



SPOTLIGHT ON RECREATION: A REPORT CARD ON PARKS PROJECT

SUMMER
2008

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WHAT IS THE REPORT CARD ON PARKS?

New Yorkers for Parks' award-winning *Report Card on Parks* was designed in 2002 to measure the maintenance and conditions of more than 100 neighborhood parks (1-20 acres) in all five boroughs. Since 2005, the *Report Card on Parks* project has been expanded to examine specific park features such as athletic fields and adapted to measure the performance of other park properties such as beaches. Every summer New Yorkers for Parks collects quantitative performance data on park properties across the city.

This new report, *Spotlight on Recreation*, uses the same survey instrument first developed in 2002 to conduct park inspections for *The Report Card on Parks*. In this report, we examine the conditions of three outdoor recreation features – athletic fields, courts, and playgrounds – in a random selection of neighborhood parks. Each feature was inspected on three separate site visits, once each in June, July, and August. This structure allows us to measure the performance of these specific features over the course of the summer. Unlike the more prestigious parks in the City, these neighborhood parks typically depend on fluctuating public funding, which frequently results in insufficient maintenance.



Union Square Park, Manhattan

Why a Spotlight on Recreation?

PlaNYC, the Mayor's sustainability plan, outlines how New York City's infrastructure should grow in order to accommodate an expected one million new residents by 2030. Increasing access to recreation and open space is a focal point of the document; however, demand is already growing. As young families increasingly stay and settle in New York City, safe and clean playgrounds, courts, and fields are in high demand. League play is increasing, and according to the Parks Department, ballfield permit requests have more than doubled since 1999.¹ In addition, public health professionals point to the need for play opportunities to help address the growing trends of childhood obesity and diabetes. This report tracks the maintenance conditions of these three important outdoor features over a summer to shed light on performance trends during the high use season.

For this study, New Yorkers for Parks randomly selected 1/3 of the parks containing athletic fields, courts and playgrounds that were surveyed in our most recent *Report Card on Parks*. This list is based on the Parks Department's roster of neighborhood parks and resulted in a survey universe of 49 parks, each between 1 and 20 acres. The parks – which included 36 athletic fields, 140 courts, and 53 playgrounds – were each inspected three times over the summer of 2007, once in June, July, and August. We made every effort to survey the parks on the same day of the week each month at approximately the same time of day.

The results of the study show that the performance of the three features remained surprisingly steady over the course of the summer with only very slight changes, but conditions were generally subpar. Athletic fields performed particularly poorly, averaging 51% (F). Courts averaged 71% (C-), improving slightly from 69% to 71% by the end of the summer. Playgrounds were the best performing of the three features, receiving an average score of 79% (C+). No playgrounds received an "autofail," or automatic score of 0, for egregious conditions such as excessive broken glass or dangerous equipment. This notable success indicates that children can play safely.

As the City once again enters tough fiscal times, it is increasingly important that we secure sufficient funding and implement successful management strategies so that our parks do not slide back into the unacceptable conditions of the 1970s and 1980s. This report offers recommendations on how to improve the outdoor recreation features essential to the enjoyment of our neighborhood parks.

¹ Williams, Timothy. "Fine Diamonds, Locked Away." *The New York Times*. 26 Oct 2005.

ATHLETIC FIELDS

New Yorkers for Parks surveyed 36 athletic fields in 19 randomly selected parks. The sample included soccer and baseball fields that were natural grass only – no asphalt or synthetic turf fields were surveyed.²

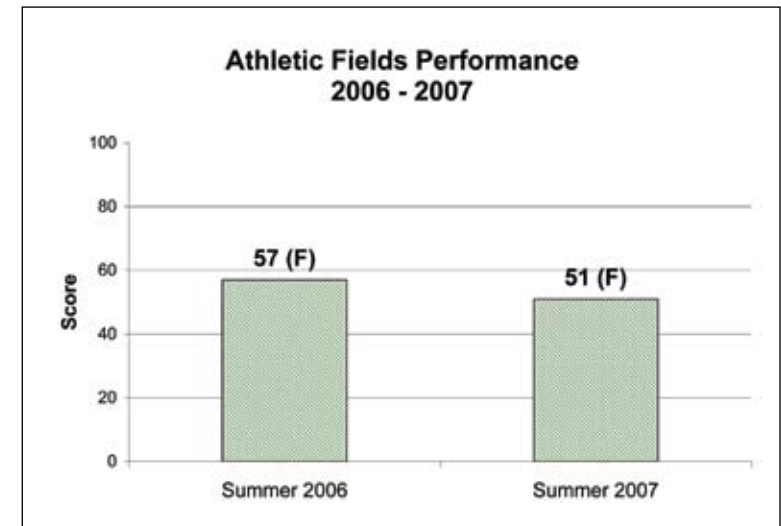
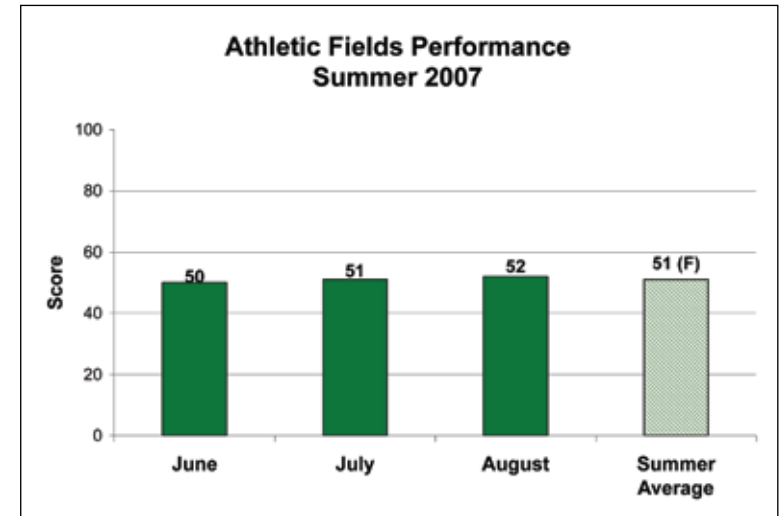
Overall Results: Athletic fields were the poorest performing feature in the survey. They improved slightly over the summer, receiving 50% in June, 51% in July, and 52% in August, resulting in an average of 51% (F) over the summer. These same fields scored a 57% (F) when they were last surveyed in the summer of 2006 for *The 2007 Report Card on Parks*.

Locked Fields: One reason that athletic fields scored poorly this summer was that they were frequently locked to the public without explanation. Locked fields that are unavailable for public use can receive an automatic score of 0; however, if “Play by Permit Only” signs are posted to explain why the field is locked, the park is not penalized. Five out of the 19 parks surveyed (26%) contained an athletic field that



Bayside Fields, Queens: The athletic field at the park was locked and unavailable to the public during June but open in July and August. This field was bare and littered with plastic bottles.

² For this report, we elected to survey only natural grass athletic fields in order to focus on the particular issues faced in maintaining a specific type of field surface. *The Report Card on Parks* includes a broader analysis of the maintenance of asphalt and synthetic turf athletic fields, and our policy report, “A New Turf War: Synthetic Turf in NYC Parks”, includes an in-depth analysis of issues relating to synthetic turf.



ATHLETIC FIELDS

was locked with no explanation at least once over the three survey months. These survey results highlight an important policy issue. By placing signs at locked fields that are reserved for permitted play only, the Parks Department can ensure that the community is aware of the policy for their neighborhood field as well as increase the score for this feature.

Some of the fields evaluated were locked due to arrangements that the Parks Department has made with local baseball leagues, whereby the league is responsible for field improvements and/or maintenance, and in return, holds the key to the field. Such groups are required to provide access to other users, but there is concern that this policy may deny local children who are not members of leagues the ability to play a pick-up game at their neighborhood park. If contact information for the key-holder is not posted, groups who are not part of an organized league are less likely to be able to obtain access.

Litter and Broken Glass: These were significant challenges found for athletic fields. On average, 34% of fields were rated “unacceptable” for litter throughout the summer. Excessive broken glass was found at 15% of sites on average, with conditions worsening as the summer progressed.

Inaccessible fields had a large impact on the average scores for this feature. If all of the surveyed athletic fields had been unlocked, the average score for the summer would have risen 12 percentage points, from 51% (F) to 63% (D). Broken glass also had a large impact. With no locked fields and no broken glass, the average summer score for athletic fields would have risen to 74% (C).

Successes: Generally, the infields and outfields were evenly graded, with few divots or puddles, and conditions improved as the summer progressed. In addition, the condition of fencing at the fields improved over the summer, and graffiti was generally addressed in a timely manner.

Parks Containing Fields that were Locked with No Explanation

Name	Borough	# fields	# locked in June	# locked in July	# locked in August
Co-Op City Ballfields	Bronx	2	2	2	2
Jackie Robinson Park	Manhattan	2	2	2	2
Bayside Fields	Queens	1	1	0	0
Msgr. Crawford Field	Brooklyn	2	2	1	0
Castle Hill Little League	Bronx	3	0	3	0

Co-Op City Ballfields and Castle Hill Little League Park are two examples of fields where a local league has a licensed maintenance agreement with the Parks Department and holds a key for the field. These fields were locked but not posted with signage to make the public aware of this policy.



Co-op City Ballfields, Bronx: This beautiful, well-maintained field was locked and unavailable for public use during each of the three inspection periods.

ATHLETIC FIELDS

Recommendations for Athletic Fields:

1. Keep as many athletic fields as possible unlocked, and publicize the reasons for locking particular fields.
2. Develop a maintenance strategy to address excessive broken glass on athletic fields, and examine the feasibility of prohibiting glass bottles and containers on the fields, as is done for beaches.



Linnaeus Playground, Queens: This field, newly graded in July, was infested with weeds and divots during the previous month's inspection.



Alex Lindower Park, Brooklyn: Litter was a significant challenge during the June and July inspections of the fields at this park.

COURTS

New Yorkers for Parks surveyed 140 courts in 20 randomly selected parks. The sample included handball, basketball, tennis, and volleyball courts. No bocce courts were included in the sample.

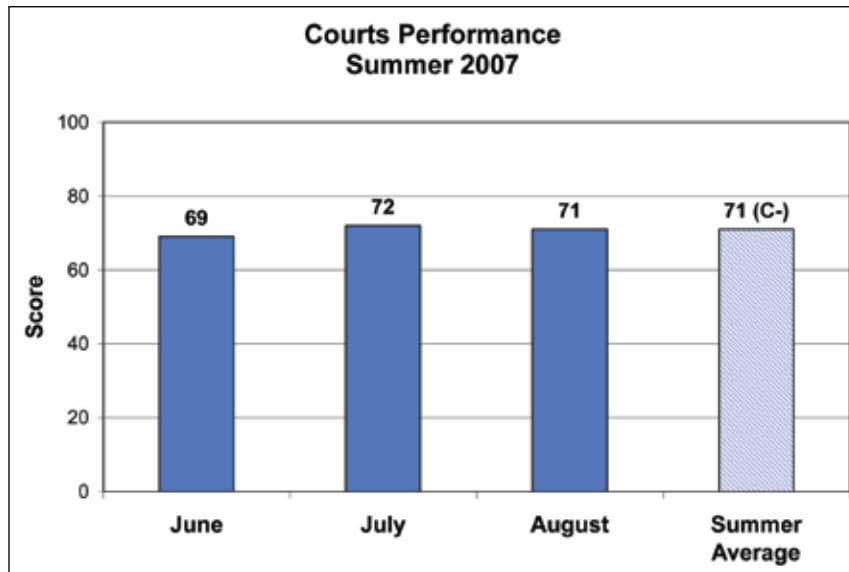
Overall Results: Courts exhibited mediocre conditions and improved only slightly, receiving 69% (D) in June, 72% (C-) in July, and 71% (C-) in August. For the summer of 2007, courts averaged 71% (C-). This score is only slightly down from a 72% (C-) average that the same courts received when they were last surveyed in 2006 for *The 2007 Report Card on Parks*.

Poor Court Surfaces: Cracks and holes in court surfaces are a safety hazard and can lead to injuries. These conditions were found on an average of 34% of courts over the summer. Sloppy maintenance conditions, such as unfinished or shoddy paint jobs and repair work with mismatched materials, were other common findings, affecting 61% of courts.

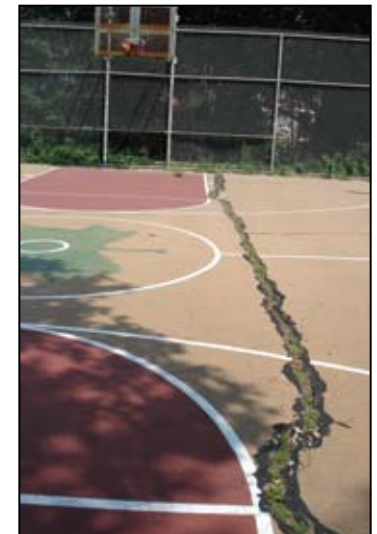
Missing nets were identified at 47% of all surveyed courts.



Flushing Fields, Queens: This tennis court is missing a net and is in desperate need of maintenance, with cracks and worn out areas in need of attention.

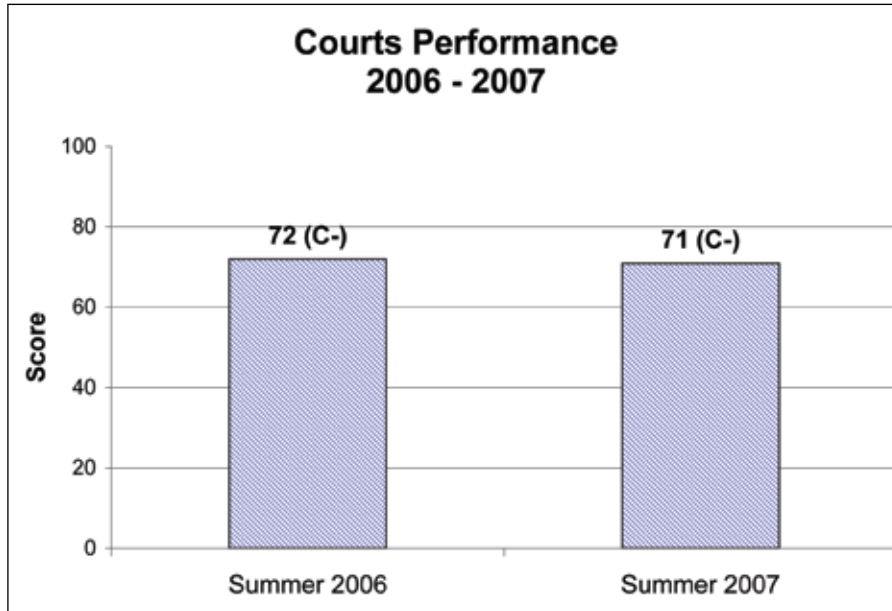


Dr. Charles Drew Park, Queens: Litter and debris were an eyesore and impacted safe use of these basketball courts.



Henry Hudson Park, Bronx: Cracks and holes affected 34% of surveyed courts.

COURTS



Successes: While 18% of sites rated “unacceptable” for graffiti in June, the department was able to reduce this to only 6% in August. In addition, very few courts exhibited dangerous conditions like broken glass; instead, most suffered from general maintenance needs, such as aging and deteriorating surfaces.

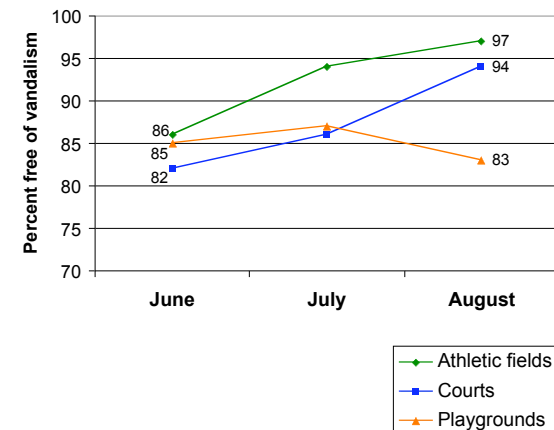
Recommendation for Courts:

1. Implement a maintenance strategy for timely repairs to court surfaces and replacement of torn and missing nets, particularly on tennis courts, similar to that which is used for quickly addressing graffiti and playground maintenance.

Success Story: Addressing Graffiti

Throughout the summer, the Parks Department was able to address graffiti and other vandalism in a timely manner, particularly on courts and athletic fields. Playgrounds presented a greater challenge, but clearly, Parks’ strategy for graffiti removal has been successful and should be replicated where possible.

Results show success: “Is the feature free of vandalism such as graffiti?”

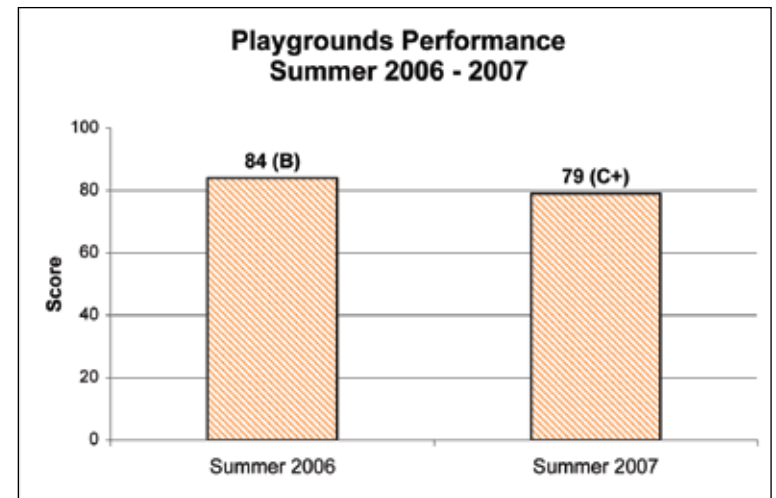
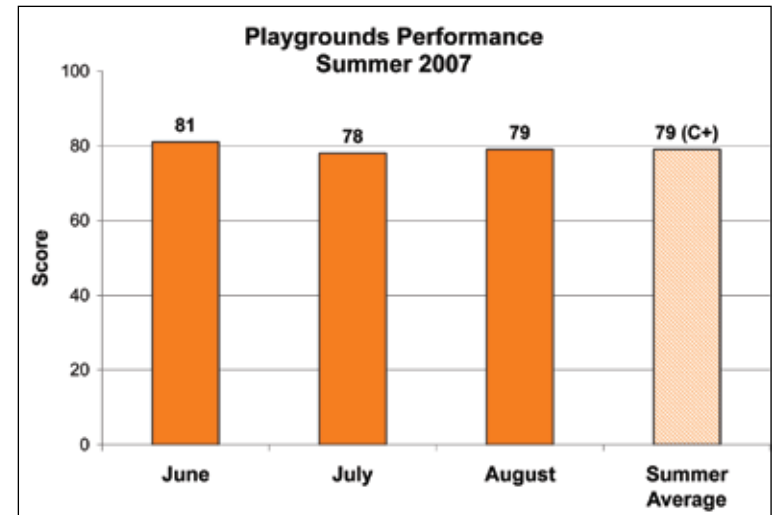


PLAYGROUNDS

New Yorkers for Parks surveyed 53 playgrounds in 20 randomly selected parks. The sample included all types of children’s playgrounds as well as adult exercise stations present in two parks.

Overall Results: Playgrounds were the best performing feature of the three surveyed; however, the average score of 79% (C+) reflects the need for improved care. In June, playgrounds received their high score for the summer, 81% (B-). July’s score dropped slightly to 78% (C+), and in August, playgrounds received a 79% (C+). When these playgrounds were last surveyed, during the summer of 2006, they received a higher average score of 84% (B).

Litter and Repair Work: On average over the summer, 25% of playgrounds were rated “unacceptable” for litter. Sloppy, unfinished or needed maintenance repairs were present at 81% of playgrounds, greatly impacting their overall performance. Similarly, in the 2007 *Report Card on Parks*, New Yorkers for Parks documented a decline in the performance of playgrounds.



Haffen Park, Bronx: This park generally performed well, earning an 84% (B) average over the summer.

PLAYGROUNDS

Significantly, the quality of safety surfacing on playgrounds declined as the summer progressed. An impressive 94% were rated acceptable in June, but that number slid to 85% by August. Conditions such as gaps, cracks, and holes must be addressed swiftly to safeguard children as they play.

The Parks Department's own Park Inspection Program (PIP) also reports a decline in the conditions of play equipment each year between 2004 and 2007.³ However, 2006 and 2007 mark the first years in this period when the agency did not meet its goal for play equipment ratings. To address this, the agency quickly assigned 50 additional maintenance workers to exclusively monitor and address playground issues. This admirable strategy was implemented in September 2007, after our surveys took place, and it is important that these efforts are not negated by the City's hiring freeze and vacancy reduction program. Unfortunately, the FY 2009 budget cut the Playground Associates program by \$1 million, which will greatly affect the number of playgrounds in the city that can benefit from summer programming and maintenance staff.

Successes: The Parks Department was very successful at addressing broken glass on playgrounds, and in fact, playgrounds earned a 99% acceptable rating on this measure. This tremendous achievement indicates safe play for New York City's children.

Recommendation for Playgrounds

1. Ensure that dedicated playground staff continues to be available to address and report maintenance needs, especially during challenging fiscal periods.



Brower Park, Brooklyn: One-quarter of surveyed playgrounds exhibited excessive litter, like this playground in June. Poor conditions at the park improved in July and August.



Russell Pederson Park, Brooklyn: Sloppy maintenance conditions were frequently found on playgrounds, affecting 81% of surveyed sites.

³ NYC Mayor's Office of Operations. *Mayor's Management Reports, FY 2004 – 2007.*

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2008 *Spotlight on Recreation* identifies several needs that, if met, will help to make the Mayor's PlaNYC 2030's goal of improving access to parks and recreation opportunities a success. Outdoor recreation features are vital to a community, particularly as public health issues like diabetes and obesity become more critical and families increasingly raise children in the city. It is imperative that these features be consistently maintained at an acceptable level.

To ensure that all New Yorkers have access to clean and safe athletic fields, courts, and playgrounds, New Yorkers for Parks offers the following recommendations:

1. Keep as many athletic fields as possible unlocked, and publicize the reasons for locking particular fields.
2. Develop a maintenance strategy to address excessive broken glass on athletic fields, and examine the feasibility of prohibiting glass bottles and containers on the fields, as is done for beaches.
3. Implement a maintenance strategy for timely repairs to court surfaces and replacement of torn and missing nets, particularly on tennis courts, similar to that which is used for quickly addressing graffiti and playground maintenance.
4. Ensure that dedicated playground staff continues to be available to address and report maintenance needs, especially during challenging fiscal periods.



FIND YOUR PARK:

ATHLETIC FIELDS



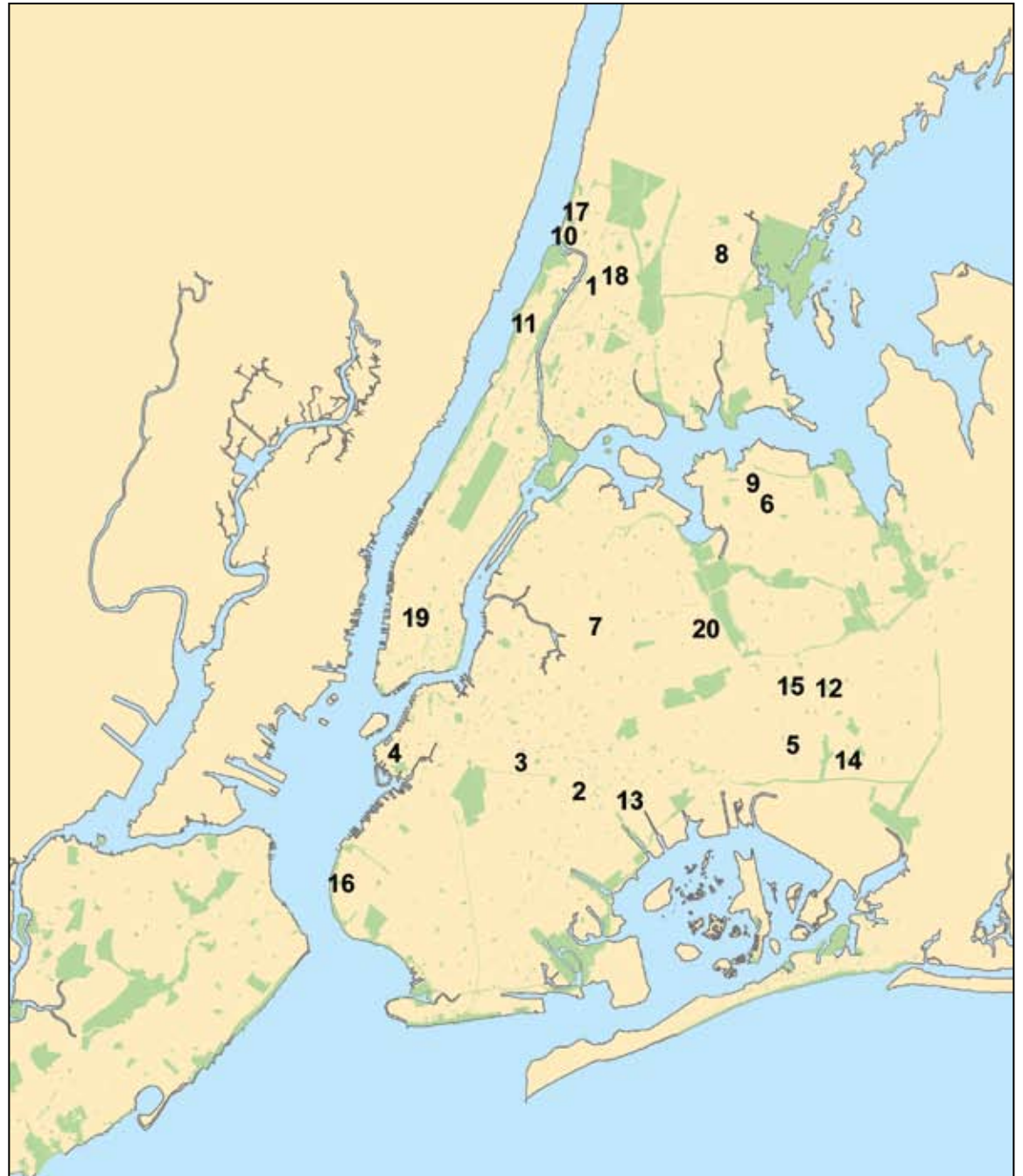
FIND YOUR PARK: ATHLETIC FIELDS

Map ID	Park	Borough	Summer Average (%)	June Score (%)	July Score (%)	August Score (%)	Neighborhood	CB	CD
1	ALEX LINDOWER PARK	Brooklyn	50	32	31	87	Mill Basin	218	46
2	ASTORIA ATHLETIC FIELD (HELLGATE)	Queens	67	62	69	71	Astoria	401	22
3	BAYSIDE FIELDS	Queens	45	0	65	70	Auburndale	411	19
4	BREUKELEN PARK	Brooklyn	83	71	83	94	Broad Channel	218	42
5	BROAD CHANNEL PARK	Queens	79	81	66	90	Broad Channel	414	32
6	CASTLE HILL LITTLE LEAGUE	Bronx	54	87	0	76	Castle Hill	109	13
7	CO-OP CITY BALLFIELDS	Bronx	0	0	0	0	Co-op City	110	12
8	CPL LAWRENCE C THOMPSON MEM PARK	Staten Island	67	74	94	33	Livingston	501	49
9	FLOYD PATTERSON PARK	Brooklyn	91	95	95	83	Brownsville	206	42
10	GRAVESEND PARK	Brooklyn	23	33	21	15	Borough Park	212	44
11	JACKIE ROBINSON PARK	Manhattan	0	0	0	0	Hamilton Heights	310	7
12	LEIF ERICSON PARK & SQUARE	Brooklyn	49	70	77	0	Bay Ridge	210	43
13	LINNAEUS PLAYGROUND	Queens	32	32	65	0	Oakland Garden	411	23
14	LORING PARK	Queens	86	81	86	90	Lindenwood	410	32
15	MSGR CRAWFORD FIELD	Brooklyn	33	0	50	50	Mill Basin	218	46
16	RAINEY PARK	Bronx	71	90	43	81	Longwood	102	17
17	SCHMUL PARK	Staten Island	66	79	40	79	Travis	502	50
18	SETON PARK	Bronx	72	57	82	77	South Riverdale	108	11
19	SOUTHERN PARKWAY BALLFIELDS	Queens	0	0	0	0	South Ozone	410	31

CB = Community Board
 CD = City Council District

FIND YOUR PARK:

COURTS



FIND YOUR PARK: COURTS

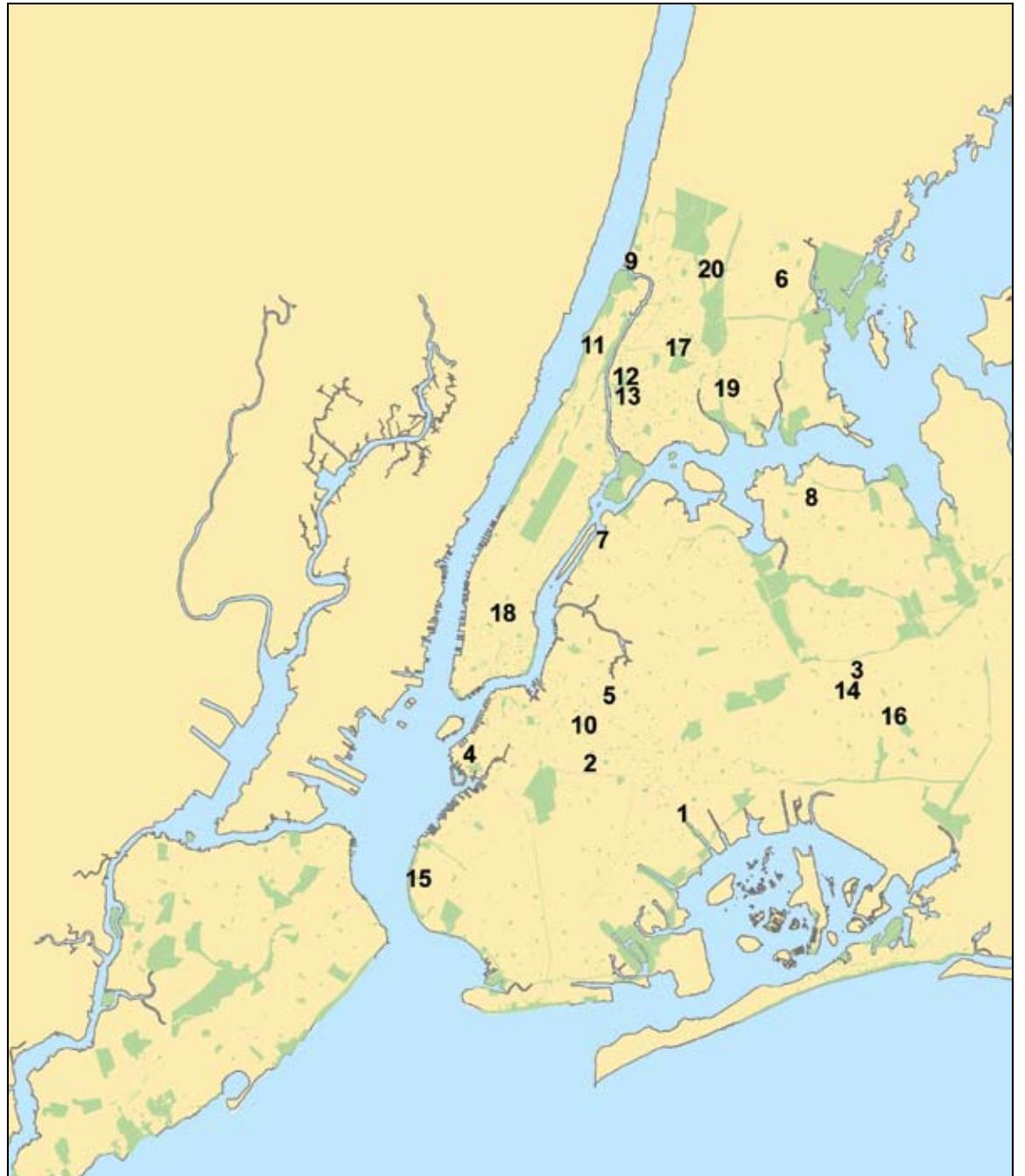
Map ID	Park	Borough	Summer Average (%)	June Score (%)	July Score (%)	August Score (%)	Neighborhood	CB	CD
1	AQUEDUCT WALK	Bronx	33	26	31	43	University Heights	105	14
2	BETSY HEAD MEMORIAL PLGD	Brooklyn	77	75	78	78	Brownsville	216	42
3	BROWER PARK	Brooklyn	91	81	96	96	Crown Heights	208	36
4	COFFEY PARK	Brooklyn	65	81	83	31	Red Hook	206	38
5	DR CHARLES R DREW MEMORIAL PK	Queens	75	76	64	84	South Jamaica	412	28
6	FLUSHING FIELDS	Queens	54	43	62	58	Linden Hill/ Whitestone	407	20
7	FRANK PRINCIPE PARK (form. MAURICE)	Queens	89	89	86	92	West Maspeth	405	26
8	HAFFEN PARK	Bronx	84	92	76	83	Baychester	112	12
9	HARVEY PARK	Queens	69	70	56	81	Whitestone	407	19
10	HENRY HUDSON PARK	Bronx	69	69	73	67	Spuyten Duyvil	108	11
11	J HOOD WRIGHT PARK	Manhattan	73	87	64	66	Washington Heights/ Ft. George	312	10
12	LIBERTY PARK (form. DET. KEITH L. WILLIAMS PARK)	Queens	89	93	88	86	Hollis/ Jamaica	412	27
13	LINDEN PLAYGROUND	Brooklyn	85	80	86	89	New Lots	205	42
14	ROCHDALE PARK	Queens	18	33	21	0	Springfield Gardens	412	28
15	RUFUS KING PARK	Queens	60	44	77	58	Jamaica	412	28
16	RUSSELL PEDERSON PLAYGROUND	Brooklyn	53	13	76	72	Bay Ridge	210	43
17	SETON PARK	Bronx	93	92	93	92	South Riverdale	108	11
18	ST JAMES PARK	Bronx	67	70	67	64	Fordham	107	14
19	WASHINGTON SQUARE PARK	Manhattan	84	85	82	85	Greenwich Village	302	1
20	YELLOWSTONE MUNICIPAL PARK	Queens	85	88	78	88	Forest Hills	406	29

CB = Community Board

CD = City Council District

FIND YOUR PARK:

PLAYGROUNDS



FIND YOUR PARK: PLAYGROUNDS

Map ID	Park	Borough	Summer Average (%)	June Score (%)	July Score (%)	August Score (%)	Neighborhood	CB	CD
1	BREUKELEN PARK	Brooklyn	80	73	79	87	Broad Channel	218	42
2	BROWER PARK	Brooklyn	82	72	91	82	Crown Heights	208	36
3	CAPT TILLY MEMORIAL PARK	Queens	81	86	73	86	Jamaica Hills	408	24
4	COFFEY PARK	Brooklyn	62	57	67	63	Red Hook	206	38
5	GREEN CENTRAL KNOLL (BUSHWICK GREEN)	Brooklyn	68	58	73	73	Bushwick	204	37
6	HAFFEN PARK	Bronx	84	92	86	75	Baychester	112	12
7	HALLETS COVE PLAYGROUND	Queens	81	81	80	82	Astoria	401	22
8	HARVEY PARK	Queens	80	88	66	87	Whitestone	407	19
9	HENRY HUDSON PARK	Bronx	87	84	84	94	Spuyten Duyvil	108	11
10	HERBERT VON KING PARK	Brooklyn	86	88	88	82	Bedford-Stuyvesant	203	36
11	J HOOD WRIGHT PARK	Manhattan	86	100	71	88	Washington Heights/ Ft. George	312	10
12	JOHN MULLALY PARK	Bronx	70	65	64	80	Concourse	104	16
13	JOYCE KILMER PARK	Bronx	81	85	73	85	Concourse Village	104	17
14	RUFUS KING PARK	Queens	80	100	92	48	Jamaica	412	28
15	RUSSELL PEDERSON PLAYGROUND	Brooklyn	83	91	91	68	Bay Ridge	210	43
16	ST ALBANS MEMORIAL PARK	Queens	77	78	70	82	Saint Albans	412	27
17	TREMONT PARK	Bronx	81	85	78	80	East Tremont	103	15
18	UNION SQUARE	Manhattan	81	85	74	85	Gramercy Park	305	2
19	WATSON GLEASON PLAYGROUND	Bronx	80	80	80	80	Parkchester/ Soundview	109	18
20	WILLIAMSBRIDGE OVAL	Bronx	69	64	76	66	Norwood	107	11

CB = Community Board

CD = City Council District

METHODOLOGY

Methodology

The Spotlight on Recreation is one in New Yorkers for Parks' series of independent park inspection reports, *The Report Card on Parks*. *The Spotlight on Recreation* measures the performance of three park service areas – athletic fields, courts, and playgrounds – in randomly selected neighborhood parks. Each feature was monitored on three separate site visits, one each in June, July, and August 2007, to measure variability within the survey set.

Using handheld computers and digital cameras, NY4P staff inspected targeted features using the same extensive questionnaire designed by a focus group of independent park experts and community leaders for *The Report Cards on Parks*. Results were uploaded into a database and analyzed to arrive at the findings cited in this report.

In designing the *Spotlight* survey, NY4P began with the population of 109 DPR “park” properties of between one and twenty acres targeted in its 2007 *Report Card on Parks* survey. From the collection of 109 DPR properties, three separate lists were drawn; the number of park properties in each list appears in parentheses:

- Parks featuring at least one grass athletic field (50);
- Parks featuring at least one court (53); and
- Parks featuring at least one playground (55).

Within each subpopulation, NY4P then drew random samples of one-third of the park properties. The first sample included 19 parks containing at least one grass turf athletic field; the second, 20 parks containing at least one court; and the third, 20 parks containing at least one playground. Note that the three samples are not mutually exclusive; larger parks in the DPR inventory routinely contain more than one of the three targeted features. Park properties selected for each sample can be found in the “Find Your Park” section of this report.

Survey Instrument

In preparing the methodology for the 2003, 2004, 2005 and 2007 *Report Card on Parks*, NY4P staff developed question forms with which to evaluate athletic fields, bathrooms, and drinking fountains. Individual questions were designed to measure the performance of each of the three park features in the following categories:

- *Maintenance*
- *Cleanliness*
- *Safety*
- *Structural integrity*

Whenever possible, the form questions were adapted from the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation's own internal evaluation mechanism, the Parks Inspection Program (PIP). All form questions were sorted into one of two distinct groups: priority and routine. Priority ratings refer to those conditions of a park feature necessary for its safe use. To further refine the routine group, NY4P convened a focus group of park experts to weight each question on a scale from one to five, one being the least important to a user's park experience, and five being the most important.

METHODOLOGY

Fieldwork

Survey work for *The Spotlight on Recreation* took place from June through August 2007 between the hours of 10 AM and 5 PM. Tuesday through Friday. We do not survey on Saturdays, Sundays, or Mondays to allow the Parks Department time to clean after the busy summer weekends. NY4P trained and deployed four staff members to conduct all survey work. All surveyors were trained in the following techniques: use of the handheld computers and digital cameras, delineation of park features, use of survey forms and standards manual, and procedures for documenting features.

In the field, surveyors traveled to each park selected for inclusion in the survey. At the site, surveyors inspected and completed a feature form for each feature selected for inspection at that park. For example, if a park was selected for inclusion in the “courts” study, surveyors would inspect every court in that park. Thus, in a park with two basketball courts and one tennis court, a surveyor completed three “court” feature forms. For each question in the applicable feature form, surveyors answered yes, no, or *not applicable*. Each park selected for inclusion in the study was visited three times during the summer – once each in June, July, and August. Every effort was made to schedule re-visits on the same day of the week, at approximately the same time of day.

In addition to the completion of the required survey forms, surveyors took extensive digital photographs to support and complement survey results. Survey results and photo documentation were stored in a central database. When photo documentation did not correlate with results or did not adequately illustrate park conditions, the park was re-visited and re-evaluated by surveyors.

Rating the Parks

Park service area scores are based entirely upon surveyors’ responses to feature form questions. Feature form scores range between 0 and 100, based upon the proportion of park service area features rated as in service and acceptable, with responses weighted in accordance with the relative priorities assigned by the focus group. For each of the three survey periods, park service area scores were assigned by averaging the scores of all feature forms completed. The three survey period park service area scores were then averaged to assign a single 2008 score for each targeted park and service area. All scores – form, park service area by survey period, and park service area 2008 average – can be converted to letter grades to provide a simple yardstick for interpreting data. Table I illustrates the conversion from numerical scores to grades.

The survey is designed to fairly rate all features that are or should be available to a user visiting a park: for example, if a park has a playground, then it should be available to users. Should that playground be locked or closed without explanation, it would fail a priority question and hence receive a rating of zero in this survey.

(Parks with no playground, or any other service area, however, are never penalized on this feature in this or any other *Report Cards on Parks*.)

**Table I:
Conversion of Raw Scores to Letter Grades**

Numerical Score	Letter Grade
97-100	A+
93-96	A
90-92	A-
87-89	B+
83-86	B
80-82	B-
77-79	C+
73-76	C
70-72	C-
60-69	D
59 and below	F



New Yorkers for Parks
The Arthur Ross Center for Parks and Open Spaces
355 Lexington Avenue, 14th Floor
New York, NY 10017
212.838.9410
www.ny4p.org

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Report staff:

Christian DiPalermo, Executive Director
Cheryl Huber, Director of Research & Planning

Matt Glomski, Project Statistician

Alyson Beha, Research & Planning Manager and Surveyor
Kevin Leichner, Research & Planning Intern
Andrea Marpillero-Colomina, Research & Planning Intern
Erin Monk-Tharp, Surveyor
Joanna Reynolds, Surveyor
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