As the city’s oldest, largest, and most heavily used park, Chicago's Lincoln Park provides lakefront access and diverse recreation, leisure, and cultural opportunities to over 20 million users annually. Urban ethnic minority groups are an important and growing clientele of Lincoln Park but little information is available to guide planning and management activities for them. Because use of the park is so heavy and diverse, standard (i.e. random) approaches to sampling users limit the kind and detail of information that can be collected on groups of special interest to planners and managers.

The purpose of this research was to provide in-depth information on ethnic minority preferences, perceptions, and needs for Lincoln Park's ongoing master planning efforts, and more generally to advance our understanding of how we can better provide park recreation and leisure opportunities for all urbanites.

A summer 1990 in-park survey of 400 Lincoln Park users yielded a reasonably good-sized sample of Black park users, but data on Hispanic and Asian park use was sparse. To remedy this, we conducted a follow-up survey the next summer, focusing solely on Black, Hispanic, and Asian park users. Using a quota sampling strategy, we increased the earlier sample by 500 (distributed equally among the three groups), so that we could compare groups along key use and preference variables. Black, Hispanic, and Asian interviewers questioned park users of their own race, which facilitated communication and opportunities to ask respondent-specific questions related to ethnicity and use, including sensitive topics such as discrimination.

Analysis of the combined sample data showed significant differences in use patterns and preferences by race. As a group, non-Hispanic White users tended to live closer to the park, walked or bicycled to it, came more often, and came alone or in couples. Minority groups came from further away, traveled more by car and mass transit, were more likely to visit the park only a few times per year, and visited in families.

There was a core of preferred activities common to all groups, but each group showed variations from the others in certain activities. For example, Blacks were more likely to engage in baseball and basketball, Asians in fishing and general sightseeing, Hispanics in soccer and picnicking, and Whites in jogging and bicycling. Commonalities and differences between groups were found with respect to other important variables, including things liked and disliked about the park, and perceptions of safety.

New questions added to the follow-up survey provided specific information about the
patterns of use and park perceptions of ethnic minorities. Over 40 percent of the sample knew of areas in Lincoln Park that were special gathering spots for members of their ethnic group. Ten percent mentioned there had been times or situations in which they felt discriminated against in the park because of their race or ethnic background. And over 30 percent said there were things managers could do to make the park a better place for members of their ethnic group.

Finally, our follow-up sample of park users showed considerable variation within racial categories, further emphasizing the need to look more deeply at ethnic versus racial affiliation, generational influences, and other factors that may affect how we understand and provide park services. Respondents in the sample represented 26 different ethnic groups, including many Hispanic and Asian groups who were newcomers to the U.S. and to Chicago. The survey sample allowed some inter-ethnic distinctions to be examined, although a companion study using focus groups with different ethnic groups provided additional information along these lines.

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