

**Programming and Services for Youth in North Kingston Parks: A Community  
Assessment**

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A Master's Report submission to the School of Urban and Regional Planning in conformity with  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Urban and Regional Planning  
Queen's University

Kingston, Ontario, Canada  
May 2013

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

Neighbourhood parks have been widely studied as places for children to play, socialize, and engage in physical activity. Overall, parks promote physical, emotional, psychological, cognitive, and social development among children (National Academy of Sciences, 2004). There is evidence that active recreation facilities and sports programs, as well as other activities and programs, tend to draw children to parks (Loukaitou-Sideris & Sideris, 2009). However, children and youth are often faced with barriers to participation in activities, such as time and resource constraints and perceptions of safety. In a recent needs assessment of North Kingston, the Kingston Community Health Centres (2010) found that an important priority for improving community quality of life is the provision of activities and support for children and youth over age six. Moreover, participation in organized activities is low compared to the national average. This report seeks to assess youth programs in the neighbourhoods of Rideau Heights and Marker's Acres and provide recommendations for the future by addressing three research questions:

- What are the programming and service needs of children in Marker's Acres and Rideau Heights?
- What community assets exist in Marker's Acres and Rideau Heights?
- How can these assets be mobilized to address the programming and service needs of children in Marker's Acres and Rideau Heights?

### Methods

A community assessment was carried out in order to collect information about programming and services for children and youth in the Rideau Heights and Marker's Acres neighbourhoods in Kingston, Ontario. This area encompasses seven neighbourhood parks: Snider Park, Headway Park, Shannon Park, Marker's Acres Park, Sutherland Drive Park, Neil McArthur Park, and Starr Reid Park.

A review of parks and youth programming literature was conducted to provide a theoretical background and summarize best practices. In order to develop an understanding of community needs and assets specific to the study area, four additional key documents were reviewed, including the City of Kingston's Official Plan and the City's Parks and Recreation Master Plan. Inventories of physical and organizational assets were compiled through the use of direct observations, key informant interviews, and community directories. The physical asset inventory served to describe each of the parks and identify resources present within the parks that can be leveraged when forming partnerships. The organizational inventory identified community organizations and institutions that serve youth or have the potential to partner with youth groups that are predominantly found within the study area. Finally, key informant interviews with service providers and members of the community were held in order to confirm

the results of the document review and asset inventories and provide additional insight into the neighbourhoods.

## Findings

This study identified several areas of improvement for youth programs and services. A review of key documents showed that participation in organized sports and clubs is low in North Kingston because of time and resource constraints, as well as perceived safety concerns. Additionally, there is a need for more programs targeting older youth. Key informants also felt that the parks in Rideau Heights and Marker's Acres are underused; more specifically, there is a lack of spontaneous play and poor use of sports fields.

Fortunately, Rideau Heights and Marker's Acres neighbourhoods have many assets that are beneficial to youth, such as strong community organizations offering a diversity of programs for children and youth, a varied network of park spaces, and the Wally Elmer Youth Centre that provides affordable programming space for youth activities. Moreover, the study area is characterized by resilience and a strong sense of community among residents, which can contribute to the positive social development of children and youth. Finally, interviews with key informants showed that individuals and organizations within the community have a history of collaborating with each other to provide facilities and services to youth.

## Recommendations

Three recommendations were proposed as a result of this study:

1. *Youth should be involved in program development.* Youth should be given the opportunity to participate in dialogue and reflection in order to determine their own programming needs.
2. *New programmable spaces should be located nearby existing neighbourhood parks.* Parks in North Kingston are generally underused by youth, however they may be more likely to engage in spontaneous play if the parks become an everyday part of their lives through afterschool programming.
3. *The City of Kingston should continue to strengthen and expand its partnership base with organizations throughout Kingston.* Partnerships can play a role in addressing resource constraints and pooling expertise from a variety of fields.