

Bringing the Community Together: An Inclusive Park Initiative

Includes:

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Abstract

Ensuring all groups of individuals are a critical factor to create a feeling of inclusion and increase community engagement. However, urban parks are often developed off on a dominant perspective and resulting in multiple groups of people being left out of the urban planning of the public space. The Ashburnham Memorial Park (AMP) is the fourth-largest community park in the City of Peterborough, Ontario (City of Peterborough, 2025). The goals of this community-based research project were to identify the current group of individuals who need to be included in the planning of urban parks and to provide the Ashburnham Memorial Stewardship Group (AMSG) with a solution for each group excluded.

Keywords

Ashburnham Memorial Park (AMP), Ashburnham Memorial Stewardship Group (AMSG), Urban Park, Groups, Community, Teenage girls, Parents, Naturalists, People of Colour, Active, Disabilities, New Canadians

Land acknowledgement

As a Trent University student researching in Nogojiwanong (Peterborough), I acknowledge that this research is taking place on the traditional territory of the Mississauga Anishinaabeg (AMSG, 2022). I acknowledge that this land is located on Treaty 20 Michi Saagiig territory, and the traditional territory of the Michi Saagiig and Chippewa Nations, also known as the Williams Treaties First Nations (City of Peterborough, 2023). These include: Curve Lake, Hiawatha, Alderville, Scugog Island, Rama, Beausoleil, and Georgina Island First Nations (City of Peterborough, 2023).

Introduction

Urban parks are essential resources for the physical, mental, and social health of communities (Wan et al., 2020). These spaces provide individuals with access to physical activity and nature, while also including an area for native species of plants and animals (Rigolon, 2016). However, access to urban parks varies across socioeconomic and ethnic groups and often leads to specific groups of people being excluded or forgotten in the planning and designing of parks (Rigolon, 2016).

Ashburnham Memorial Park (AMP) is located in Nogojiwanong, Peterborough, Ontario, and is a focal point for community members in the East City (AMSG, 2021). After reviewing and observing data, structures, and plans in the park, an initiative to make the park more inclusive needs to occur. This report will discuss different groups that might feel or be excluded due to the current infrastructure and programming in Ashburnham Memorial Park.

The AMP is highly valued in the city due to holding 50 acres of land, resulting in it being the City's fourth-largest park (City of Peterborough, 2025). As well, the AMP has multiple recreational opportunities shown in *Figure 1*, including a basketball court, the Peterborough Museum & Archives, a picnic area, two playgrounds, a softball field, and a viewpoint (City of Peterborough, 2025).

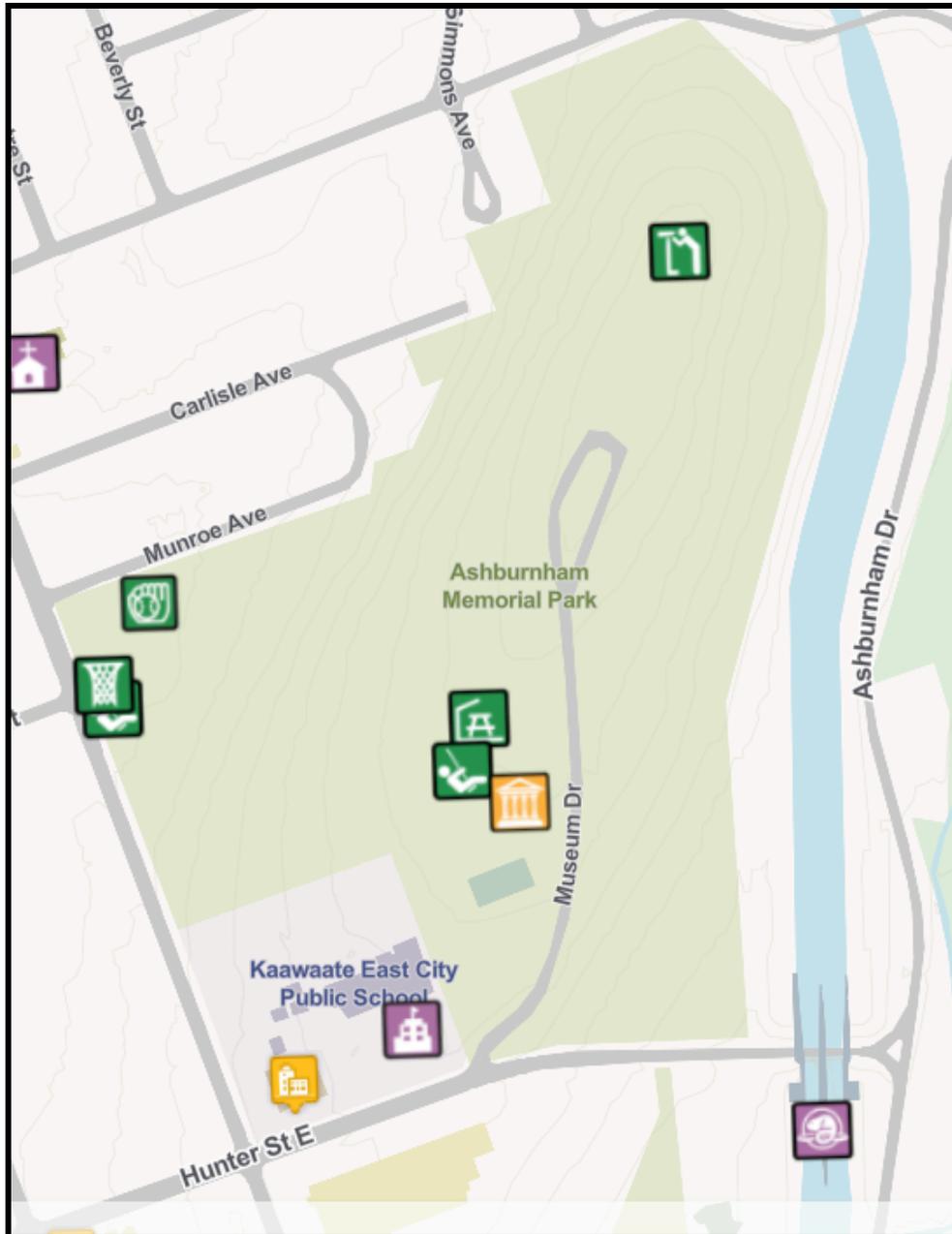


Figure 1: Map of Ashburnham Memorial Park (AMP), address: 300 Hunter St E, Peterborough.

(City of Peterborough, 2025a)

To ensure the AMP is cared for, the Ashburnham Memorial Stewardship Group (AMSG) is a steering committee, established in June 2021, to advocate for the improvement of the area and consists of five volunteers who meet approximately every month (AMSG, 2023). Over the

years, the AMMSG has made efforts to connect the surrounding community with the AMP, but has often been met with challenges such as conflicting priorities regarding how the park should be used, worries about preserving the park's ecosystem, and limited public engagement (AMMSG, 2024).

The purpose of this community-based research project is to identify the groups of individuals that need to be included in urban planning for parks to ensure the AMMSG is welcoming to all community members and that developments to the park in the future represent various requests and viewpoints.

Methods:

To begin this research, the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2)* was completed, which offers ethical guidelines that apply to all studies that use human subjects and their data and biological materials (Government of Canada, 2022). This program aided the earliest research when reviewing the past answers collected from users in the park concerning how they operate inside the area, and papers written by previous Trent University students on the matter (Government of Canada, 2022).

To understand the community that surrounds that park, the first AMMSG event occurred in September 2025, where the organisation paired up with Clean Up Peterborough to pick up cigarette buds and litter in the park. Clean Up Peterborough was created in March 2024, where volunteers made up of residents of both the City and County of Peterborough, who care about nature and wish to keep the community clean, all year long. Tongs, buckets, and gloves we used to pick up garbage for around 3 hours, all while discussing the large amount of litter discarded not only on the ground but hidden away in the vegetation. After finishing, the group sorted the

different types of trash into plastic bags and waited for a city-owned garbage truck to bring it to their garbage site.

Lastly, a literature review from academic journals and an analysis of the AMMSG Community Engagement Survey 2024 were the main methods to look for past citizen-led transformations and redesigning of AMP, which resulted discovery of multiple perspectives when attending urban parks in the city. The common aspects noticed from past survey data and conversations at the clean-up in the Park space were the neglected pavement on top of the hill, the lighting, and the demographics present in the space.

Results:

Before starting the community-based research project, research questions were formulated to ensure the analysis remained focused. After discussing different ways the project could proceed, four research questions were developed:

Q1. How do people use Ashburnham Memorial Park?

Q2. What is the public & stakeholders' perception of the park?

Q3. How can the community's priorities shape future planning for the park?

Q4. How can community groups best push forward?

These research questions led to the conclusion of common themes seen in academic journals and aided in identifying the six groups that are usually excluded from urban planning in the parks. These six groups include: Naturalists/Active People, Parents, Teenage Girls, People with Disabilities, People of Colour, and New Canadians.

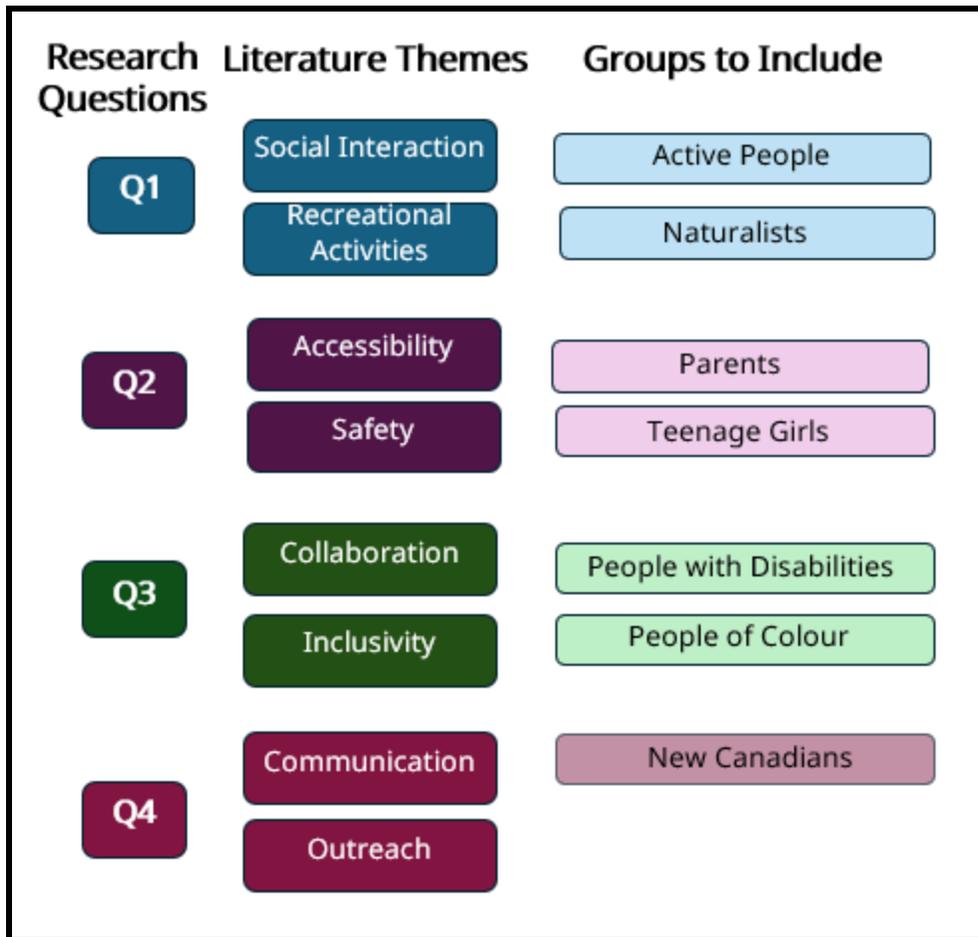


Figure 2: Diagram of research questions filtering literature themes found in academic journals and groups to include in urban parks.

Teenage Girls

In 2024, a survey of 70 people was conducted regarding community engagement in Ashburnham Memorial Park. When looking at the demographics of the respondents, only 2 people were between the ages of 0-18, while respondents between the age ranges of 19-60 and 60+ had 31 people participate (AMSG, 2024). This suggests that the majority of people using the

Ashburnham Memorial Park are adults, and moreover, that the area is attractive to older age groups rather than younger people.

When looking at the demographic statistics in Peterborough, Ontario, we can see that there are around 5,000 more women in Peterborough (Statistics Canada, 2024). Yet, when comparing the results from the ASMG survey, there is no question dedicated to gender identification. This can affect the changes to the park since women make up a sizable fraction of the population, planners risk ignoring their specific demands and preferences if they lack precise data on the gender distribution of park visitors. Therefore, community participation in Ashburnham Memorial Park could be improved by focused initiatives to involve younger populations as well as women.

When visiting the park over the past few months, there was a common theme of the older male demographic present in the Ashburnham Memorial Park. Teenage girls cannot be put in the same category as children or adults; therefore, not being able to use the playground or spending money limits several options (Women in Urbanism Canada, 2024).

For example, the seating in AMP is limited and far apart, creating an isolating environment; meanwhile, teenage girls are more likely to stay in an area if they are able to bring friends. For girls to make space for themselves in the city, they rely on bringing their friends to physically take up more space without putting themselves in any danger (Kern, 2019). Leslie Kern explains how spaces for girls do not extend past their bedroom, and urban spaces often lack access and safety for young girls (Kern, 2019).

To help bring a more accessible social life to the park, the organisation *Make Space For Girls* has spent the last twenty years identifying which features make a park more appealing to teenage girls (Walker & Clark, 2023). Research from Women in Urbanism Canada has revealed

that the engagement that teenage girls need is actively supported by sitting in a semicircle, facing one another, and using multilevel platforms (Women in Urbanism Canada, 2024). Building the seating to be grouped together and also have some facing each other allows teenage girls to linger in the space (Women in Urbanism Canada, 2024).

Parents

Parents are a key factor in having children use the park, creating a sense of belonging for the children and parents in the area (Raising Children Network, 2022). Having a space for children also brings different races and ethnic groups together since the most requested physical features across all groups were playgrounds, sports fields, and green areas for their children (Ogletree et al., 2020). After reviewing the data from the survey, 22 people said they would not bring their families to the Ashburnham Memorial Park due to too much garbage and a lack of other families.

Ensuring the park is accessible for parents and children is important since the Ashburnham Memorial Park has a school located at the bottom of the park, called the Kaawaate East City Public School. Yet, this built environment provides a feeling of discomfort for parents due to the car-centric planning, such as the large asphalt parking for cars, creating an environment for dangerous activities. In October 2021, several skid marks produced by cars driving doughnuts in the park resulted in parents not feeling safe to bring their children (Kovach, 2021). If parents sense there is a risk for their children in their community, it leads to reduced levels of walking and cycling among children (Loukaitou-Sideris & Sideris, 2009).

A goal for the park to be accomplished in the future is ensuring there is proper installation of safety barriers between the cars and the pedestrians (Loukaitou-Sideris & Sideris, 2009). The academic article by Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris and Athanasios Sideris explains that

while the openness of the AMP allows more accessibility to neighbours and their homes, the proximity to speeding cars going up the AMP hill increases parents' fears (Loukaitou-Sideris & Sideris, 2009). These concerns influence parents to place more limitations on what public spaces their children use compared to their childhood (Loukaitou-Sideris & Sideris, 2009). By installing a short ramp or vegetation along the sides of the AMP hill going up to the viewpoint, it will motivate parents to feel safe bringing their children into the space without increasing worries of an accident (Loukaitou-Sideris & Sideris, 2009).

Naturalists/Active People

The Ashburnham Memorial Park Community Engagement Survey 2024 for Ashburnham Memorial Park showed that the #1 choice for using the park is to enjoy nature. However, the hidden trails that can be accessed on top of the hill tend to exclude the individuals who are not familiar with the park, leading to people skipping over the biodiversity accessible there to view. iNaturalist is a website used by the Ashburnham Memorial Park community to identify different species of animals and plants, allowing the community to interact with each other.

As of February 2024, the ASMG iNaturalist project has 351 species identified and 894 observations of voice recordings of bats and birds (ASMG, 2021). While this brings already informed individuals together in the community, the issue is that this website can only be accessed by looking the website up, which limits several people from knowing about the platform. As the iNaturalist app can be downloaded on any iPhone or Android, having physical signage of the resource can help encourage more people to join the area.

Another factor in the lack of engagement in AMP is the seclusion of the recreational opportunities. As illustrated in *Figure 1*, the AMP has areas for viewing birds and insects, such

as the viewpoint at the top of the hill. Yet, since the viewpoint is far away from the entrance of the park, many newcomers are not aware of its existence.

In urban parks, signage is vital to influence how people behave in, engage with, and view the park (Campbell et al., 2019). Having a sign at the bottom of the hill of AMP showing a QR code with a way to download the app or being directed to the website allows attraction for recreational activity (Campbell et al., 2019). Another app that could be featured on a sign from the AMMSG to provide in-person activities is the Merlin Bird ID by Cornell Lab. This app permits people from all over the world to add any bird species they see or hear into the app, providing more advertising for the park.

People of Colour

Intergroup contact theory is a significant aspect of urban parks, which focuses on the interactions shared between different racial and ethnic groups (Powers et al., 2022). This theory helps positive interaction between multiple groups take place in particular settings, which may result in a decrease in discrimination towards members of a different group (Powers et al., 2022). In urban parks, there can be unfair participation in decision-making due to one racial or ethnic group having more power or authority compared to other groups (Powers et al., 2022). The AMP began to include women in the early 1920s, when the Women's Patriotic League of Ashburnham wanted to save the park from being dissolved by purchasing the land using teas, bazaars, and bake sales funds (AMMSG 2022). While this started the movement of including more groups of individuals into the park, the majority of the demographic of the Women's Patriotic League of Ashburnham were white women, leaving numerous marginalised groups absent from being represented in the initial decision-making processes involving the park (AMMSG 2022).

A method to include more perspectives from other groups of individuals is expanding the AMMSG group to provide more equal power in decision-making. One example is creating positions in the AMMSG specifically set aside for representatives of communities that lack sufficient representation, such as Indigenous Peoples and other racialised groups (Powers et al., 2022).

Phillip Dwight Morgan grew up in Scarborough, Ontario and then decided to move to Trent University for school (Morgan, 2019). Yet, Morgan would be questioned about where he came from and often did not fit people's assumptions about nature due to the large white population in the area (Morgan, 2019). Due to visual art, literature, television, and movies, Black people have been categorised as not being present in nature (Morgan, 2019). This harmful narrative prevented Morgan from enjoying the Canadian wilderness and stopped other groups of people from taking up spaces to use spaces that now need biking or canoeing (Morgan, 2019). This personal example from a student at Trent University reveals that the narratives from media and infrastructure can exclude people of colour from being comfortable in nature.

Another method to include more groups of people in the park is fostering a feeling of acceptance and belonging in parks by offering culturally appropriate programs and events that are open to a wide range of community members (Powers et al., 2022). For example, an arts and crafts event or farmers market allows people to share their culture and specialities with other people (Kolman, 2024). As well as a movie night from different cultures to share their music and stories, promoting understanding amongst people from different cultural backgrounds (Kolman, 2024).

People with Disabilities

A study reveals that humans who are unable to come into contact with green spaces develop depression, which can lead to decreased functional ability (Błaszczyk et al., 2020). With the park being a large landmark with a multitude of species comes with a demand for every individual in the community to be able to access the space. Statistics Canada has recorded that 32,900 people have disabilities while 67,500 people do not in Peterborough, Ontario (Government of Canada, 2019). Therefore, providing inclusive designs in the Ashburnham Memorial Park is essential to increase community engagement, yet due to the AMP's current design, people with disabilities are not able to easily use the public space.

The largest obstacle prominent in the park is the large hill that does not have any sidewalks or a railing on the side of the road up to the top of the hill. This creates an issue with physically disabled individuals since people with mobility issues will have trouble getting up the hill, and individuals with any range of blindness do not have a proper space to walk.

While the AMMSG is unable to physically alter the hill to lower the incline, benches can be placed along the hill to provide an opportunity to rest individuals' legs in case they need frequent stops when walking (Saitta et al., 2019). For instance, this academic article interviewed different age groups to determine common factors that aid people in parks, and a 75-year-old woman who was recovering from a hip operation frequently used a bench to walk around the corner (Saitta et al., 2019).

Therefore, installing more benches that are also compatible with mobility assistance equipment, such as a wheelchair, would encourage people with disabilities to use their community spaces without fear of not having somewhere to rest (Saitta et al., 2019).

New Canadians

New Canadians are often seen as a demographic that needs to find ways to fit in with the current structure of society. However, this can lead to isolation and a feeling that they do not belong in public areas such as parks (Salenieks, 2014). A goal for the AMMSG is to provide programs to connect with New Canadians with their parks by using a local guide to teach about the public space. In Canada, a study reveals that most people who visit parks are Caucasian, due to ethnic minorities' relatively low representation in these built environments (Salenieks, 2014). This academic paper examines the main causes are transportation problems, safety concerns, and an absence of multilingual park signage (Salenieks, 2014).

Although navigating multiple language barriers can be challenging for the AMMSG, a new program called “Nature as a Second Language” is a method implemented by Alberta Parks to provide more opportunities for independent park visitation (Salenieks, 2014). This program organised day trips in parks where New Canadians were able to see how locals would use the park, and created more confidence to continue visiting the space (Salenieks, 2014). This program can help New Canadians since they have been observed to select passive activities, including hiking, mountain biking, and nature viewing, over active ones, such as trekking and climbing (Salenieks, 2014). Therefore, the New Canadians are empowered to do their preferred activities without extra assistance (Salenieks, 2014).

An example of this method is the Spring Bird Walk in May 2023, where Drew Monkman, an author and naturalist, recorded 22 different species of birds in the park (AMMSG, 2023). The project was a significant event due to Monkman teaching the participants how to log bird species for the Peterborough *e-bird project*, which is one of the world’s largest biodiversity science projects (AMMSG, 2023). Therefore, by reaching out to the New Canadians Centre in

Peterborough, Ontario, the AMMSG would be able to collaborate with the non-profit organisation to introduce similar projects that help New Canadians to be confident in the AMP.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the AMP offers several recreational options, yet it is primarily catered towards a dominant group in society. The research goals that were established through reviewing the recorded survey data and observational research of the AMP allowed the community-based research to reach multiple groups that were originally excluded from the development of the park. If the AMMSG begins to implement the future goals highlighted in this paper, the AMP will be able to provide more community engagement opportunities to the community. Programs that include developing more and closer benches, safer barriers from cars, signage for current apps to use in the park, setting aside spaces for more groups, and collaborations with local organisations, will ensure the AMP is inclusive and accessible for six more groups in the Peterborough community.

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