

Environmental Initiatives to Improve Well-being for Impoverished Americans

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ABSTRACT

Impoverished communities in America continue to be left behind despite the nation's industrialization and improving quality of life. In 2021, the United States Census Bureau reported that 11.6% of Americans still lived in poverty (Creamer et al., 2022). Living at an economic disadvantage, individuals in poverty often cannot afford basic necessities and meet satisfactory living standards. Among these challenges is environmental inequality in which impoverished Americans can lack access to vegetated areas or well-maintained environments (Sicotte, 2013 & Erickson, 2016). The ramifications of this challenge contribute to heightened susceptibility to both mental and physical health complications, including but not limited to depression, anxiety, and heat-related fatalities (Ridley 2020 & EPA, n.d.). To combat the health crisis, this review aims to explore how environmental initiatives – such as green spaces, outdoor community events, and environmental justice – are able to improve the well-being of impoverished communities. I analyze current literature and find that increased interactions with natural environments boost well-being. Additionally, I evaluate active environmental initiatives in America and relate their potential to serving low-income communities. From analysis, it is evident that fostering a deeper connection with the natural environment holds promise for enhancing the holistic wellness of impoverished communities. Future endeavors in public and non-profit sectors should focus on achieving the successful incorporation of environmental initiatives in low-income neighborhoods.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the United States has continued to prosper. There have been incredible advances in technology, medicine, and fights for equality. Making up almost 24% of the total global economy as of 2021, America remains the most wealthy nation with a GDP of \$22.96 trillion (The World Bank, n.d.).

However, even with the growth in various sectors of the nation's society, poverty levels have persisted over the past five decades (Creamer et al., 2022). Civilians living in poverty are one of the most vulnerable groups in America. They often have difficulty accessing food, affordable housing, medication, education, and various other necessities. Furthermore, low-income neighborhoods often have fewer well-maintained natural spaces in their community. Under constant environmental and economic insecurity, these individuals are more susceptible to poor well-being as well as deteriorating physical health (Sicotte, 2013 & EPA, n.d.).

There has been extensive research on the exposure of outdoor spaces and natural lands to battle declining well-being. For example, green exercising, forest therapy, and gardening have all been reported to satisfy mental and physical health (Shanahan et al., 2016, Buckley, 2020, & Shin et al., 2011). The COVID-19 lockdowns have further highlighted these findings. In times of great anxiety, spending time amongst nature provided a sense of security (Bustamante et al., 2022)

In this review, I evaluate the implications of increased exposure to natural environments in impoverished areas where environmental care is lacking. I will continue to examine the efforts and potential of environmental initiatives across the nation that work to increase greenspaces, community experiences outdoors, and end environmental injustice.

Poverty in America

In the 1960s, there was a great effort to reduce poverty in America. President Lyndon Johnson launched programs including Medicare, Medicaid, Job Corps, school lunch programs, and more to accomplish this effort (Confronting Poverty, n.d.). While these programs made remarkable progress, poverty rates have remained between 10-15% as decades passed (Creamer et al., 2022). To understand the current state of poverty in America, trends, inequalities, and causations will be examined. By analyzing these aspects, we can identify impoverished communities that need further support to improve their welfare.

Analyzing Trends in Poverty

Poverty in America has many racial, geographical, and cultural trends. From the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the majority of U.S. counties consisting of high and persistent levels of poverty are in Southern regions (Farrigan, 2021). These areas have been historically poor, and the population majority is dominated by citizens of color. Particularly, African Americans, American Indians, Hispanics, and Native Americans have been the most vulnerable racial groups to poverty (Farrigan, 2021). The current racial and geographic trends imply that systemic factors, historical inequalities, and economic dynamics may contribute to the representation of these racial groups amongst the impoverished population.

An illustrative example is the Mississippi Delta Region which is predominantly African American and bears a legacy of slavery, poverty, and economic struggles. In 2009, it was reported that up to 48% of the counties in the Delta lived in poverty (BBC, 2012). The deep-rooted history of poverty in the Delta reflects the ongoing challenges faced by particular communities of color in overcoming socio-economic disparities in the United States. However, poverty also remains significant in urban areas. Statistics state New York, the wealthiest city in the United States, has an impoverished population of 18% of adults and 24% of children ages three and under. Furthermore, the issue of economic hardship and racial inequality is reinforced as Asians, Blacks, and Latinos were more commonly seen with economic disadvantage (Poverty Tracker Research Group at Columbia University, 2023).

Culturally, there is also a correlation between single-parent households and poverty. The Annie E. Casey Foundation found that only 6% of married couples lived in poverty while 30% of single-parent households lived in poverty as of 2021 (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2022). With the absence of a second income or additional support, single-parent households struggle more to cover expenses regarding food, housing, clothing, education, and other basic necessities.

In conclusion, poverty in America is one of the nation's most prominent issues that has continued to linger. The concentration of poverty in a region is often associated with history, race, and culture, indicating the enduring impact of systemic factors and inequalities. To strive for a more equitable society, it is crucial to empower and address the unique challenges to generate greater well-being for people in poverty.

Environmental Inequality

The interplay between socioeconomic disparities and the environment is apparent. In 2013, a study was conducted on environmentally burdened communities in the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area. Being heavily industrialized, Philadelphia is a region where researchers can examine the types of communities impacted by the environmental hazards from production. When observing the trends of environmentally burdened communities, findings indicated that the lower social classes, which were often racially diverse, experienced more exposure to environmental hazards (Sicotte, 2013). These observations can be attributed to the fact that affluent individuals had the means to move out of Philadelphia's heavily industrialized and polluted areas while less affluent people could not afford to relocate. In addition,

research from the University of Michigan News found that industries targeted minority and low-income neighborhoods due to the lack of resistance resulting from fewer resources and less political influence (Erickson, 2016). The evidence presented presses the importance of addressing environmental inequality and safeguarding the well-being of these vulnerable populations from negative health impacts caused by environmentally hazardous living areas.

Following the observation made in the Philadelphia Metropolitan Area, similar disparities in healthy natural environments were seen in Bay Area communities. Cities with higher income, such as Palo Alto with a median 2021 annual income of \$195,781 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.), had a much higher tree canopy coverage than East Palo Alto, a city with a median annual income of \$96,349 (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Although in adjacent towns, the neighborhoods of Palo Alto had tree canopy coverage of up to 25%, whereas the majority of East Palo Alto had an average tree canopy coverage of only 6%. Uriel Hernandez, an East Palo Alto resident, attested to this observation stating, “I grew up a block from the freeway, so as a kid I had asthma. I was never around trees or nature” (Haque, 2021). Comparing the two towns, the lack of public development for greenery in East Palo Alto is apparent. The discrepancy highlights the effect of income and its relation to healthy and green environments. People living in poverty often suffer from environmental inequality, having limited choices in where they can afford to reside and being unable to contribute to greening initiatives. For example, financial constraints make it difficult to invest in practices such as increasing tree canopy, investing in green technologies, or the installation of energy-efficient appliances. To overcome these inequalities, low-income communities would greatly benefit from targeted outreach, inclusivity, and community engagement that work to improve environmental conditions.



Fig 1. Comparison of Tree Canopy shown in Palo Alto and East Palo Alto. Courtesy by Stanford Journalism (2021).

The Well-beings of Impoverished Individuals

Those living in poverty are more susceptible to declining physical and mental health. One of the most prominent issues seen in low-income neighborhoods is heat islands, an urban area that experiences more heat than its surrounding areas. According to the United States Environmental Protection Agency, lower-income neighborhoods often reported higher

temperatures than wealthier neighborhoods adjacent to them. The causation for higher indoor and outdoor temperatures can be traced to dated infrastructure, more impermeable surfaces in the built environment, and a lack of greenery for shade (EPA, n.d.). This presents a health risk as impoverished communities are at risk of heat-related complications such as heat exhaustion, heatstroke, and hyperthermia. These individuals will only continue to suffer from health consequences to a greater degree as global warming persists with climate change increasing in severity all across the world.

Adding on to physical health complications, people in poverty are more likely to engage in substance usage. St. Joseph Institute, a rehabilitation center, notes that those struggling to make ends meet are more stressed and therefore, more likely to turn to substances to deal with these feelings. As a result, impoverished individuals are more at risk of slipping into drug and alcohol addictions (St. Joseph Institute, 2018). Unfortunately, this coping mechanism is life-threatening. Over-reliance on drugs can lead to irreversible brain damage, weakening of the heart, and death. Addressing and dismantling the link between poverty and substance abuse is essential to maintaining the well-being of impoverished Americans.

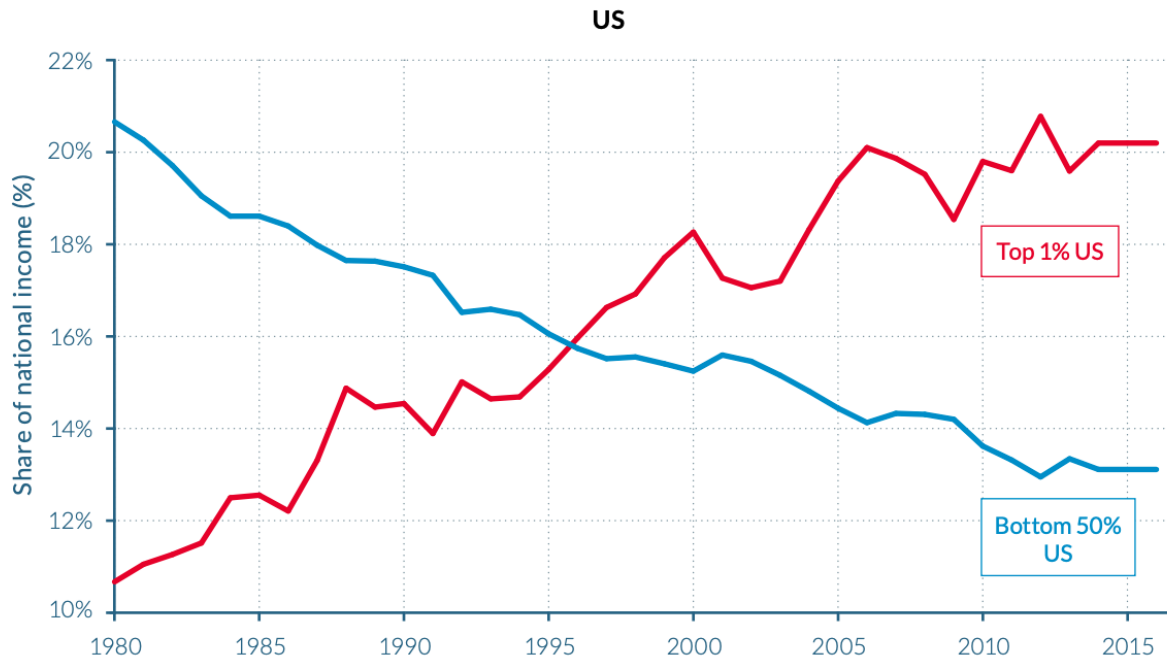
Moving beyond physical health implications, the stress and psychological strain associated with poverty can have profound impacts on mental health. Persistent financial hardships, lack of opportunities for upward mobility, and challenging living environments are common themes in experiencing mental health issues. In fact, individuals with lower incomes are 1.5 to three times more likely to experience depression and anxiety (Ridley et al., 2020). Similarly, a Brookings Institute analysis reported that poor Americans dealt with more feelings of pain, worry, sadness, stress, and anger compared to wealthier Americans (Graham, 2015). With the constant emotional burden of being economically disadvantaged, it is apparent that economic status directs individuals to low living standards. In conclusion, the evidence presented underscores the significant impact of poverty on well-being.

The Future of Poverty

Since the 1970s, the income gap in America has grown steadily. The income growth rate of the lower and middle classes has been slower than that of the upper class (World Inequality Lab, 2018). To better understand why poverty persists in America despite its GDP increasing, Hoynes and her team examined social trends that may explain the phenomenon. One of the conclusions for prominent income inequality was stagnant median wages (Hoynes et al., 2016). Stagnant growth in median wages is detrimental to poverty reduction efforts as it contributes to the lack of upward mobility. Without the ability to climb up the economic ladder, people will struggle to escape the cycle of poverty and its limited access to opportunities.

Another trend that may play a part in persistent poverty levels is nonmarital childbearing. According to a 2016 analysis done by *Child Trends*, levels of nonmarital childbearing have gone up among women of all races and educational levels. In particular, Black women have been the most impacted with 33% of births to Black women with a bachelor's degree or higher occurring outside of marriage (Wildsmith et al., 2018). As a result of increased nonmarital childbearing, single-parent households are on the rise, potentially exposing more families and Americans to economic vulnerability.

As the income continues to widen and single-parent households increase, individuals are more likely to fall into poverty, and those already in poverty will have more difficulty escaping their socio-economic status. Concerningly, they will continue suffering from negative mental and physical well-being from being economically disadvantaged. To help combat these hardships, action will need to be taken, and one way forward is via improvements in the natural environment.



Source: WID.world (2017). See wir2018.wid.world for data series and notes.

In 2016, 12% of national income was received by the top 1% in Western Europe, compared to 20% in the United States. In 1980, 10% of national income was received by the top 1% in Western Europe, compared to 11% in the United States.

Fig 2. The share of national income in the United States from 1980-2015. Courtesy of World Inequality Lab (2018).

The Relationship Between Environment and Improved Well-being

The environment is greatly intertwined with the well-being of individuals. They take great importance in influencing physical activities and the tranquility of the mind. Additionally, they are seen to promote social unity in communities. In this passage, I will uncover the various benefits of community environments by examining engagement with environments during the COVID-19 lockdowns, its effects on the body, and the social interactions fostered.

Isolation and Deprivation of Natural Environments

In 2020, the global community encountered one of the most significant crises of the 21st century, the COVID-19 pandemic. To slow the rapid spread of this disease, various nations established lockdown procedures, and consequently, millions were forced to adapt to new lifestyles indoors and lacked interactions with outdoor environments.

The lockdowns in South Korea illustrate that well-being is linked to the duration spent in green spaces. Green spaces can be referred to as areas comprised of vegetation, examples including parks, gardens, and wetlands. During the lockdowns, the fear of contracting and transmitting the disease prompted residents to limit their outdoor activities, resulting in reduced time spent in green spaces while adhering to stay-at-home orders. A study conducted by Heo and her team concluded that heightened stress levels and a decline in overall well-being were observed as a consequence (Heo et al., 2021). This insight underscores the importance of considering natural environments for well-being as such deprivation from greenspaces had discernible impacts on the mental and emotional state of the South Korean population.

A 2022 study conducted in the United States further reinforces the necessity of environmental exposure for wellness during COVID-19 lockdowns. In contrast to the study conducted in South Korea, this research focused on

how individuals made efforts to increase their interactions outdoors. By collecting anecdotes from older adults in America, the study highlighted evidence supporting the therapeutic value of spending time outdoors. Sixty-three-year-old Edith recalled feeling assured seeing that life in nature continued with normality. Similarly, 87-year-old Mabel commented that walking outside had helped maintain a positive attitude during the lockdowns (Bustamante et al., 2022). These personal anecdotes offer valuable contributions to studying greenspace exposure and their relation to well-being. The evidence presented proves that being in nature fostered resilience and was a good coping mechanism during times of anxiety and uncertainty. Therefore, considering that impoverished individuals are more prone to emotional distress and live in environmentally hazardous areas, the expansion of green spaces and improving living conditions could have significant implications for their well-being.

Health Benefits from Exposure to Nature

Whether it be physical or mental health, various studies have pointed out that increased interactions with nature positively influence individuals. For instance, in Brisbane Australia, over 1,500 residents participated in a study examining health benefits and their relation to nature experiences. The research concluded that both depression and high blood pressure lowered in city residents who spent more time outdoors. In fact, the researchers estimated that if city residents increased their visitation to green spaces for 30 minutes at least once a week, depression cases were projected to reduce by seven percent, and high blood pressure cases were projected to reduce by nine percent (Shanahan et al., 2016). The research supports the notion that nature interactions are essential for health.

Additionally, it has been observed that engaging in green exercise – or exercise in the presence of nature – was found to improve self-esteem and mood. In the UK countryside, a study conducted by Pretty et al. found that participating in green exercise boosts self-esteem and can effectively alleviate feelings of anger, depression, confusion, and tension (2007). Notably, the intensity and duration of green exercise seemed to not correlate with the positive effects shown (Pretty et al., 2007). Similar findings have been reinforced in Queensland, Australia, where individuals reported feeling happier after spending time outdoors (Buckley, 2020). The results from these studies present a case that highlights the significance of engagement with natural environments and mental health therapy. Nature provides valuable support for physical and mental well-being among individuals, increasing happiness and decreasing stress levels. This is especially relevant for impoverished individuals who are likely to benefit from increased accessibility and versatility of natural settings, considering the increased possibility of poor welfare.

Nature also assists those struggling with substance usage and depression. In a 2011 study, depressed alcoholics in South Korea who felt socioeconomic pressure took part in a forest therapy program. Through participating in this program, depressed alcoholics showed significant developments in reduced levels of depression and reported fewer feelings of worry about personal matters and more feelings of relaxation, comfort, and happiness (Shin et al., 2011). By providing a positive and healing experience, engaging with nature serves as a beneficial form of mental health intervention.

Nature's Effect on Social Cohesion

Humans are naturally social creatures that seek social interactions. Face-to-face interactions have remained an indispensable strategy for fostering genuine connections and meaningful relationships. One way these interactions can occur is through green spaces. Green spaces are known to be areas where people gather for social activities, leisure, and recreational purposes. Therefore, they are great spaces for generating social cohesion and community.

Physical social interactions promote connectedness in communities. Having a strong sense of belonging inside a community has been empirically linked to reduced stress levels and healthy habits such as improved sleep and dietary practices. Consequently, individuals are less likely to develop serious physical and mental illnesses, prolonging their lives (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). In light of this understanding, research findings have shown a compelling relationship between nature and social cohesion. Social cohesion is defined as the strength in

connections and the feeling of unity among individuals within a community, carrying profound implications on well-being, especially among impoverished individuals.

In a study conducted in Singapore, researchers found that those who spent more time outdoors participated in more cooperative nature-based activities such as gardening. Accordingly, these individuals exhibited a stronger identification with nature and a heightened sense of social cohesion (Oh et al., 2022). The implications of these findings extend significantly to the happiness of impoverished individuals. For those in poverty, being in nature and engaging in collaborative nature-based activities can develop stronger social bonds and support systems. This, in turn, reduces stress levels due to increased social support. Moreover, enhancing nature in economically challenged communities and initiating outdoor community activities are cost-effective and accessible methods to improve well-being. By harnessing the potential benefits of increased nature interactions and collaborative nature-based activities, we can empower those in poverty to enhance their social cohesion, paving the way for more fulfilling lives.

In summary, natural environments have been proven to play a role in enhancing mental, physical, and social health. This finding holds particular significance for those mired in the hardships of poverty and who navigate a landscape of limited access to resources, deprivation of healthy environments, heightened health complications, and substance usage. It is evident that the integration of nature and its benefits has great implications for creating more enriching lives for impoverished communities. But what types of programs or initiatives facilitate more time spent in natural environments?

Environmental Initiatives as Solutions to Increase Happiness

In today's world, the importance of environmental initiatives, efforts, and actions to address various ecological issues, cannot be overstated. The need for sustainable and equitable solutions to combat the poor well-being of impoverished individuals is paramount, especially as climate change exacerbates the problem. In particular, expanding green spaces, encouraging outdoor community events, and advocating for environmental justice is crucial to enhancing environments in areas deprived of healthy ones. Below, I explore some potential initiatives and their implications.

Increasing and Preserving Green Spaces

Green spaces can provide great benefits for maintaining well-being in a community as they help stimulate social integration, improve engagement, and restore attention. In addition to these social benefits, green spaces are areas where individuals can intake fresh air and involve themselves in physical activity. As a result, those who live near green spaces are happier and live more sustainable lives (Rao, 2020).

Amongst urban areas, Copenhagen, Denmark, has been a leader in the incorporation of green spaces. The city has been successful in using environmental strategies to increase greenery in an expanding city. Certain projects popular in Copenhagen are green roofs, green courtyards, green facades, and evaluating the greenness of developing public infrastructures to ensure the incorporation of urban nature (EuropeNow, n.d). The city of London, the United Kingdom, also shares the goal of integrating more green spaces into the city. Being known as a bustling and populous city, the city has shared objectives for the future of London. The Greater London Authority aims to make over 50% of London green by 2050 (EuropeNow, n.d). With the current progress and ambitious goals for the future, these two cities will reap the benefits of green spaces including higher aesthetic value, resilience to climate changes, and recreational areas for community interactions. The cities send a reminder of how initiatives, even smaller environmental organizations, have the ability to enhance their community by being environmentally friendly. They serve as inspiration that more initiatives could achieve such success and progress to serve residents and neighborhoods.

Non-profit environmental initiatives also have great potential and success in providing nature for local communities. In the fast-paced developing industrial city of Washington D.C., Casey Trees is an organization that works to protect and restore the district's tree canopy. They ensure this by advocating for protection and actively planting

trees. In 2022, the team was able to plant over 115% of its planting goal of 10,500 trees (CaseyTree, 2023). One Tree Planted, a non-profit also focused on tree planting and environmental restoration, is a more geographically widespread organization. Their 2022 impact report estimates that the trees planted by One Tree Planted can sequester 10 million tons of carbon over the next twenty years (One Tree Planted, n.d.). By increasing tree canopy, communities will experience improved air quality, more shade coverage, and better public health. These elements will be especially advantageous to communities in poverty that have historically lacked environmental care.

While planting trees is crucial for preserving and increasing greenery, initiatives like Neighborhood Gardens Trust and Green Spaces LA target smaller local green spaces. Neighborhood Gardens Trust, based in Philadelphia, believes in equitable access to green spaces and shared open spaces. This organization works to preserve community gardens that enhance local neighborhoods and promote unity outdoors. Testimonies of community members working with Neighborhood Gardens Trust reveal the benefits of protected gardens. Viery Ricketts-Thomas shares that The Glenwood Green Acres has "... revitalized the neighborhood. It's a recreational and therapy center." Similarly, resident Victor Young expresses that the Five Loaves Two Fish Community Garden "...is the most beautiful, peaceful place. If we lose this space, we lose the harmony it has brought to the neighborhood" (Neighborhood Gardens Trust, n.d.). These testimonies reveal the vital role of green spaces in promoting social cohesion and well-being.

Green Spaces LA dedicates its efforts to addressing the environmental disparities between lower-income and higher-income neighborhoods in South Los Angeles. With a focus on neglected and poorly maintained community centers, this organization works to transform abandoned green spaces into growing green havens. One significant project completed in 2022 was the Imperial Courts Unity Garden in Los Angeles. As seen in Figures 3a and 3b, the organization managed to revive the community city garden and create a maintenance strategy to care for the garden (GreenSpaces LA, n.d.). By planting vegetation and nurturing these areas, Green Spaces LA not only enhances the physical environment but also provides empowerment for the struggling community.

Neighborhood Gardens Trust and Green Spaces LA demonstrate the capability of non-profit organizations in championing the preservation of local greenspaces. Their efforts have helped enrich the lives of residents of all socioeconomic statuses and inspire a sense of connection to the natural world. These initiatives represent a powerful step towards ensuring that nature is accessible and plentiful, a factor that will greatly benefit the well-being of all communities.



Fig 3a. Imperial Courts Unity Garden in March 2021. Courtesy of GreenSpaces LA (n.d.).



Fig 3b. Imperial Courts Unity Garden in May 2022. Courtesy of GreenSpaces LA (n.d.).

In an era where environmental challenges are mounting for the global community, and even more so for vulnerable populations, environmental initiatives demonstrate the strength of community-driven efforts in addressing ecological issues. By supporting these organizations or increasing the growth of these initiatives, there is great optimism for providing healthy environments for all. Such involvement can lead to a ripple effect of environmental consciousness, inspiring more city-level sustainable practices that can prioritize conservation efforts in policies as seen in Copenhagen and London.

Outdoor Community Activities

One of the greatest barriers to experiencing green spaces is accessibility. As previously mentioned, it's important to interact with environments to relieve physical, mental, and social stress. Recognizing this imperative, the role of environmental initiatives in initiating outdoor commuting events has become pivotal. Two noteworthy examples of such organizations follow, both possessing the capacity to organize outdoor events that facilitate such interactions.

Blue Sky Fund is a non-profit organization dedicated to bringing more outdoor experiences to youth. To accomplish their mission, they have brought over 2,300 students to 14 Richmond schools on field trips revolving around environmental sciences. In their 2021-22 impact report, it was reported that the students experienced an estimated 45,000 hours outdoors through this organization. The schools saw immediate boosts in grades with a 10% increase in students ending the year with a grade of B or higher (Blue Sky Fund, n.d.). The observed improvement in grades highlights a potential connection between exposure to nature and holistic benefits for educational achievements and development.

Meanwhile, Black Outside has been working to engage African Americans, who are the most vulnerable to experiencing inadequate environmental conditions, in outdoor activities. Serving over 500 youth and visiting over 15 parks, Black Outside has managed to create meaningful experiences and foster connections with the natural world. One participant reflects on the profound impacts of the initiative on well-being, expressing, "I became a better person and connected with parts of the world that I've never connected with..." (Black Outside, n.d.).

Both Blue Sky Fund and Black Outside exemplify the influence of environmental initiatives that bring positive change in the relationship between nature and individuals. Their efforts introduce the beauty of the outdoors and the appreciation of natural environments. As a result, there is great potential in empowering and uplifting those in poverty. These initiatives break down barriers and promote nature-based activities, allowing impoverished individuals to experience more interactions with nature which improves well-being.

Fighting for Environmental Justice

To address the disparity in healthy natural environments within impoverished communities, more awareness needs to be brought to this issue. An effective avenue for achieving this lies in environmental justice initiatives. Environmental justice initiatives practice intersectionality, a concept that recognizes the various contributions to identities given their social status (Yale Sustainability, 2022). For example, a disabled man who grew up in wealth might have different experiences from a disabled man who grew up in poverty. By acknowledging the experiences of marginalized communities, a collective effort can be formed to better understand and advocate for those suffering from poor environmental conditions.

Louisiana Bucket Bridge is a non-profit that practices intersectionality by championing the cause of cleaner and healthier environments in Louisiana neighborhoods. They actively address issues by holding corporations accountable for the cost of pollution. Through signing petitions, sending letters, raising money for grants, and more, this organization has been instrumental in protecting local communities and the environment. In 2022, they were able to prevent generous pollution in neighborhoods by halting the expansion of companies producing methanol, plastic, and steel (Louisiana Bucket Bridge, 2022). Through their efficiency in advocating for environmental responsibility and sustainability, Louisiana residents mitigate the harmful effects of pollution and are provided adequate living standards by breathing cleaner air and obtaining purer water sources.

Although Nature For All takes a similar approach to raising awareness through petitions, this organization fights for a different environmental cause. To ensure nature is accessible for all, this non-profit organization works to keep public lands and open spaces of the San Gabriel Mountains and rivers open. In 2021, they have garnered over 9,000 community members to sign petitions to protect public lands and natural spaces (Nature For All, 2021). By doing so, they are dismantling barriers that prevent communities from accessing the natural environment, a vital component to happiness as previously mentioned.

Focusing more on justice for impoverished communities, Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice has launched numerous initiatives to assist Detroit residents. In 2017, over a third of Detroit's residents were living in poverty, resulting in heightened health issues due to economic and environmental insecurity. When surveyed, over 95% of community members agreed that access to green spaces was important for community health. This prompted the organization to launch recycling and composting campaigns and invest in training programs that increase jobs centering on environmental sustainability (Detroit Sustainability Action, 2019). Targeting underserved communities, Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice empowers residents through opportunities for improvements toward livelihoods and neighborhoods. Their commitment has significant potential in closing the environmental disparity gap and enriching the lives of many.

These initiatives demonstrate environmental justice by striving to close environmental disparities. With these efforts, communities, especially marginalized ones, can obtain better living conditions, health, and community engagement, all of which can increase happiness and improve the quality of life for impoverished Americans.

Conclusions

This review evaluated the significance of environmental initiatives and their potential to improve the well-being of one of the most vulnerable groups in America, the impoverished. Economically disadvantaged, various statistics and

anecdotes have proven that having positive interactions with nature can help these individuals alleviate physical and mental distress. To ensure that impoverished communities could achieve such improvements to their well-being, I studied multiple environmental initiatives. Among these, several emerged as highly effective in providing or preserving more green spaces, promoting outdoor community events, and bringing environmental justice, all of which will have profound impacts on maintaining fulfilling lives for those in poverty. While these initiatives will greatly influence advancement toward environmental protection, future research should also examine how the initiatives may differ between rural and urban areas. By doing so, we can better understand how to successfully incorporate these initiatives not only into cities but also within any low-income community in the United States. Finally, research is deeply needed to further assess the value of community-led, green efforts. This will bring recognition and proof that initiatives such as those described in this paper provide integral enrichment to the lives and the environments of low-income communities.

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