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by Gordon Dewis

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## Access and use of parks and green spaces: The potential impact of COVID-19 on Canadian households

by **Gordon Dewis**

Among other physical distancing measures taken to reduce the spread of COVID-19, one of the first responses taken by various levels of government was the closure of parks<sup>1</sup> to the public. While necessary, these restrictions may adversely impact the physical and mental health of people who are not able to visit them. Considering that a growing body of research has noted the beneficial association between access to parks and green spaces and one's mental health, these spaces play an important role in the lives of Canadians. (Houlden, et al. 2018) (Vanaken and Danckaerts 2018)



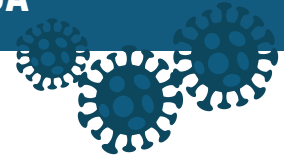
Within this context, many Canadian households make use of parks and green spaces, especially when they are close to their homes. The reasons for this are varied; however, all contribute in some way to the mental and physical well-being of Canadians. Limited access has the potential to negatively impact health, particularly when other stressors exist in a person's life.

The 2017 Households and the Environment Survey included questions about a household's access to and use of parks and public green spaces, both those close to home<sup>2</sup> and elsewhere. Examining the responses to these questions in terms of socio-demographic variables such as location, household composition and dwelling type may provide some insight into how much of an impact the restrictions due to COVID-19 may have on Canadian households.

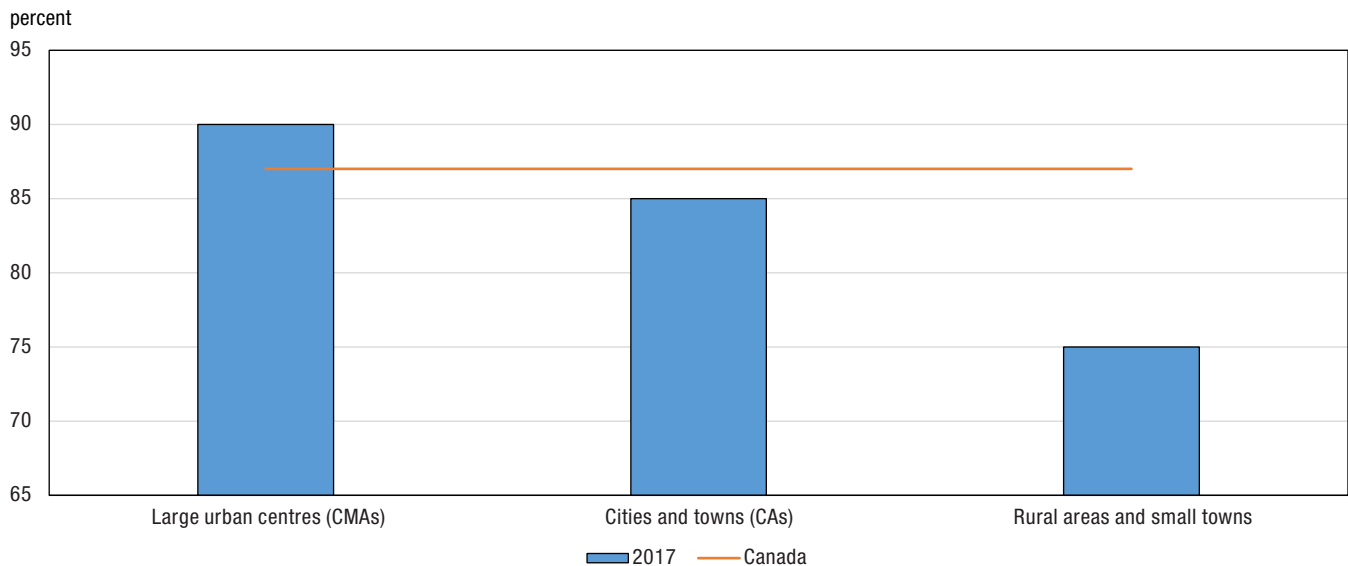
### Proximity to and use of parks and public green spaces

Most Canadian households reported having a park within a ten-minute journey of their home in 2017 (87%). Of those households that reported this, 85% reported that they had visited it within the previous twelve months.

1. The terms "park" and "public green space" may be used interchangeably in this article.  
2. "close to home" is defined as being within a ten-minute journey of home.



**Chart 1**  
**Parks and green spaces close to home, 2017**



Source: Statistics Canada, Households and the Environment Survey (2017).

There are some households (13%) that reported they did not have a park or green space close to home. Of these, 39%<sup>3</sup> reported that they visited a park or green space nevertheless, during the previous twelve months.

In urban areas, where parks serve as the predominant nearby green space, restrictions to access may be felt more acutely. The higher the urban density of where a household lived, the more likely the household was to report having a park close to home. Ninety percent of households in large urban centres<sup>4</sup> reported having a park close to home, compared to 85% of households in cities and towns<sup>5</sup>, and 75% of households in rural areas and small towns<sup>6</sup>.

## Households with children

Families with children<sup>7</sup> may find the restrictions on access to parks due to COVID-19 particularly challenging if a park was used regularly as a venue for outdoor play and activities. Of the households with children that reported a park close to home in 2017, 95% visited the park. In comparison, only 82% of households without children that were near a park visited it.

3. 5% of all households.

4. Census metropolitan areas (CMAs)

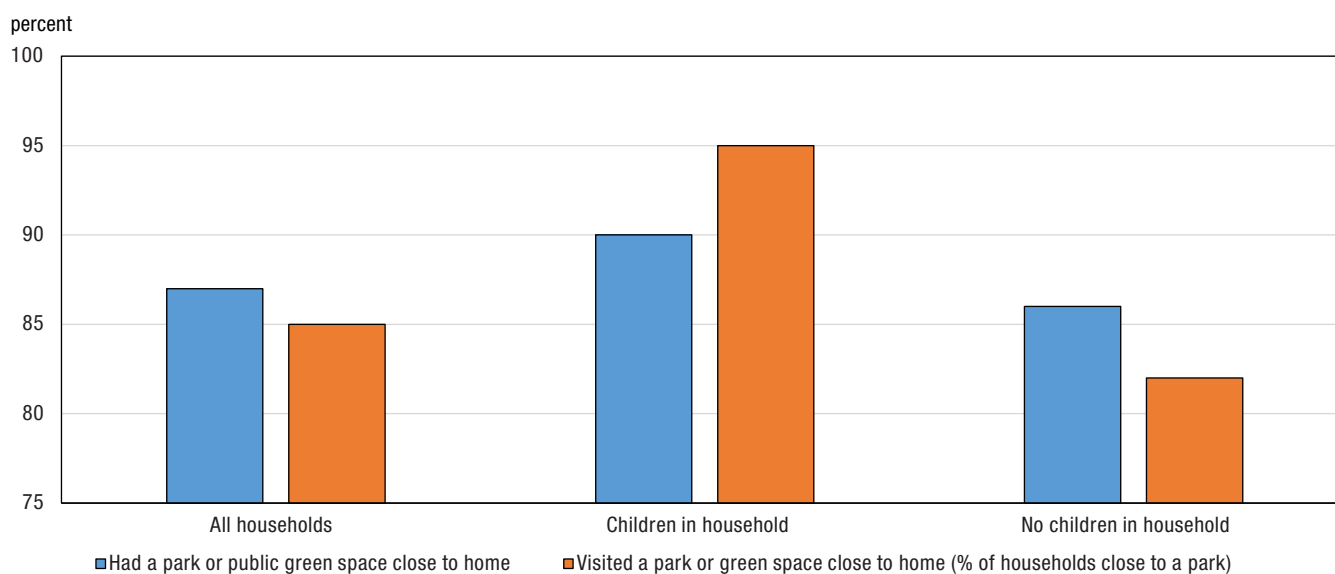
5. Census agglomerations (CAs)

6. Neither CMAs nor CAs

7. The term "children" is defined as household members 17 years of age or younger at the time of interview.



**Chart 2**  
**Access to and use of parks close to home, 2017**



Source: Statistics Canada, Households and the Environment Survey (2017).

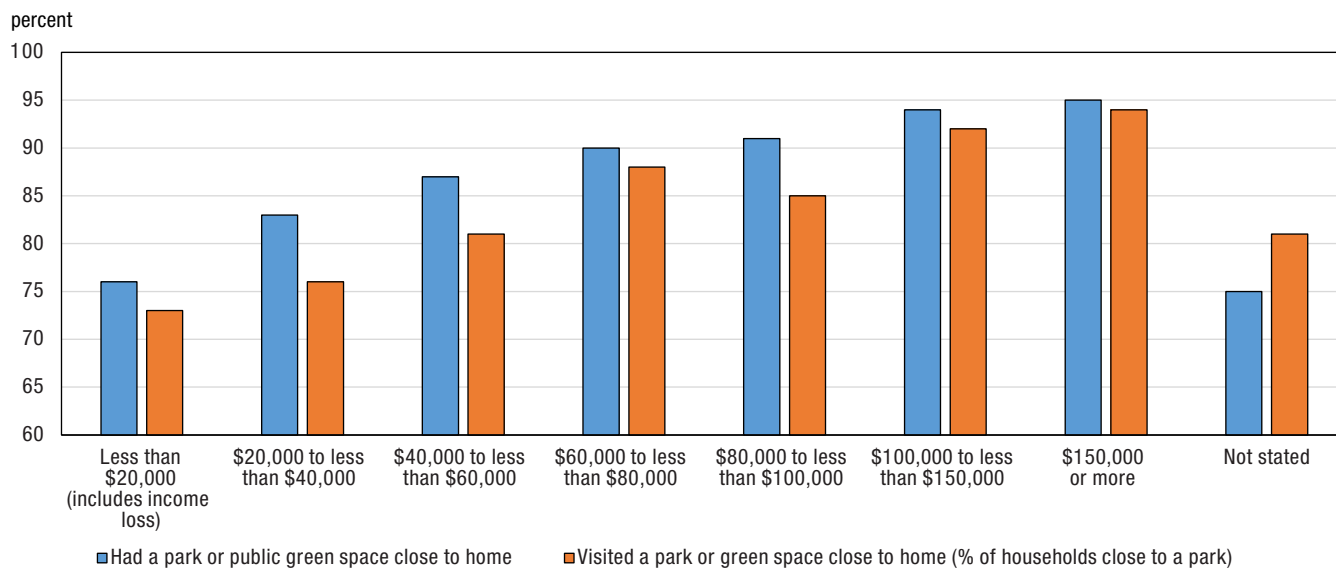
## Household income

How likely a household reported a park close to home was related to the household's total annual income. The higher a household's total annual income, the more likely it was to have a park or public green space close to where they lived in 2017. About three-quarters (76%) of households with an income of less than \$20,000 per year reported having access to a nearby park, compared to 95% of households with an annual income of \$150,000 or more. Similarly, the likelihood that a household with a nearby park had visited that park ranged from 73% of households in the lowest income bracket to 94% in the highest bracket.

In the absence of having access to a park as a result of COVID-19 physical isolation measures, households with a lawn or area with grass around their property may have been able to use it for limited outdoor activity, in lieu of a park. Of all households, those with an income of less than \$20,000 per year were less likely to have a lawn as part of their property (40%), compared to 86% of households earning \$150,000 or more per year.

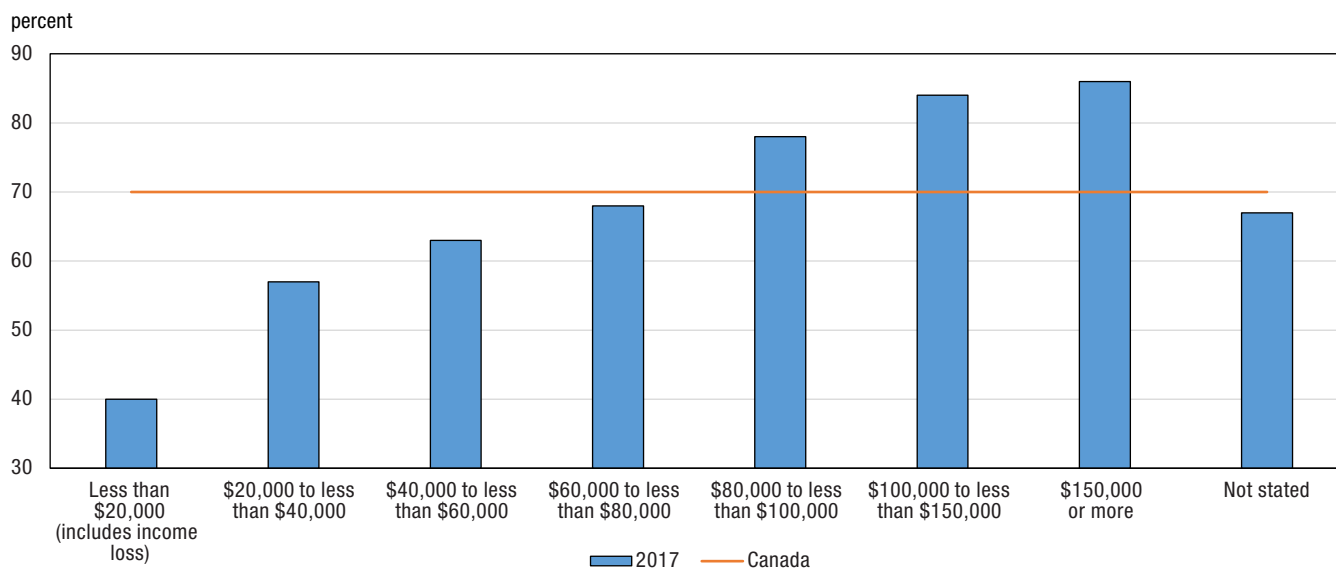


**Chart 3**  
**Access to and use of parks close to home, 2017**



Source: Statistics Canada, Households and the Environment Survey (2017).

**Chart 4**  
**Households with lawns or areas with grass, 2017**



Source: Statistics Canada, Households and the Environment Survey (2017).



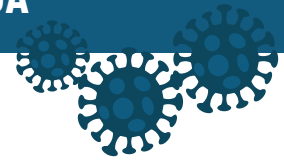
## Methodology

The Households and the Environment Survey (HES) asks Canadian households about their activities and behaviours with respect to the environment. It covers a wide variety of topics including water and energy consumption and conservation, hazardous products used in the home, and the household's interactions with nature. Data from the survey are used by governments to guide policies and programs, by researchers to learn more about Canadians and by individuals to see how they compare with the rest of the country.

In 2017, the HES surveyed approximately 22,000 households between October 2017 and early-January 2018.

The target population of the 2017 HES consisted of households in Canada, excluding households located in Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut, households located on reserves and in other Aboriginal settlements in the provinces, and households consisting entirely of full-time members of the Canadian Armed Forces. Institutions and households in certain remote regions were also excluded.

First conducted in 1991, the HES was subsequently conducted in 1994, 2006 and every second year starting with 2007. Some of the environmental variables from the first cycle continue to be measured, but many new topics have been introduced over the years.



**Table 1**  
**Access to and use of parks and public green spaces, 2017**

	Had a park close to home <sup>1</sup>	Visited a park close to home <sup>2</sup>	No parks close to home <sup>1</sup>	Visited a distant park <sup>3</sup>
	percent			
<b>All households</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>39</b>
Large urban centres (CMAs)	90	86	10	37
Cities and towns (CAs)	85	84	15	47
Rural and small towns	75	80	25	38
<b>Tenure</b>				
Home owned by a household member	87	85	13	41
Home not owned by a household member	86	85	14	34
<b>Dwelling type</b>				
Single detached home	87	85	13	44
Semi-detached, row	87	88	13 <sup>E</sup>	25 <sup>E</sup>
Apartments	88	84	12	36
Other	84	85	16	34
<b>Household type</b>				
Children in household	90	95	10	47
Children-only	95	90	F	F
Adult(s) plus children	90	96	10	49
Senior(s) plus children	78	F	F	F
Adult(s), senior(s) and children	92	88	F	F
No children in household	86	82	14	37
Adult(s) only	89	84	11	45
Senior(s) only	82	75	18	26
Adult(s) and senior(s)	83	81	17	38
<b>Total annual household income</b>				
Less than \$20,000 (includes income loss)	76	73	24	31 <sup>E</sup>
\$20,000 to less than \$40,000	83	76	17	37
\$40,000 to less than \$60,000	87	81	13	42
\$60,000 to less than \$80,000	90	88	10 <sup>E</sup>	43 <sup>E</sup>
\$80,000 to less than \$100,000	91	85	9	63
\$100,000 to less than \$150,000	94	92	6	65
\$150,000 or more	95	94	5	83
Not stated	75	81	25	22

<sup>E</sup> use with caution

F too unreliable to be published

1. As a percentage of all households.

2. As a percentage of households that had a park close to home.

3. As a percentage of households that did not have a park close to home.

**Notes:** The term "close to home" is defined as being within a ten-minute journey of home. The term "park" includes "public green space".

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Households and the Environment Survey (2017).

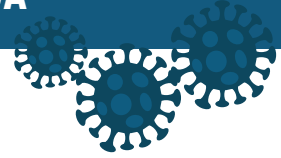
**Table 2**  
**Households that had a lawn or area with grass, 2017**

	Percent
<b>Total annual household income</b>	
<b>All households</b>	<b>70</b>
Less than \$20,000 (includes income loss)	40
\$20,000 to less than \$40,000	57
\$40,000 to less than \$60,000	63
\$60,000 to less than \$80,000	68
\$80,000 to less than \$100,000	78
\$100,000 to less than \$150,000	84
\$150,000 or more	86
Not stated	67

**Note:** As a percentage of all households.

**Source:** Statistics Canada, Households and the Environment Survey (2017).





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