

African Americans Perceptions and Use of Urban Parks

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Abstract

Research shows a complex relationship between African-Americans and nature, with fewer visits to parks and less interest in individual outdoor activities. The majority of studies on this topic focus on African-Americans' engagement with National Parks and urban areas, but most are survey-based. This research takes a more qualitative approach, looking at how African-Americans' perceptions influence their decisions relating to parks. The data will be collected through semi-structured interviews of the visitors of the different Chicago Park District locations on the South Side of Chicago. The locations of the natural areas were chosen based off their position in the neighborhood and the size of the natural area being at least one acre of land. The research suggest a difference in the types of activities performed in the urban parks among African Americans and types of amenities a park offers.

Background

Nature & Race – Historic Urban

One hundred years ago, African Americans had to get creative in the ways they enjoyed the outdoors because they were not welcome everywhere due to racism and Jim Crow laws. During the Jim Crow era, many US Parks were segregated. Even some urban parks were racially segregated. The Race riot of 1919 in Lincoln Park Chicago was a prime example of the racial tension and hostility rampant throughout urban communities. The urban parks were meant to be a place to unwind, contrasting the industrial working life at the time (Byrne & Wolch, 2013). Some states did not allow people of color into their state park facilities and continued segregation into and through the 1950's (O'Brien, 2012). Parks dedicated to people of color had subpar facilities and very little funding, as compared to white only parks (McKay, 1954). Some practices continued even after laws were put in place to combat racism and discrimination. The US National Park system is part of the image that comes to mind with outdoor recreation in the US. This park system was racial divided and segregated during Jim Crow era (Byrne & Wolch, 2009).

Nature & Race – Urban

Urban communities are known for having diverse communities filled with people from many different cultures (Sasidharan, Willits, & Godbey, 2005). As more parks were built throughout the city, the differences in quality became more noticeable. Parks in black neighborhoods were smaller and had fewer facilities than their white counterparts (Byrne & Wolch, 2013).

Participation

Barriers as to why African Americans may not be visiting public land areas in as high percentages include: economics, location, misconceptions, perceived discrimination or other forms of racism, fear of unknown danger (Le & Holmes, 2012; Payne et al. 2002; Sasidharan et al. 2005). Other reasons may be due to a lack of motivation. In some urban communities, African Americans may not participate in their neighborhood parks because some lack resources, funding and up to date amenities, which can all be deterrents.

Park Activity

Parks must accommodate the varies needs of different people. People use parks for a variety of different activities, whether it is completing a fitness goal or socializing with friends (Bustam, Thapa & Buta, 2011). Parks offer opportunities for a variety of different activities, depending on group preference. Traditionally, research has found that African Americans are more likely to participate in team sports and fitness activities, rather than the nature-based activities that their white counterparts (Payne, Mowen & Orsega-Smith, 2002; Le & Holmes, 2012; Sasidharan, Willits & Godbey, 2005; Bustam, Thapa & Buta, 2011).

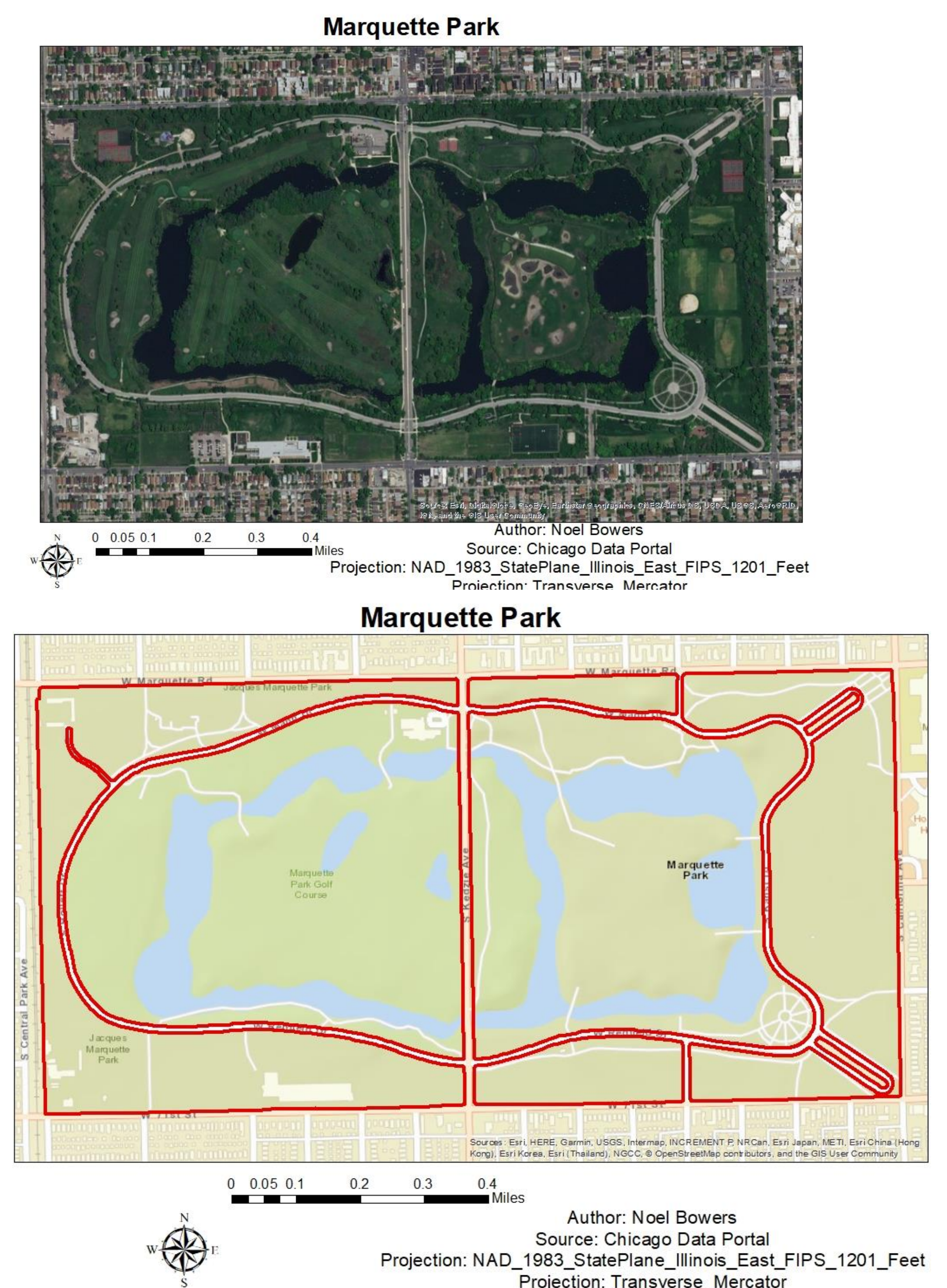
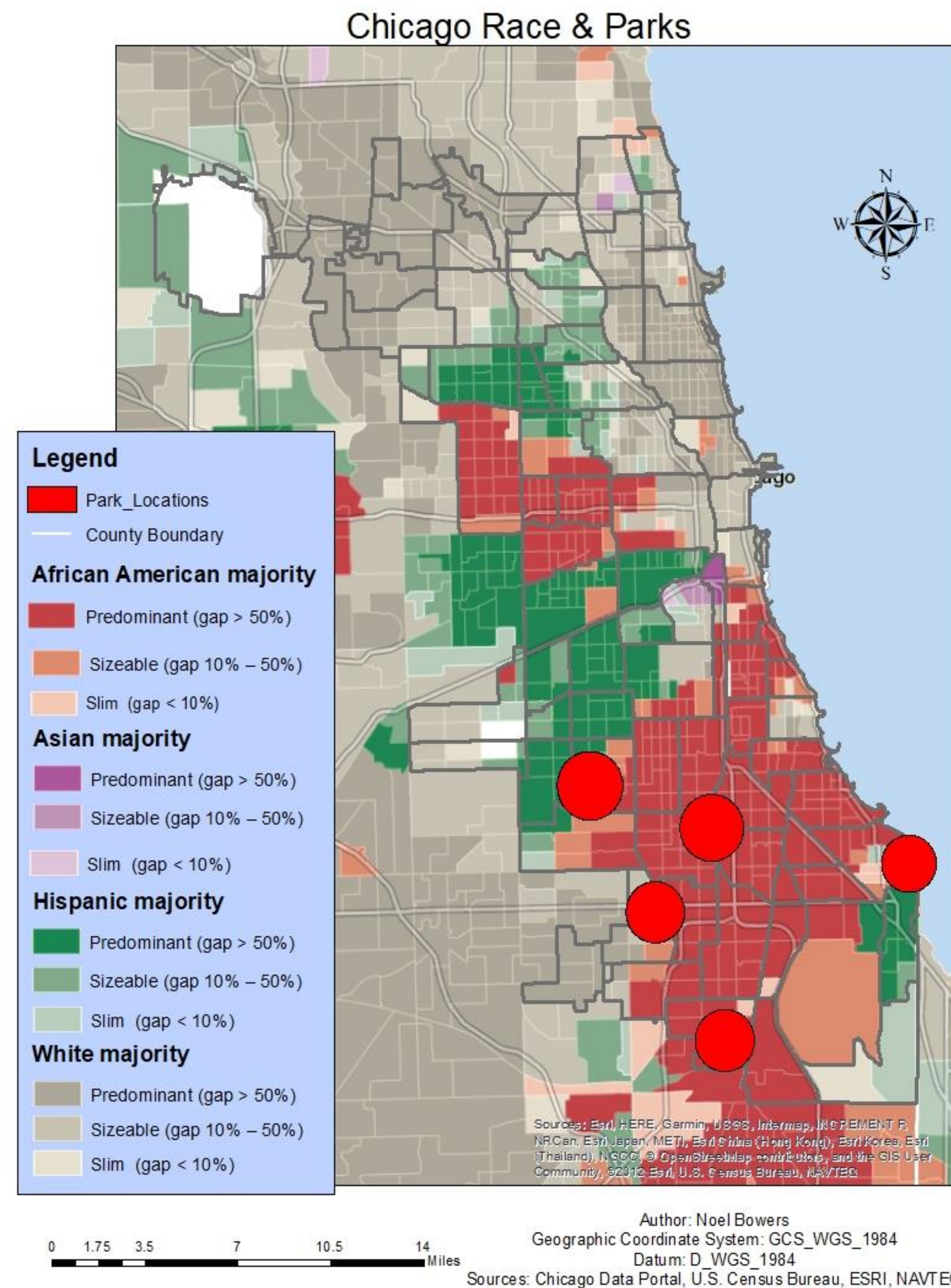
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Methods/Next Steps

The goal is to gain a better understanding of the perceptions of African Americans have about natural spaces. Qualitative interviews will focus on African Americans who frequent their local urban parks on the South Side of Chicago. This study will give participants a sketch map of the park where the interview will take place and will have 7-10 minutes to plot the areas of the park they use the most for their activities. The study will pull samples from 5 different Chicago Park District locations on the South Side of Chicago that have natural areas of at least one acre in size.

The setting of the interview is important to the questions asked. The participant may give more detailed responses if they can be interviewed during a time in which they would typically be using the facilities of the park. The questions asked in the research follow a mixture of approaches to gain varied results. Allowing the participants responses to go between storytelling, opinions and minimal structure for the questions that require focused answers.



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