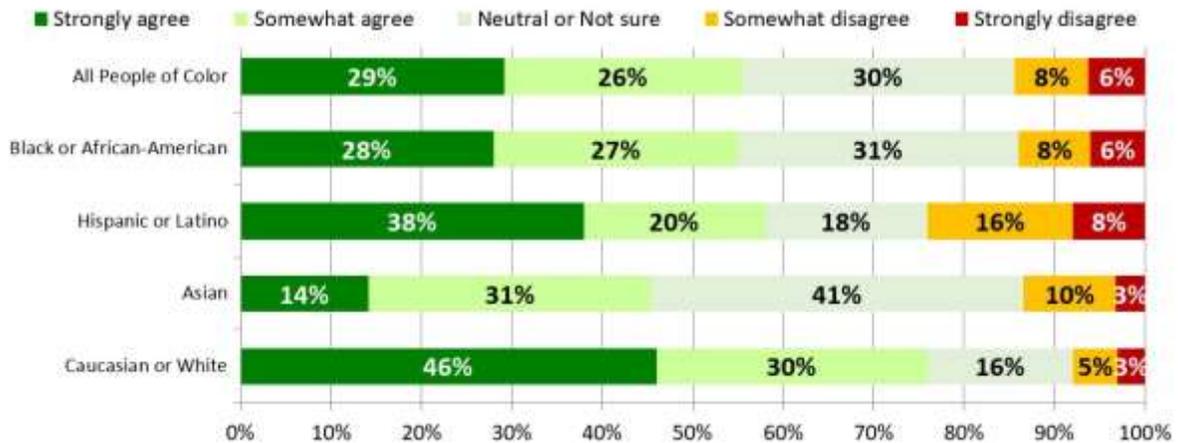


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What is striking is how the level of agreement with this statement varies by race and ethnicity, as illustrated below. While 55% of people of color agree with this statement and 14% disagree, the level of agreement jumps by more than 20 percentage points among white respondents (to 76%), with only 8% disagreeing.

When I am in the parks or on trails around here, I see other people like me.

Segmented by Race and Ethnicity



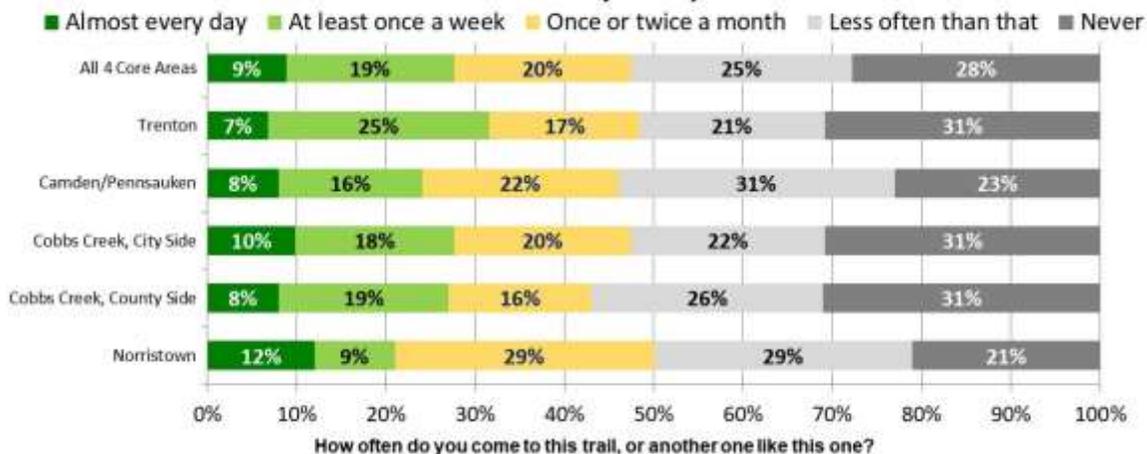
Frequency of Using the Trail

Summary Finding: At least half of the residents of every study area are seldom making use of the trail near them, or not at all. The largest number are using the trail for walking, and only 10% said their purpose on the trail is transportation.

There is another point to make about trail usage, and whether residents of these neighborhoods are connected to their trails. As measured on the Community Survey, over half of nearby residents seldom or never access any trail, let alone the one that is closest to them. That number is 50% in Norristown, and reaches 57% on the Delaware County side of Cobbs Creek who seldom or never use a trail.

Frequency Using a Trail

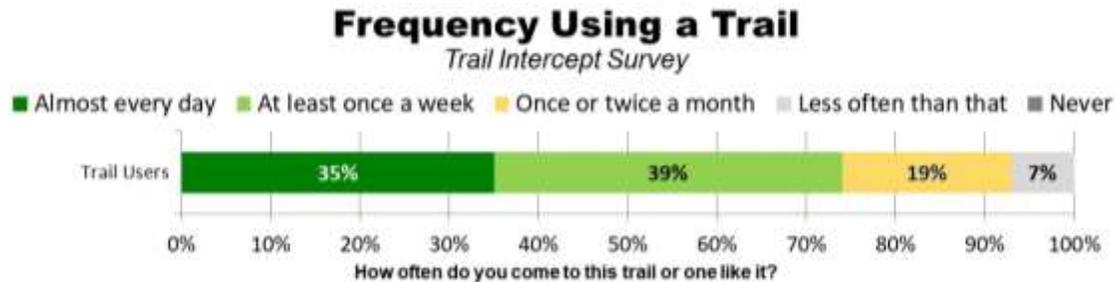
Community Survey



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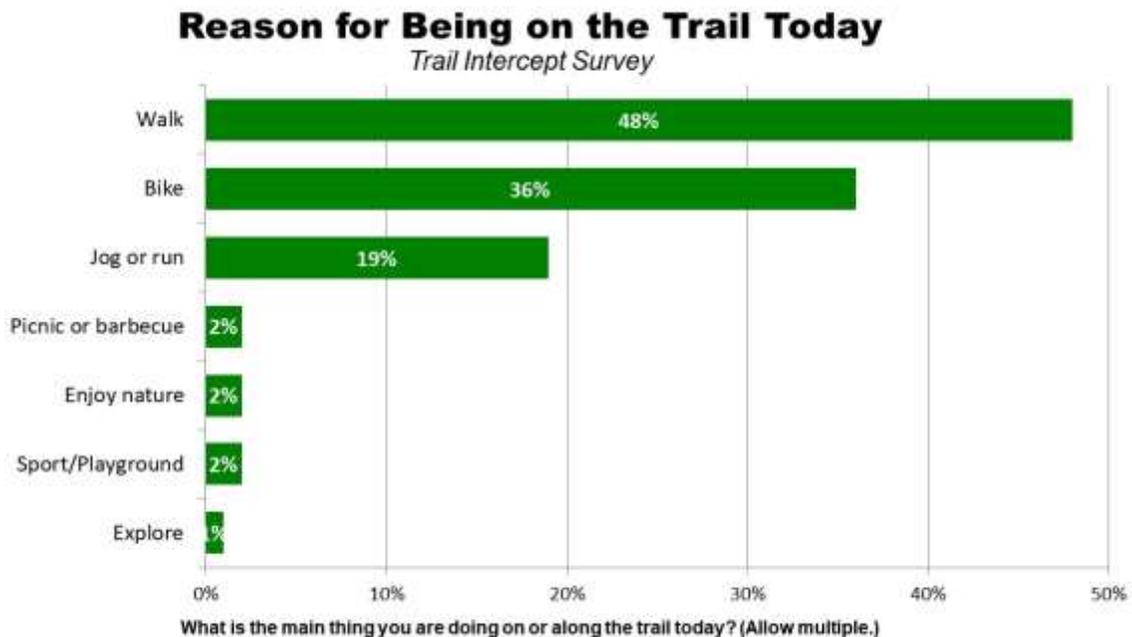
This result, the large number of people in these neighborhoods who are not engaged with their local trail at all, is one of the most significant findings of this study. In part, the disparity we see on at least some of the trails between the makeup of trail users and residents living near the trail is due to the fact that so many nearby residents are not engaged with the trail. Yet we know, from the discussion in every focus group, that people want to spend time outdoors if their most basic concerns about personal safety and COVID safety can be overcome.

By contrast, once on the trail people make it a habit. Among the trail users intercepted through the Trail Survey, about one-third said they are using the trail almost every day, and another 39% said they are using the trail, or one like it, at least once a week.



The majority of people who are actually out on the trails in these neighborhoods are using the trails for low-intensity activities, and not traveling very far on the trail. In response to the intercept survey, trail users were most likely to say they were on the trail to walk, with just about half (48%) saying that was their reason for being on the trail that day. Another 6% had come to the trail as a destination, to picnic or barbecue, fish, enjoy nature, birdwatch, meet a friend, or take their child to the playground.

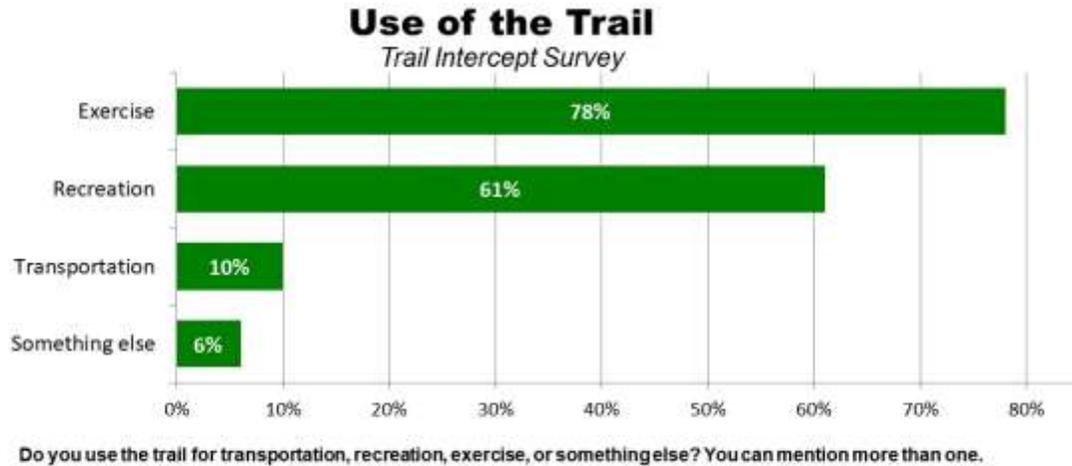
Biking or running were the other major reasons for visiting the trail, with 36% of trail users saying they were there to bike that day, and 19% going for a run.



People intercepted on the trail planned to spend an average of one hour on the trail that day.

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Asked if they were on the trail for “transportation, recreation, exercise, or something else,” 78% said their reason for being there was exercise. Six in ten (61%) said they were on the trail for recreation. Only 10% said their purpose was transportation. Note that people could offer more than one response. Of those who said their purpose was something else, they explained that they were there today for their mental health, relaxation, simply to enjoy the scenery, or to explore.



Impressions of the Circuit Trails

Summary Finding: There is little awareness in these neighborhoods that there is a network of trails called the Circuit Trails. Better awareness may not only increase use, but arouse a desire in some residents to get out there and explore. Others just want to know that the Circuit Trails will give them the experience with fresh air and nature they are looking for, close to where they live. They like the idea of people and parts of their community being connected together, and for the trails to give them access to a natural experience. For them, the word “network” was intuitive and may be a helpful descriptive addition to “circuit,” as in Circuit Trails Network, helping people understand and relate to this community asset.

First impressions of the Circuit Trails

Deep in the focus group, after people had discussed their neighborhood, their relationship with the outdoors, and their awareness and impression of their local trail, they were presented with the concept of the Circuit Trails. Participants were shown a map of the Circuit, zoomed in to their local neighborhoods, identifying the nearby trail. Then the screen zoomed out to show the interlocking trail system, current and planned, spanning the region.

Almost invariably, the first reaction was surprise. People did not know this network existed, and they needed a minute to take it in. Reactions ranged from muted, typically among the Besieged archetype, to enthusiastic and even excited among the Juggling and the Empowered archetypes.

“(It might be a good idea) to get people out farther...instead of just staying in one space. They can see how other people live and stuff too.” – Norristown Participant

“I feel like I’m really shocked. Like, I didn’t know that all of this even existed.” – Trenton Participant

“That’s really interesting. I didn’t know that they all connect to each other, so it’d be cool to go check it out.” – Trenton Participant

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In a Southwest Philadelphia focus group, where two of the participants lived within a block of the Cobbs Creek Trail, all four participants were absolutely bowled over as the on-screen map of the Circuit zoomed out and they saw how their local trail connected to a much broader regional network. Their exclamations rippled out in a cascade as they looked at the map.

(Moderator): "Your trail that you walk...is a part of all of this that you see on the screen."

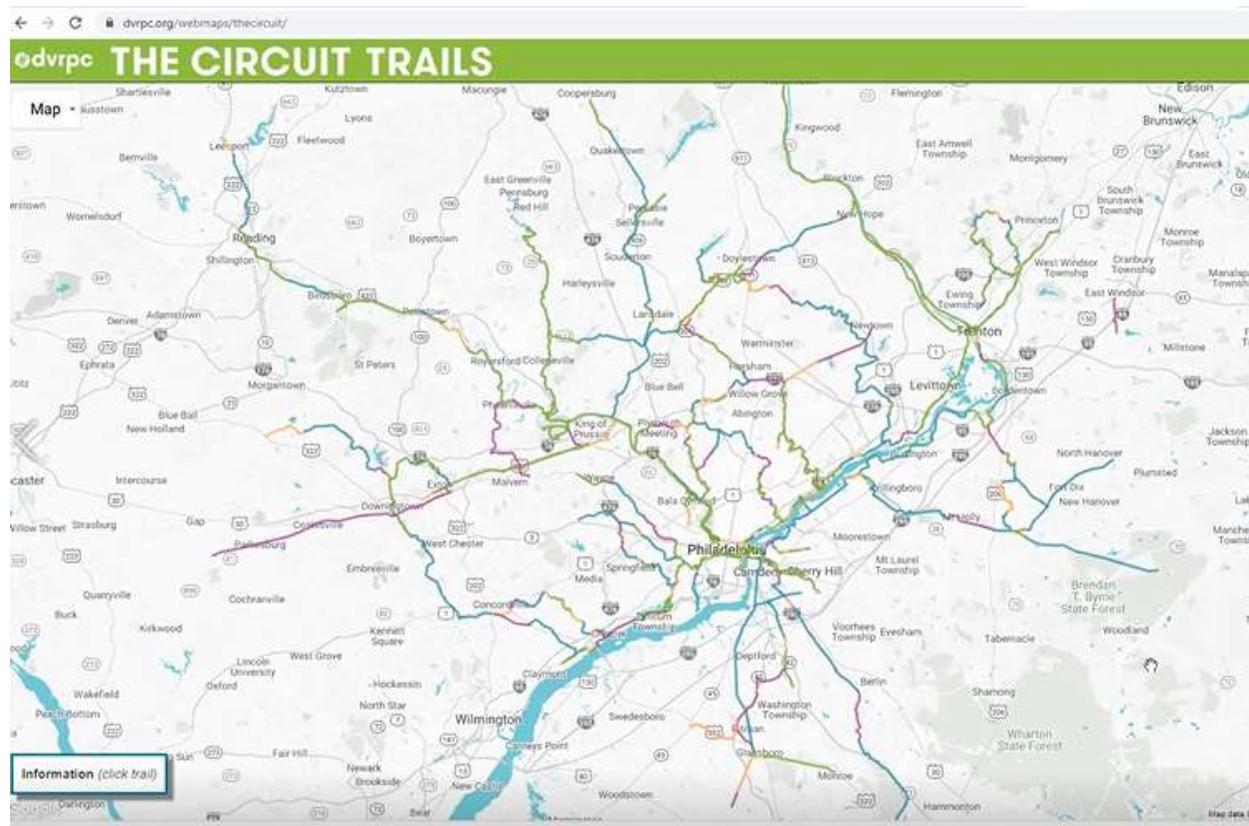
(Participants): "I know, it's wow, it's amazing." "Wow."

(Moderator): "Yeah, that's why I wanted to ask you, what do you think of that?"

(Participants, interrupting each other): "That's crazy." "I mean, yeah, no..." "You could walk..." "I would've never known." "You mean you can walk to New Jersey on this trail?" "There is a trail, the Towpath, you can walk from... I used to pass it in Princeton. You can actually take it from New Brunswick through Princeton, down pretty much into Philly." "Wow." "People bike it sometimes." "Wow. Wow." "That's crazy." "Interesting."

Thank you, that's amazing!"

– Southwest Philadelphia Participants



The Circuit Trails “Network”

In one of the Trenton focus groups, the participants thought about the Circuit as a series of connections that are “bringing people together.” In this group, discussion focused on the role of a connected trail system as connecting a community to its parks, and connecting different parts of the community to each other. These residents found the concept of the Circuit to be unifying and hopeful.

“(If) you talking about bringing people together, then ‘network’ is the word that comes to my mind. When I think of bringing people together from different walks of life, for the purpose of contributing to anything that's optimistic, that's therapeutic, that is a win-win situation for everybody.” – Trenton Participant

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While some participants liked the word “Circuit” and felt it brought to mind the circulatory system, most did not identify with that word. They felt the Circuit Trails should describe themselves using the word “network.” A Southwest Philadelphia participant described the word “network” as “friendly, it’s more people-friendly.” They see the Circuit’s role as connecting people, not places.

Impact of Learning about the Circuit: An Invitation to Explore

For some participants, knowing about the Circuit aroused curiosity. One Norristown participant was absolutely inspired by the concept of the Circuit Trails. It awakened a desire to explore. He wanted to get out and see what was out there. He wanted to get a bike and see how far he could go.

“That is crazy! ...It’s crazy that you can take one trail, one pathway without driving or nothing. You could literally take a bike or something and just drive from...Norristown to Philadelphia. Take that same pathway from Philadelphia to Trenton, New Jersey.” – Norristown Participant

Asked later in the group what he could see himself doing along the trail, he reflected, “Probably biking or walking. Probably sitting in front of the water, even though it might be dirty, but just the thought of it...”

The Circuit: Not a Transportation System

At the same time, some people looked at the map of the Circuit and did not feel that immediate pull to explore. They needed to be drawn in. They focused on the urban sections of the Circuit near them and could not imagine there would be anything interesting there to see or do. Their comments reinforced the idea that the trail, for them, should be a place of respite from their urban environment, giving them a break from the heavily built, blighted, and crowded surroundings they see every day. The trail should offer glimpses of nature, and relaxing activities. It should not be just a walk along a busy city street. Consider this exchange in Camden:

(Participant 1): “It’s city walking. It’s just like walking through the city. I don’t think there’s anything I would like to see as far as nature.”

(Participant 2, several minutes later): “I too would like to see like a lot more appealing scenery. Just not like, the buildings and the trash and addicts. Also, I used to bike, like when I was younger. I haven’t done it in recent years, but that’s something that I would probably like get into. I did canoeing once... (and) that also was fun. So if...there was like an opportunity for that, I would do that also. It’s just...the city walks or whatever, like the trails through the city, I don’t think that would be appealing to me.”

– Camden Participants

People who are not familiar with the trails are not always sure they are places where they would want to spend time. This Trenton participant expressed concern about the section of the trail that passes through the urban core, skeptical that it will provide access to the nature and “the nice fresh air” that he is looking for.

“I have to see what it looks like. I got to see the scenery because, right now, if you leave it up for me to fill in the blanks, it doesn’t look attractive.” – Trenton Participant

A participant in the other Camden group, one of the participants we have described as Besieged, became agitated looking at the map of proposed Circuit Trails through the City of Camden, because he felt the trail connections were just a sham.

“They are (messing) with you. I have been to some of these places. ...This is regular streets! ...(and) the streets are all (messed) up.” – Camden Participant

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He went on to explain his vision of what a trail should be:

“A trail is actually like where you can actually ride, where you have trees around you, you know what I mean? Where it's actually just a bike trail and you ain't got people all on the trail. Where it's smooth enough for you to actually be able to ride your bike. ...Where you can tell you're outside and you're not in the city. It looks comfortable. Soothing. Where you actually feel like you're in the wilderness...Not the city of Camden and you just got some line where you're telling people, cars can't come into that because it's for bikes.”

– Camden Participant

His vision of a trail was widely shared by the participants in these focus groups. A trail, they feel, is not a place just meant to get you from Point A to Point B. Being on a trail is about an experience. It is about removing oneself, if even for a short time, from the pressures and worries of the urban environment. A trail brings fresh air, brings you close to water and natural spaces, and connects you to parks and activities. It should be well-maintained and inviting. All of these concepts need to be conveyed in the marketing and positioning of the Circuit Trails.

As a finishing point, participants made clear that they do not need to travel to a remote area, far from the city, to get this feeling of respite. People described hearing birds or breathing in fresh air or sitting by the water near where they live. In fact, they would prefer that these little immersions in the natural world be accessible to them, close to where they live. The Circuit should find ways to create and invite them to spaces like this, close to where they live. That is what most of the people we interviewed are looking for.

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ENVISIONING A MORE ENGAGING TRAIL SYSTEM

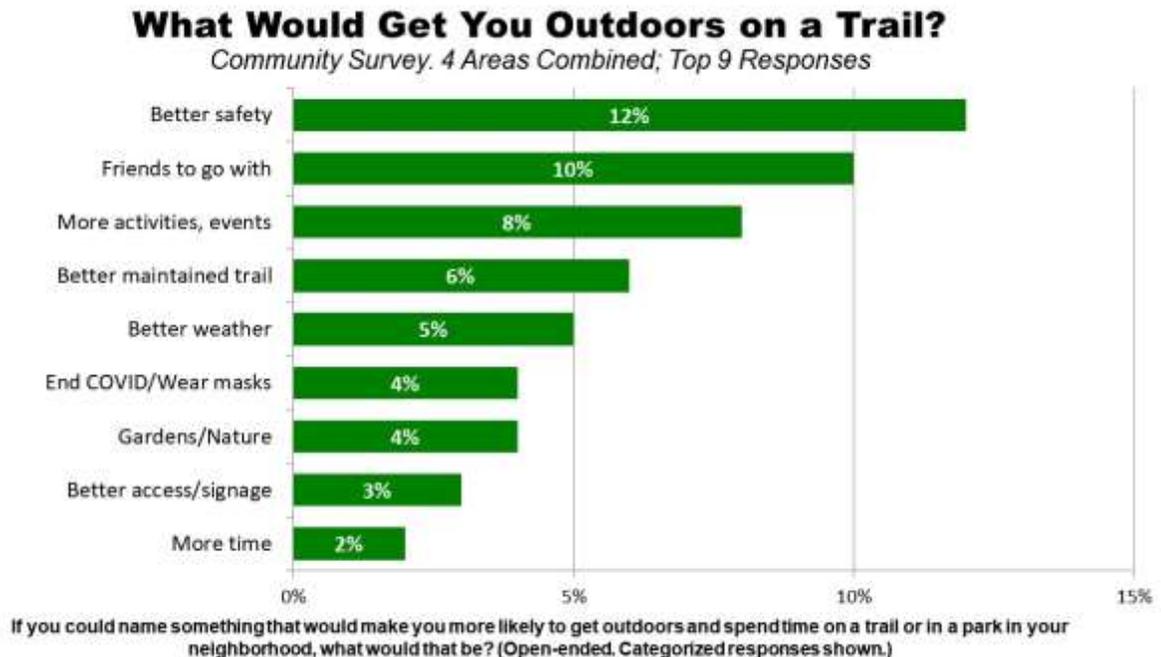
The Basics: One Thing That People Say Would Get Them out on a Trail

The study concluded by asking participants what they could imagine that would make trails more engaging for people like them. On the Community Survey, neighborhood residents were asked a simple summative question: “If you could name something that would make you more likely to get outdoors and spend time on a trail or in a park in your neighborhood, what would that be?” This was an open-ended question.

Naturally, as is clear by now, public safety leads the list with 12%. Tackling COVID also makes an appearance, at 4%. People also made a request for better weather and more time in their day. But other major themes appear, as well:

- Having friends to go with you to the trail.
- Activities and events to invite you into the space.
- Better maintenance.
- Gardens and green oases along the trail.
- Better access and signage.

These are themes that have arose throughout the focus group discussion. More detail is found below.



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Recommendations for a More Inviting and Inclusive Trail

As a focus group exercise, the moderator invited every group to design the trail that would appeal to them. What amenities would it have? What programs would it offer? What would it look like and feel like? We have summarized their thoughts, and our observations based on the context of their discussion, in ten key recommendations. These recommendations fall into the broader categories of Security, Greening, Physical Infrastructure, Programming and Welcome, and Outreach.

SECURITY

1. An Appropriate Security Presence

Security was often mentioned. People want to feel safe on the trail. But with few exceptions, people insisted they did not want to see a police presence on the trail. Young African-American men in the focus groups insisted that a police presence on the trail would make them feel less safe, and much less welcome. This Norristown participant put it bluntly:

“(Having police on the trail) would make me feel less safe. I actually just, I don't like police officers. ...I never actually liked police officers. They always ... Every time I had an encounter with a police officer, it was racist. You could tell it was racist. It was the cop blatantly didn't like Black people.” – Norristown Participant

That feeling, that police should not be on the trail, was shared among nearly all the people we interviewed. On the other hand, most people would welcome “ambassadors” or “park rangers,” who they felt would probably enforce all of the same rules, but would use a different approach:

(Moderator): “What about park employees, park rangers, instead of police?”

(Participants): “Yeah.” “Yes.” [crosstalk; vigorous agreement] “...rangers. That would seem a little bit more friendly.” “Yes.”

– Southwest Philadelphia Participants

People also suggested that callboxes could be an option, rather than a human presence on the trail.

GREENING

2. A Green Oasis

Focus group participants could not have been clearer that they want the Circuit Trails to provide them with a respite from the urban environment. Practically speaking, though, they are not talking about driving or taking public transit to a trail access point miles outside of the city. What they are asking for is a creatively designed trail that offers glimpses of water, urban greening, the sound of birds, splashes of color.

These residents, whether they are in motion on foot or on a bike, or whether they are just meeting a friend or taking the dog for a short walk, are looking for a few moments of peace and refreshment in the midst of a busy and often stressful day. Access to nature, the sound or look of water, the beauty of a garden, these are the things that will give them the emotional release they are seeking. That does not mean the trails need to be green and tranquil along their whole length. But residents hope for accessible places where they can dip out of their normal world and dip in to a peaceful, green environment, even if only for a short time.

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PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

3. Places to Gather and Relax

Numerous people asked for amenities that would allow them to gather with family and friends, entertain their children, or just sit and read a book or enjoy nature. They asked for:

- Places to picnic and barbecue
- Playgrounds
- Benches and other places to sit

4. Trail Maintenance and Amenities

Naturally, people hoped for better maintenance of the trail surface, lighting in certain areas, and easier or safer access points including adequate parking. In addition, they hoped for amenities along the trail, such as:

- Bikeshare
- Restrooms
- Sports courts and fields
- Boat rentals

5. Signage

In both Norristown and Trenton, participants asked for signs to point the direction to the trail. This seems to be a particularly acute need in Trenton, where we heard about this in the stakeholder meeting, and where awareness was low in the focus groups that the trail extended along the canal all the way through the city. Though not requested in Camden, it was clear that many people there do not know where the trails are and could benefit from signage.

In Norristown, awareness of the Schuylkill River Trail was high. There, a focus group participant suggested that signage could tie into the Circuit Trails Network, not just pointing the way to the local trail, but also indicating further destinations that could be accessed through the regional trail network, to enhance that thirst for exploration.

PROGRAMMING AND WELCOME

6. An Invitation to Have Fun

The best way to overcome a subtle lack of welcome into public spaces, focus group participants said, is to offer compelling and irresistible activities and events and actually invite people into those public spaces, wholeheartedly. Make the space vibrant, and gear it towards the tastes of the audience, and people will come, they said. Make them feel like this is their space. These were some of their ideas:

- Live music
- Festivals
- Crafts and other creative, family-oriented activities
- Pop-up shops

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- Local artisans and vendors
- Historical and cultural commemoration along the trail, especially focused on people of color

"...get to know the history of New Jersey... There's so much in New Jersey and everyone thinks it's just what you pass through on the way from New York to Philadelphia." – Trenton Participant

- Food trucks

"...food vendors. I was just thinking of all the things that people kind of missed out on during the pandemic where everyone loves to go out to eat. You can have people come out. Some of the restaurants that have lost money can recoup some of that." – Southwest Philadelphia Participant

7. Overt Welcome

Stakeholders, who raised the concern that people of color may not feel welcome in parks and other public spaces, even in their own neighborhoods, suggested that imagery can be meaningful. They suggested that public art at trail access points could feature people of color, and the posting of the message "Black Lives Matter" in key locations would also convey a sense of respect and welcome.

8. Organized Group Activities

People want to be in groups. In part, given safety concerns, some people will feel more comfortable in the company of others. Study participants also said they are looking for companionship, and would welcome opportunities to join up with other people along the trail to pursue similar interests. They suggested:

- Guided nature hikes
- Birdwatching walks
- Yoga along the trail
- Exercise groups
- Group activities for children

"(With guided activities along the trail) you would also help the kids' parents, because if they will need a minute, you know? If they need a second to their selves, if their children are somewhere where they feel like they can trust the people that are taking them on these walks and teaching them how to do these different things, it would also be a little, it would alleviate some of the pressure from the younger parents."

– Southwest Philadelphia Participant

OUTREACH

9. Show People Enjoying the Trail

People want to see images of people who look like them, enjoying the trail. They want to imagine themselves on the trail, and know that they belong there. The Circuit's website, and any outreach, should feature people – real people from these neighborhoods.

Here is how a Southwest Philadelphia resident put it, a 16-year-old focus group participant who worries a lot about the tough streets in the neighborhood around her, but just wants to be outside having fun.

"Seeing friendly faces, not everyone looking so mean. Maybe like a lot of people, well, not a lot due to COVID now, I wouldn't want like a whole lot of people, but just a couple of people, people laughing, having fun. That would be a good experience." – Southwest Philadelphia Participant

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10. Leverage Local Social Media and Traditional Door-to-Door

A Trenton participant laughingly said she followed several of her Uber drivers on Instagram because they are fun people who know a lot about the area. But seriously, she pointed out, not only are they fun, but they have great ideas of things to do in the area.

"Like truthfully it's that one Uber driver, he goes everywhere. His name's Johnny Hollywood. He's funny. I'm like, 'Oh, you were here. Oh, that's so interesting.'" – Trenton Participant

A number of participants mentioned local social media influencers or bloggers who focus on music, public safety, food, or a variety of other topics. Getting those influencers out to the trail and curating images to their local followers would help create a new impression of the trails, they said.

Many people in these focus groups asked for more traditional and interpersonal means of communication propagated in the neighborhood – flyers handed out door-to-door, conversations, traditional mail.

"For me it's usually word of mouth a lot. I would like to see more flyers handed out or door-to-door action, which I feel like we don't get at all. Even with town meetings and stuff, you don't get that. It's just, if you're in the know, you're in the know, if not, then you lost out." – Camden Participant

A Longer-Term Approach: A Community-Supported Trail and Sense of Pride in Place

There is an eleventh, more ambitious recommendation to consider. This research indicates that there is the potential to engage neighborhood residents to care for their own section of trail, to help maintain and design it to their liking. Focus group participants insisted they would be willing to be engaged in this way, increasing their sense of ownership and use of the trail. Residents want to have pride in their neighborhoods. They want to feel a sense of ownership, and feel that they are part of making the neighborhood better.

Norristown participants, talking about how much safer and better maintained they feel the trail is in higher-income communities nearby, arrived at the idea that neighbors needed to take matters into their own hands and take ownership of public spaces in Norristown to make them better.

"Basically, I feel as though, if the community comes together and take over the situation, as far as like keeping the park clean, looking after each other...They used to say, it takes a village to raise a child. It takes a village to run everything. So if you come together as a village that cares about your neighborhood and then wants to see better, it will become better."

"...Yes. You can help cleaning up..."

"...Or even build it up. Plant trees, flowers, just making it nice looking."

(Moderator): "Describe what would it be like if the community came together around this spot of the Norristown trail... What does it feel like to you? What can you imagine?"

"Something that you can be proud of living Norristown and everything."

"Yeah, I think it would be beautiful."

"Absolutely somewhere to call home. This is where I live. This is where I'm from and it's beautiful."

"It's pride. You take pride in your work. If you're doing good work, then why wouldn't you want to show it off?"

"And people want to come into it."

"Hey, come see where I live, come see where I go to cookout. You know what I'm saying? Look how beautiful it is and it makes you feel good inside."

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– Norristown Participants

Trenton participants eagerly jumped in, as well, and earnestly said they would like to help to restore public spaces close to them and make them more inviting and welcoming for people.

“I would help organize (a clean-up).”

“Yeah, I would be interested in helping that, seeing it come to life. ...I've helped plan events before. So if we were to plan a family event, I could help, assist, in planning that.”

“I'd be on the landscaping part.”

– Trenton Participants

This approach would require the involvement of community stakeholders, and the patient presence of community organizing. But residents indicated in this study that they could imagine the trail as a significant point of pride for their neighborhood, and they said they would like to do their part.

CONCLUSION

A full set of appendices accompanies this summary: survey questionnaires, segmented survey results, recruitment screener and moderator's guide, recordings and transcripts.

It has been our privilege to conduct this research for the Circuit Trails and the William Penn Foundation. We stand by ready to provide further interpretation as needed as you seek to apply these findings.

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