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Keeping Cities from Becoming “Child-Free Zones”

With kids on the decline in urban areas, cities can make themselves more attractive to young families by building more playgrounds.

It's beyond dispute at this point that there's been a central city revival over the past decade or so. Downtowns throughout the country have seen increases in residential population, and commercial districts that were moribund in 2000 have come alive with restaurants and entertainment. If you're seeking evidence, just look around.

Real as the resurgence has been, however, it is one marked by a nest of nuances. Perhaps the most important of them has to do with children and families.

In the past few months, the urban policy websites that help define the debate over cities and their future have nearly all weighed in on a striking set of numbers, ones that focus on the relative absence of children under 18 in some of the most successful city centers. The numbers are straightforward: 13 percent of San Francisco is under 18; 15 percent of Seattle; and 17 percent of Boston. That compares to the national average of 24 percent.

In spring 2013, the Tulane University geographer Richard Campanella wrote an online essay lamenting the fact that children were notably scarce in the newly fashionable neighborhoods of New Orleans, including the one he himself lived in. “Unless gentrified neighborhoods make themselves into affordable and agreeable places to raise and educate the next generation,” Campanella declared, “they will morph into dour historical theme parks with price tags only aging one-percenters can afford.” Within a short time, Campanella's blog post had attracted hundreds of responses, most of them sympathizing with his argument.

Even some of those who have passionately championed the city revival are expressing their concerns over the issue. “In our rush to promote higher-density urbanism,” the urbanist author Kaid Benfield recently asked in a piece for *Atlantic Cities*, “are we inadvertently creating child-free zones that are inhospitable to families with kids? ... If we're as committed to diversity as we like to say, shouldn't that include children?”

A little perspective is useful here. Cities are reviving at a time when the size of families throughout the country is shrinking. The percentage of U.S. residents under 18, which was 26 percent in 1990, has declined steadily since then and is projected to decline further over the coming years. Some of the cities with the lowest percentage of kids, including New York and San Francisco, saw smaller percentage declines in the past decade than the national average. Walk around Lower Manhattan or New York's Upper West Side on a weekend morning and you will see a parade of strollers; children haven't exactly disappeared from urban America's gentrified streets.

Still, there's no denying that the shortage of urban children is something to worry about. When some of the nation's most desirable cities show under-18 populations of one-sixth or less, an imbalance exists that threatens over time to turn otherwise healthy central cities into demographic outliers.

Washington, D.C., is a good example. Over the past decade, it has been growing at a pace far

greater than most American cities. Almost all of the population increase has come from the age 24-35 cohort. Washington has the highest rate of one-person households in the country. And though it has seen a fair number of births compared to other cities—about 8,000 per year—D.C. has found it difficult to keep families living within the city once the children grow a little older. The statistics for other big cities, including those with impressive downtown revivals, are relatively similar.

The worrisome absence of children in reviving urban areas is not a phenomenon that public policy can easily address. There is no magic antidote to high rents and dysfunctional schools. But there is one step that cities can take in the short run to make their central neighborhoods more family friendly. They can see to it that there are places for children to play.

Most of America's older cities are park-rich and playground-poor. They possess huge areas of sprawling parkland that make the city as a whole a greener place, but aren't easily accessible to families living in the inner neighborhoods. Darell Hammond, head of the children's advocacy group KaBOOM!, refers to huge swaths of territory in America's big cities as "play deserts." "Kids aren't playing the way they used to play," Hammond says. "And that has an impact on their health and the community's health."

There are good statistics on the play desert problem in America.

According to a study in 2012 by the Trust for Public Lands, the most playground-friendly city in America is Madison, Wis., with a total of 7.1 playgrounds for every 10,000 residents. Cincinnati is second, with 5.1. By this yardstick, some of the more successfully gentrifying cities in America in recent years have abysmal numbers. Chicago stands at 1.9 playgrounds per 10,000 residents; Washington, D.C., at 1.7; San Francisco at 1.6 and Los Angeles close to the bottom at 1. If you plot the percentage of children in a big city against the number of playgrounds, you nearly always get a correlation. This is not to say what causes what, but it does make clear that quite a few cities desiring a reputation for family friendliness have failed to address a simple problem that is limiting their attractiveness to young families.

Los Angeles is one of those cities. Its confines include the magnificent 4,000-plus-acre Griffith Park, but many of the city's neighborhoods have no usable public playground at all. "In older parts of town," the chairman of the L.A. Parks Foundation wrote recently, "there are many dense miles of residences and commercial properties unbroken by green spaces."

In Los Angeles, play deserts are an old problem. For decades, they contributed to the sterility and monotony of the inner-city neighborhoods where poor people and minorities clustered. Most of those people remained in the city because they lacked the resources to settle further from the center. Now they have been joined by an affluent cohort of urban returnees who have the skills and political clout to pressure the city into creating more green space. Gentrifiers and inner-city old-timers have plenty to argue about, but this is one subject on which they should be unanimous. More green space is good for everybody.

And the need for more and better places to play is slowly becoming part of the national conversation about urban revival. "I think you have a convergence going on," says Darell Hammond, "about what it means to have family-friendly, child-friendly cities."

Two years ago, in the midst of a decline in real estate prices all over the city, Los Angeles purchased 181 acres of available land and used it to create 50 new neighborhood parks. More than 20 new parks have already opened. Most of them are less than an acre in size. But they are big enough to contain up-to-date equipment and to give local kids a place to play other than the street. Some of the parks are actually quite elaborate, like Drum Barracks Park, located on an old oil well site, which

includes statues of camels that once lived nearby.

But you don't need camels to have a serious impact on your city's playground problem. Chicago is a good example. It doesn't so much have a shortage of playgrounds as a shortage of playgrounds any family would want to use. There are 525 city playgrounds in all, not counting those attached to public school grounds. A majority of them are in bad condition, with broken equipment, rotting wooden fixtures and no accessibility for the handicapped.

In spring 2013, the city announced a program called Chicago Plays, which promised to restore 300 playgrounds over five years. Fifty were scheduled for restoration by the end of the first year alone. "It's not a paint job," Mayor Rahm Emanuel declared in announcing the initiative. "It's a total redo of equipment. No other city is doing this." Emanuel promised that when the program was complete, every child in the city would be within a seven-minute walk of high-quality playground space.

The remarkable thing about Chicago Plays is how cheap it figures to be, at least compared to other family-friendly urban strategies. The city estimates that it can restore a dysfunctional playground to good shape for about \$125,000. That means a total cost of \$38 million over five years, all from existing Park District funds, no new money necessary.

New York City is going about playground enhancement in still another way. It is gradually making school playgrounds, normally closed outside school hours, into facilities open to the public virtually around the clock. Some 290 sites were selected for the city's Schoolyards to Play program in 2007, some of them needing nothing other than to be unlocked, and others requiring extensive renovation and capital improvement. By the end of 2013, 229 school playgrounds had been opened to the public, most of them in play desert neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens.

The crucial point is that here, too, the cost is minimal in the context of a city budget of roughly \$75 billion. The initial capital cost projection was \$117 million, with operating subsidies of \$14.5 million a year. New York can afford that, especially given the tangible increase in urban livability that the program promises.

It would, needless to say, be a mistake to treat play deserts as the primary reason families with children move out of gentrified cities. Underperforming schools are the reason most often cited, and with justification. But when weak schools are paired with the absence of playgrounds, the pressure on young parents to decamp for the suburbs can be too much to resist.

No city should want a reputation as a place unfriendly to children. For a relatively trivial sum, it can take a step in the right direction. Any city that doesn't take that step is sending the wrong message.

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