

Healthy by Nature: Policy Practices Aimed at Maximizing the Human Behavioral Health Benefits of Nature Contact

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Research Brief

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BACKGROUND

Nature and human health research has identified cognitive, physiological, mental health, educational, and environmental benefits many benefits of nature exposure. The research, however, primarily draws upon studies that included WEIRD (western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) populations (Henrich *et al.*, 2010), and has largely failed to address cultural diversity and ethnic/racial sociodynamics. Policymakers can improve access to nature to ensure these benefits are accessible to people of all ages, abilities, and ethnic and racial backgrounds.

Nature exposure was defined as humans interacting with living environment- whether natural (e.g. forests, oceans), cultivated (e.g., gardens), or virtual imitations of the former (e.g., photos, videos).

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Accumulating research strongly suggests that nature can serve as a robust wellbeing tool for a number of health outcomes, including mental health, attention and focus, etc. There is still much to understand in nature and health research, particularly regarding non-WEIRD populations. Current research lacks consistency in the definition of nature and exposure lengths to nature. Policies to promote the relationship between nature and human health were recommended which emphasize the importance of diverse representation in leadership and decision-making.

Implications

Policy recommendations address land management, education, healthcare, and federally funded research, and general recommendations. The recommendations below can be applied to local, state, or federal levels to improve access to nature and promote nature as a supplemental health-promoting intervention.



Listen to the needs and desires of community members



Train healthcare workers to prescribe nature



Create free outdoor public programming



Build gardens and other natural spaces in senior and long-term care facilities



Plant native plants on public land



Direct funding toward on-the-ground practitioners

Practical toolkits to utilize for improving nature access: Pocket Park, Green Schoolyards, Playscapes, Youth Development