



bridging the gap

Research Informing Policies & Practices
for Healthy Youth

Research Brief
February 2016

Disparities in Shared Use Agreements, Policies, and Plans

Introduction

Lack of physical activity contributes to the obesity epidemic that affects more than one-third of adults and nearly 17% of youth in the United States.^{1,2} Less than half of all adults³ and less than one-third of high school students⁴ meet the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines.⁵ The Institute of Medicine and *Healthy People 2020* recommend providing access to school facilities for people of all ages outside normal school hours to increase opportunities for physical activity.^{6,7} One way to increase access is through the development of shared use agreements between schools and local organizations.

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Shared use agreements “occur when governmental entities, or sometimes private, nonprofit organizations, agree to open or broaden access to their facilities for community use. Shared use can take place on a formal basis (based on a written, legal document) or on an informal basis (based on historical practice).”⁸ By adopting formal shared use agreements, community groups are more likely to have access to school facilities such as gyms and athletic fields.⁸

Studies have shown that access to school recreation facilities is associated with increased physical activity¹⁰ and participation in afterschool physical activity programs.¹¹ Shared use agreements also are a good strategy for increasing physical activity in areas that lack recreational facilities, and can be an economical and efficient way to provide opportunities for physical activity, since they involve use of existing facilities.^{9, 12, 13, 14}

This brief examines how likely children and teenagers younger than age 18 live in communities that have adopted shared use agreements in the form of resolutions, ordinances, or formal agreements, and the partnerships involved with those agreements. It also examines how often shared use agreements are mentioned in long-term community development planning documents, which guide the development of policies but lack the same enforcement as formal agreements. Finally, we examined whether such provisions vary based on locale, race/ethnicity, and community income.

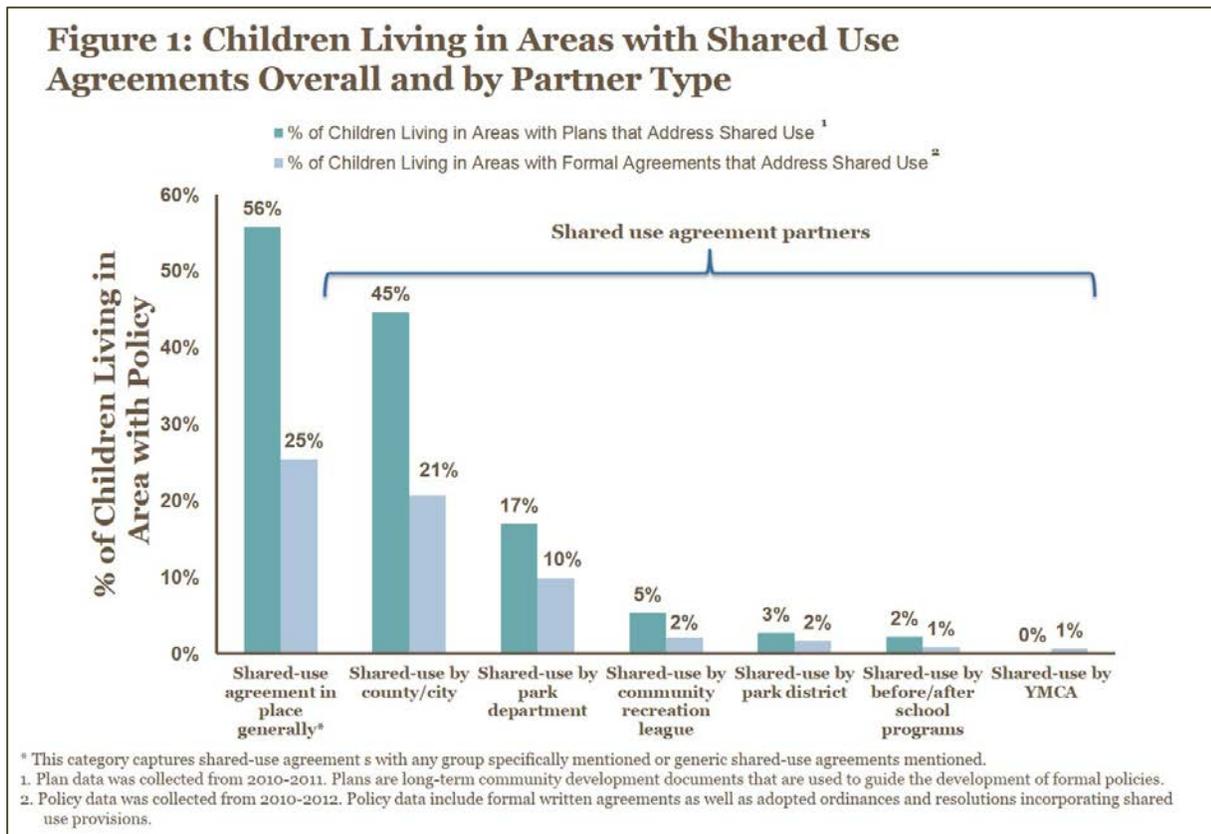
The formal agreements were collected in 2010, 2011, and 2012 from 468 catchments (hereafter referred to as “communities”) made up of over 900 jurisdictions, and the planning documents were collected in 2010 and 2011 from 308 catchments made up of over 600 jurisdictions located in a nationally representative sample of public middle and high school enrollment areas. The areas analyzed were based on middle and high school enrollment areas, but results in this brief are representative of children and teenagers ages 0 to 17. We evaluated shared use agreements related to recreational purposes between schools and park districts or departments, community recreational leagues or groups, after school programs, YMCA programs, or local governments (e.g., municipal, town, and county).

Key Terms

- *Shared use agreement (SUA)*: an agreement between governmental entities, or sometimes private, nonprofit organizations, to open or broaden access to their facilities for community use.
- *Formal agreement*: a written, legal document outlining the obligations of all groups that are part of the shared use agreement.
- *Informal agreement*: an agreement based on historical practice or language included in a community's long-term plan. These agreements are less likely to be enforced than formal agreements but are often part of the first steps to adopt a formal agreement.
- *General agreement*: a comprehensive category to capture agreements mentioned in plans or policies that identify specific partners (park district/department, community recreation group, after school program, YMCA, or county/city) or where a partner is not specifically identified.
- *Specific agreement*: an agreement where a specific partner is identified. For this study we captured specific agreements between schools and park districts, park/recreation departments, community recreational leagues, before and after school programs, the YMCA, or counties and cities.

Key Findings

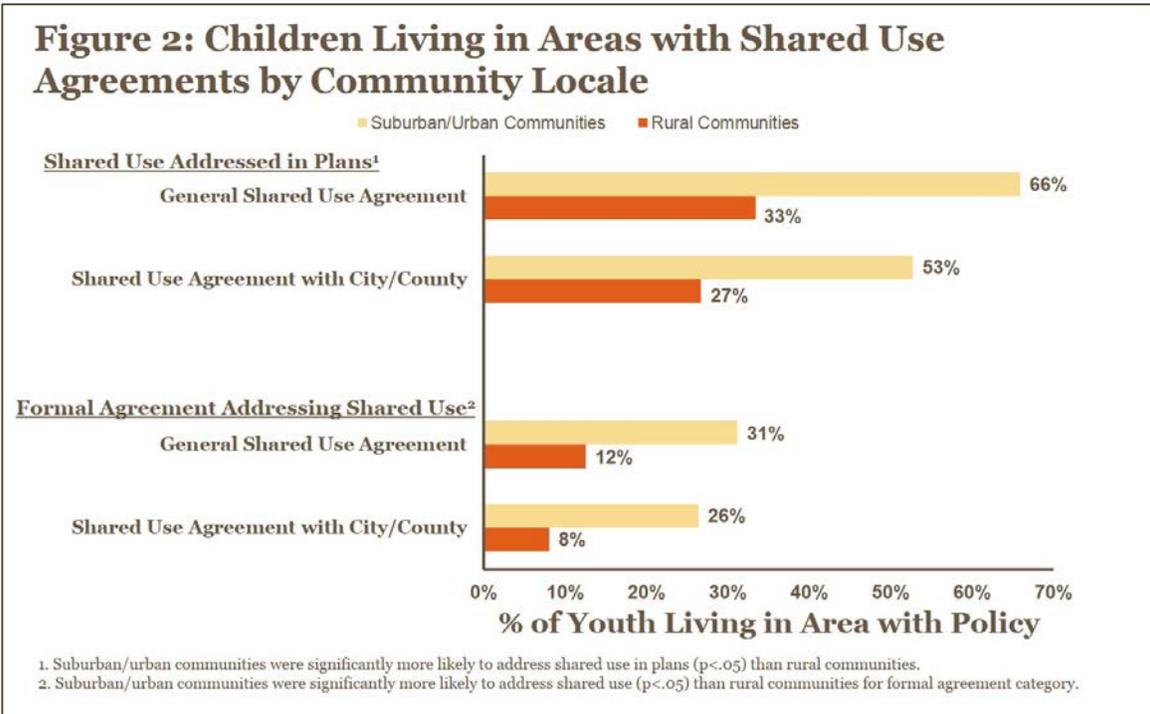
Children were more likely to live in a community that addressed shared use agreements in its long-term development plans than in one with formal agreements. The higher prevalence of agreements in plans might indicate that communities are interested in adopting formal agreements but have not done so yet. The type of groups specifically mentioned in the shared use agreement varied across plans and formal agreements (see Figure 1).



- Children were more than twice as likely to live in a community that addressed a shared use agreement in a plan than in one that addressed it in a formal agreement (56% vs. 25%). Similarly, children were more than twice as likely to reside in a community that addressed shared use agreements between schools and counties/cities in plans than they were to live in a community that did so in formal agreements (45% vs. 21%).
- Overall, the percentage of children living in communities with formal shared use agreements was low (25%). Twenty-one percent of children lived in a community that addressed shared use between a school and a county or city, the most common partnership. Children were least likely to live in communities that had policies that specifically addressed use between schools and community recreation leagues (2%), park districts (2%), before and after school programs (1%) or the YMCA (1%).

Locale Differences (Figure 2)

- Children living in rural communities were half as likely to be in communities that addressed general and specific shared use agreements between schools and counties/cities in their long-term plans than were children living in suburban or urban communities.
- Additionally, children living in rural communities were less than half as likely to live in areas with formal general shared use agreements than were children in suburban or urban communities (12% vs. 31%); they were roughly a third less likely to live in areas with formal shared use agreements specifically between schools and cities/counties (8% vs. 26%).



Income and Race/Ethnicity Differences (Figures 3 and 4)

- Children living in low-income communities were less likely to live in areas that had plans with general shared use agreements, or plans with specific shared use agreements between schools and counties/cities than were children in middle- or high-income communities (general: 43% vs. 65%; city/county: 37% vs. 50%).
- Children living in low-income communities were less likely to live in areas with formal, general shared use agreements than were children living in middle- or high-income communities (20% vs. 30%).
- Children living in majority Hispanic communities were more than three times as likely to live in areas with a formal, general shared use agreement than were children living in majority White communities (62% vs. 17%).

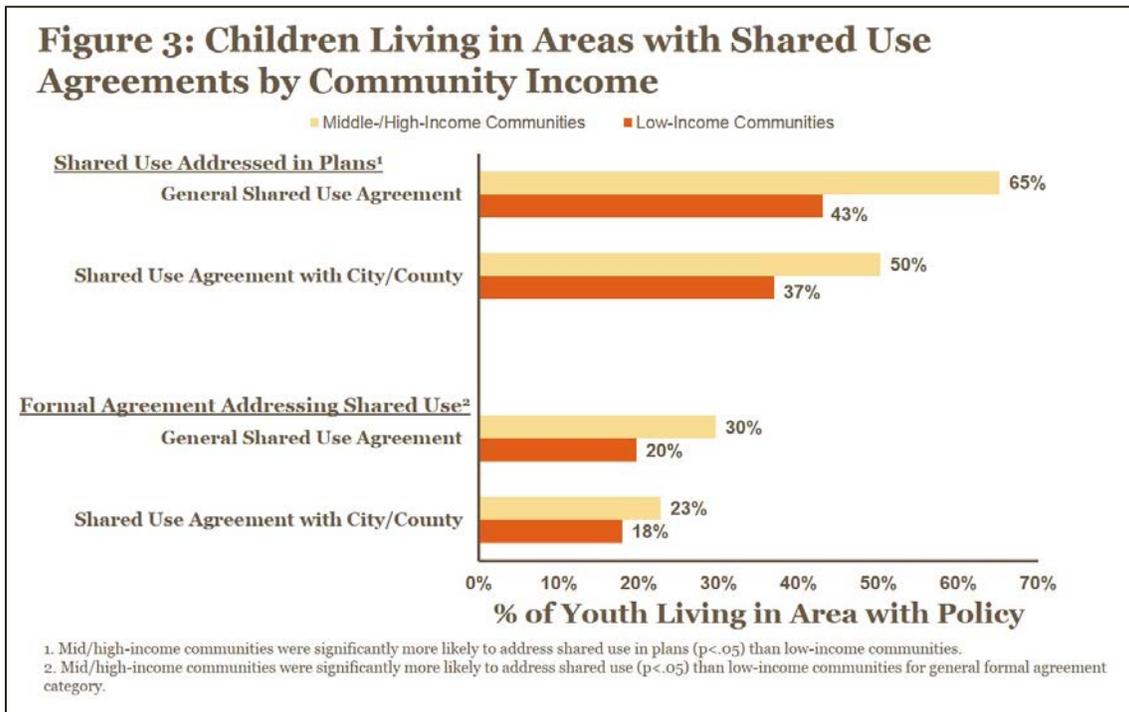
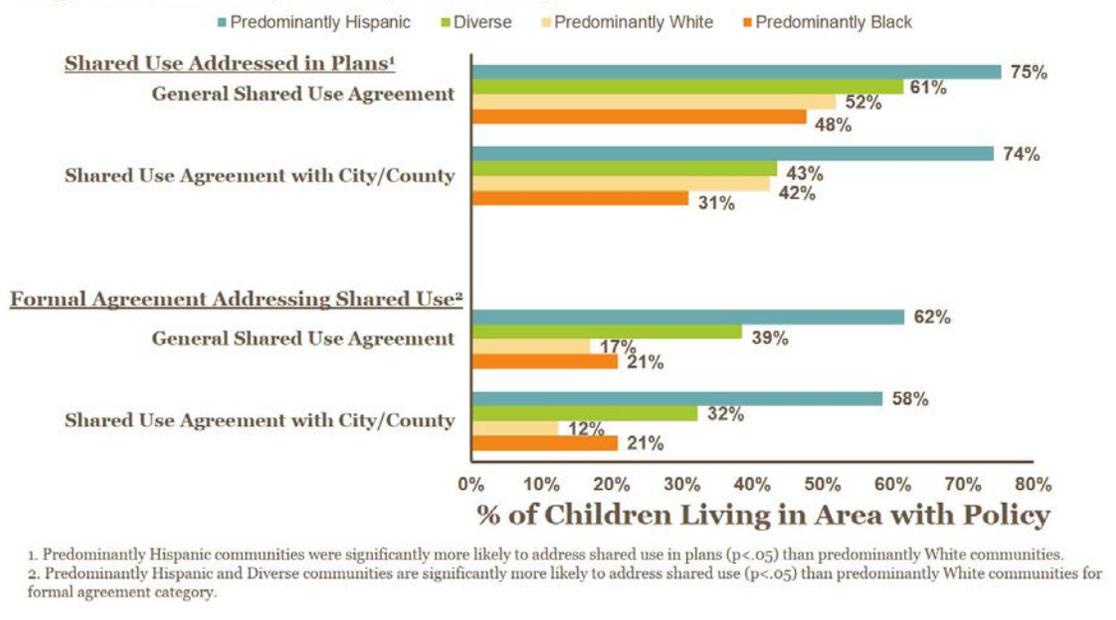


Figure 4: Children Living in Areas with Shared Use Agreements by Race/Ethnicity



Conclusions and Policy Implications

Children were more likely to live in communities with shared use agreements in their long-term plans than in communities with actual formal shared use agreements. We also found disparities in the presence of shared use agreements across locale and family income. Children in rural communities were significantly less likely to live in areas with formal shared use agreements or agreements in plans than were children in suburban/urban communities. Generally, children in low-income communities were less likely to live in areas with shared use agreements than were children in middle- or high-income communities. Interestingly we found that children living in majority Hispanic communities were more likely to live in areas with formal shared use agreements. This is promising since Latinos have a high rate of obesity.¹⁵ We also found that very few communities had policies that specifically addressed use between schools and community organizations that are most likely to provide physical activity opportunities, such as community recreation leagues and park districts.

Communities can use a number of strategies to promote shared use opportunities that make physical activity accessible, including:

- adopt formal shared use agreements to institutionalize community access to schools;
- develop shared use agreements with a variety of community partners, such as youth organizations, sports leagues, parks and recreation departments, or those that allow use by the general public;
- locate new park facilities near schools to create opportunities for shared use;¹⁶
- include specific provisions in shared use agreements specifying the facilities being shared and the times they are available for use in order to increase participation;¹⁷
- include policies in shared use agreements that permit the use of school facilities for afterschool community-sponsored programs as a cost-effective way to increase participation;¹¹ and
- include language in agreements to help protect school districts against lawsuits, and allocate the responsibility for maintenance, repairs, and supervision to local governments.^{18, 19}

Endnotes

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Bridging the Gap is a nationally recognized research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation dedicated to improving the understanding of how policies and environmental factors affect diet, physical activity and obesity among youth, as well as youth tobacco use. For more information, visit www.bridgingthegapresearch.org and follow us on Twitter: [@BTGresearch](https://twitter.com/BTGresearch).