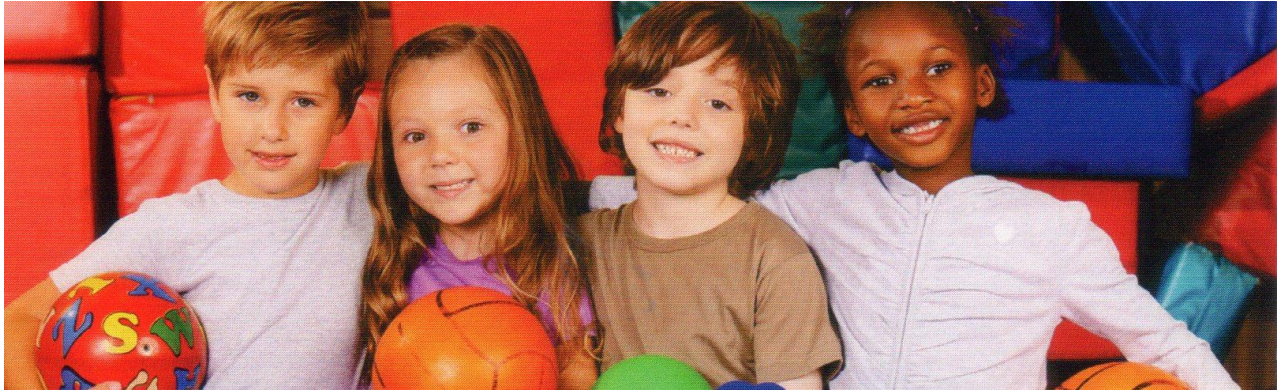


2025 Fall

Kentucky SHAPE Journal



Ky SHAPE 
teaching students to thrive for life

[Kentucky SHAPE JOURNAL]

Volume 63, Issue Number 1
ISSN: 2333-7419 (Online Version)
ISSN: 1071-2577 (Printed Copy)

Kentucky SHAPE Journal
Volume 63, Issue 1, 2025 (Fall Issue)

ISSN: 2333-7419 (Online Version)

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A Message from the Kentucky SHAPE President

Hello KYSHAPE Family and Journal Readers,

What an incredible year it has been for our association. Kentucky's HPE community is truly a source of inspiration!

KYSHAPE's Year of Triumph

We've celebrated historic milestones that underscore the professional excellence right here in Kentucky:

- **National Recognition:** We proudly celebrated **two SHAPE America Southern District Teachers of the Year**— [Juli Neace \(Fort Thomas\)](#) for Middle School Physical Education and [Melanie Smith \(Model\)](#) for Health Education. This is a testament to the caliber of educators in our state!
- **Movement & Connection:** Our **wildly successful #MoveThrive25** event in June brought our community together for unparalleled learning.
- **Investing in the Future:** Last month's **Future Professional Event at Murray State**, empowered our HETE and PETE students, offering them essential best practices, professional growth strategies, and crucial insights into future employment.

Recharge, Refocus, and Renew: Join Us for #MoveThrive26!

It's the **perfect time** to commit to your own professional growth and recharge. KYSHAPE is here to support that journey!

I am absolutely thrilled to announce that our **Summer Conference is locked in for June 24-26 at Tates Creek High School in Lexington!**

We are going **all-in** with our **#MoveThrive26** theme, creating an experience you simply cannot afford to miss:

- **Homegrown Excellence:** Featuring the best and brightest professional practice from Kentucky's own health and physical educators.
- **National Impact:** Hosting **leading HPE speakers** from across the country to share innovative, cutting-edge ideas.

This will be a dynamic blend of high-impact learning, powerful networking, and incredible inspiration. **Mark your calendars now!**

Stay Connected

Be on the lookout for upcoming information regarding our important advocacy efforts like **Speak Out! Day (Feb. 10-11)**, our national presence at **#SHAPEKC**, and the planning for **#MoveThrive26**. Also, have **#SHAPELouisville** on your radar for the spring of 2028! We can't wait to bring the national conference to Kentucky.

Your KYSHAPE Board and I are here to serve you. Please never hesitate to reach out if you need support, resources, or guidance.

Your passion is the driving force behind everything we do. Thank you for making a lasting impact on the lives of Kentucky's students, and for allowing me the honor of serving as your

KY SHAPE President.

Angela Stark, KY SHAPE President

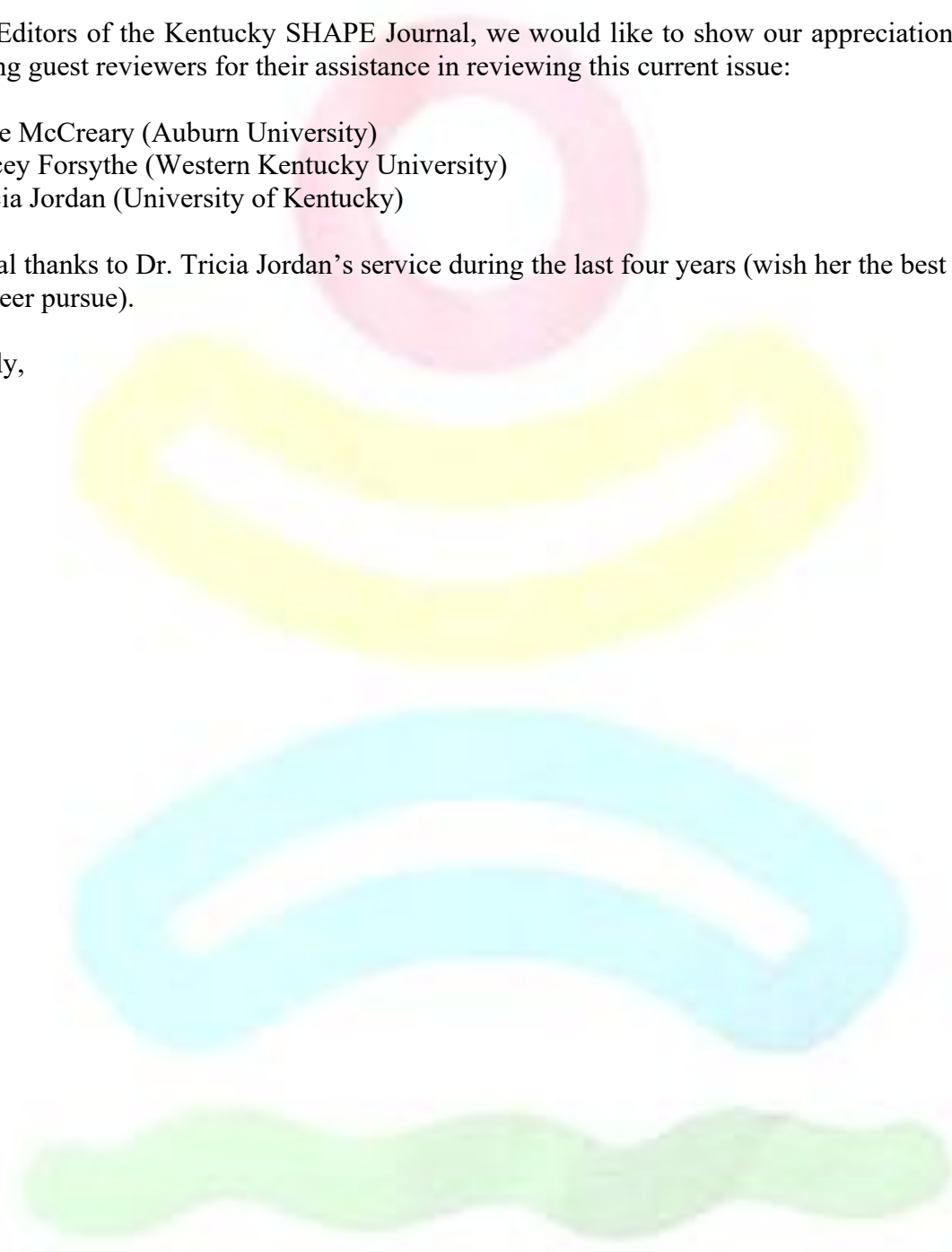
Acknowledgement

As the Editors of the Kentucky SHAPE Journal, we would like to show our appreciation to the following guest reviewers for their assistance in reviewing this current issue:

Dr. Allie McCreary (Auburn University)
Dr. Stacey Forsythe (Western Kentucky University)
Dr. Tricia Jordan (University of Kentucky)

A special thanks to Dr. Tricia Jordan's service during the last four years (wish her the best for a new career pursue).

Sincerely,



Kentucky SHAPE Journal Submission Guideline

SUBMISSION OF A PAPER

The *Kentucky SHAPE Journal* (formerly *KAHPERD Journal*) is published twice yearly (spring and fall) by the Kentucky SHAPE. The journal welcomes the submission of empirical research papers, articles/commentaries, best practices/strategies, interviews, research abstracts (spring issue only) and book reviews from academics and practitioners. Please read the information below about the aims and scope of the journal, the format and style for submitted material, and the submissions protocol. Your work will be more likely to be published if you follow the guidelines thoroughly.

Articles are accepted via an electronic attachment (must be in Microsoft Word format, doc or docx) through e-mail to the editor before the deadline dates. Submissions should be sent to one of the co-editors below based on the topic (nature) and discipline of the study:

- For an article related to health promotion, exercise science and exercise physiology, please email the submission to Gina Gonzalez: ggonzalez2@saybrook.edu
- For an article related to physical education, recreation and sport management/administration, sport sociology, and sport coaching, please email the submission to Jean Chen (yuchun.chen@wku.edu)
- You are more than welcome to contact Steve Chen (s.chen@moreheadstate) for any submission related questions.

Submission Deadlines:

Spring issue—March 1

Fall issue—September 1

Estimated publishing time:

Spring issue—Mid May

Fall issue—Late November

AIMS AND SCOPE

The main mission is to bring together academics and practitioners to further the knowledge and understanding about issues and topics related to health, physical education, sport administration and marketing, exercise science, sport coaching, dance, and recreation. We encourage submissions relating to these topics from a variety of perspectives.

FORMAT AND STYLE

When preparing manuscripts for publication in the *Kentucky SHAPE Journal*, authors should follow the guidelines set forth in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 7th Edition*. Manuscripts should not be submitted for publication elsewhere at the same time being reviewed by *Kentucky SHAPE Journal*. Authors are advised to proof the typing, and check references for accuracy. Articles should include an abstract of approximately 150-200 words including the rationale for the study, methods used, key findings and conclusions. Manuscripts should not exceed 20 double-spaced pages (not including references, tables, and figures).

The manuscript must be typed double-spaced, including the abstracts and references; please number each line. Tables, charts, pictures, diagrams, drawings and figures should be in black and white, placed on separate pages at the end of the manuscript. They must be submitted photo-ready and reproduced to fit into a standard print column of 3.5 inches. Only one copy of each illustration is required, and captions and proper citations should be typed on the bottom of the table and diagrams; please clearly mark where the tables/figures belong in the text. Jargon should be reduced to a minimum, with technical language and acronyms clearly defined. The accuracy of any citations is the responsibility of the author(s). Please try to follow the APA 7th edition to document your citations and the reference lists. For more specific style questions, please consult a recent edition of the journal.

CONTENT

All submissions should be written primarily to inform senior practitioners and academics involved in areas of health, physical education, recreation, and dance.

Research Manuscripts

Research articles should be well-grounded conceptually and theoretically and be methodologically sound. Qualitative and quantitative pieces of research are equally appropriate. Formatting suggestion: Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Results, & Discussion, Conclusion, and Implication.

Commentary Articles or Teaching Lesson Plans

Articles related to literature review, opinion analyses, and discussions of trending topics for various sport-related disciplines, law reviews, and teaching lessons (or pedagogies) and activity plans in physical education are all welcome (limited to 5000 words including references).

Book Reviews

Reviews of books and/or reports are welcome (around 1000-2000 words). Information concerning the book/report must be sent to the editor. Interviews (it would be nice to discuss with the editor beforehand) and best practice/strategy papers of 1,500-3,000 words should be objective and informative rather than promotional and should follow the following format: Objective/Background/Discussion and Practical Implication.

Research Abstracts

Research abstracts (300 words or less) are welcome. The submitted abstracts should have been presented (either an oral or a poster presentation) at the KY SHAPE annual conference in the previous year.

*The editors are keen to discuss and advise on proposed research projects, but this is no guarantee of publication.

Case Studies

The purpose of using case studies in learning environments is to stimulate critical thinking. Such thinking skills as problem-solving, decision-making, creative thinking, visualizing, knowing how to learn, and reasoning should be stimulated as your case is discussed in learning environments.

The guidelines found below provide authors guidance in writing case studies for publication in the *Kentucky SHAPE Journal*:

Use narrative form when writing your case(s). Consider telling a brief story about a controversial or problematic issue or incident in the field of discipline selected from the list of suggested subject areas, competencies, and educational levels. The story could, for example, illustrate principles or theories, describe events, and/or address problems or situations related to the topic(s) you choose. You may include data to be analyzed or illustrated. Include a key character with a problem or dilemma to solve. Within the case, the key character may or may not attempt to solve the issue within the case.

For Example:

Suggested Subject Area	Competencies	Focus	Educational Level
Alcohol sponsorship and sales at collegiate venues	Diversity, ethics, decision making, social responsibility	Sport Management	Undergraduate, Graduate, or both
Class management	Leadership, strategic planning, communication	PE	Undergraduate, Graduate, or both
Design of fitness programs	Scientific training, First Aid training, sport psychology	Exercise science	Undergraduate, Graduate, or both
Tourism economic impact study	Economy, analytic skills, event planning	Recreation	Undergraduate, Graduate, or both
Developing a weight watching program	Nutrition, exercise knowledge, motivation....	Health, and health promotion	Undergraduate, Graduate, or both
Preparing a dance gala	Strategic planning, event management, dance performance	Dance	Undergraduate, Graduate, or both

The case can be based on reality or fictional scenario. It can also evolve from one's own or others' actual experience. It can be deeply personal and reflective, yet it should be written objectively. The case is intended to simulate real life; therefore, the case does not have to be unrealistically neat. Rather, the issue can be messy and complex.

Case authors should provide questions and solution ideas. Often, when writing and discussing case(s), it is advised to allow readers to discuss analyses and compromise, make their own interpretations, and draw their own inferences regarding solutions. Although solutions may not always be extensively included, case authors are encouraged to cover detailed solutions that help educators discuss the cases in a more informed and insightful way with students.

To provide an optimal learning opportunity through the case(s), four elements should be included in the case study submission:

- a. Abstract and learning objectives: a summary of case and its purpose, learning outcomes and applications (75-150 words)

Fill in the following boxes

Suggested Subject Area	Competencies	Focus	Educational Level

- b. Introduction of case: presentation of issues, challenges, problems, and various thoughts
- c. Teaching notes: addressing discussion questions, guidelines for discussions, and pros and cons of different solutions
- d. References

SUBMISSIONS AND REVIEW PROTOCOL

Submission of a paper to the publication implies agreement of the author(s) that copyright rests with *Kentucky SHAPE Journal* when the paper is published. *Kentucky SHAPE Journal* will not accept any submissions that are under review with other publications. All manuscripts submitted will be blindly peer-reviewed by 2 to 3 professionals/experts. Authors will normally receive a decision regarding publication within six to eight weeks. Rejected manuscripts will not be returned.

Co-Editors:

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Jean Chen, yuchun.chen@wku.edu, Western Kentucky University

Managing Editor:

Steve Chen, s.chen@moreheadstate, Morehead State University

(Peer Reviewed Article)**Place, Connectedness, and Home: Storytelling, Recreation,
and Place Attachment in a Kentucky Community**

Geena Flener, Eastern Kentucky University

Michael J. Bradley, Arkansas Tech University

Abstract

A sense of place is deeply personal, shaped by memory, movement, and meaning. This study explores place attachment through informal leisure and storytelling, using a community journal placed in a local coffee shop in Richmond, Kentucky. Over four months, residents and visitors responded to the prompt, “What does Richmond mean to you?” by including poems, drawings, brief narratives, and expressions of memory and identity. Using a narrative inquiry approach, we revisited these entries several years later and engaged them alongside researcher reflection to explore how home, identity, and belonging are experienced and expressed in everyday spaces. The findings highlight the emotional power of third places and the importance of informal leisure in shaping community connection. In a time of social fragmentation and mobility, this project underscores the enduring value of rootedness and the quiet, powerful moments that make a place feel like home.

Keywords: place attachment, sense of place, community identity, informal leisure, narrative inquiry, storytelling, third places, emotional geography

Introduction

Storytelling is a powerful qualitative research method that bridges data collection and dissemination by capturing the lived experiences, emotional depth, and cultural contexts of study participants (Liu et al., 2012). When effectively employed, storytelling invites readers into an intimate relationship with the research, allowing them to experience not only what participants say, but how they feel and perceive the world around them. In recent years, this approach has found growing relevance in leisure studies, where traditional quantitative data often struggles to fully articulate the personal and symbolic meanings people assign to place and recreation (Ding, 2018; Flores & Kuhn, 2018).

In 2016, researchers initiated a small, community-based project in Richmond, Kentucky, to explore how everyday spaces foster emotional connection and community identity. The intent was simple but meaningful: to offer a space for residents and visitors to reflect on their relationship to place through a shared community journal placed in a local coffee shop. The goal was not just to gather data, but to invite public storytelling rooted in the rhythms of informal leisure. The researchers sought to answer: How do people describe “home”? What emotions do they attach to familiar streets, cafés, and neighborhoods? Could a blank notebook in a shared space capture the depth of a community’s voice?

Most commonly, storytelling in research draws from interviews that are coded and analyzed for themes, with the resulting narrative woven together to communicate broader meaning (Saldaña, 2015). This narrative weaving involves creative thought and methodological rigor, balancing the voice of the researcher with the authenticity of the subjects' lived experience. Storytelling can be framed from a personal viewpoint or a detached third-person perspective, and both forms offer value in interpreting how individuals engage with the places they inhabit.

Among the most powerful contexts for storytelling is the exploration of place, particularly how individuals form attachments to the spaces that shape their lives. In recreation and leisure studies, the concept of place attachment helps explain how people make sense of their lives through emotional and experiential bonds with locations (Jepson & Sharpley, 2015; Stefaniak et al., 2017). These bonds are often cultivated in community spaces, parks, trails, sidewalks, coffee shops, places where people are free from obligation and able to reflect, connect, and engage. The essence of leisure includes time, activity, and psychological engagement (Bull et al., 2003). It is often during unstructured leisure, where people gather without formal purpose, that communities are built, culture is expressed, and identities are shaped. These informal, everyday recreation settings are where people forge their strongest attachments to place and to each other.

Despite this, relatively few studies explore the significance of shared informal spaces, those not designed explicitly for leisure but that function as central sites of community and reflection. The *Richmond Community Journal* sought to explore this gap by inviting public responses to the question, "What does Richmond mean to you?" Through this simple prompt, the project created a participatory snapshot of emotional geography: handwritten entries, drawings, poems, and spontaneous reflections that painted a portrait of belonging, memory, and transition.

The original data were collected in 2016. Several years later, the researchers revisited the journal with fresh eyes and deeper reflection, both as researchers and as individuals who had moved through our own transitions in place, community, and identity. This manuscript represents that revisitation. It offers a blended narrative that draws from participant voices, personal storytelling, and the evolving lens of place attachment.

While the scope of this project was modest, the implications are meaningful. For recreation professionals and community planners, this study highlights the potential of informal, low-barrier participatory methods to uncover emotional bonds to place. It also underscores the importance of recognizing and investing in third places as anchors of belonging, particularly in an era marked by mobility, disconnection, and social fragmentation.

Project Framework and Scope

This project began in 2016 as a community-based storytelling initiative aimed at capturing reflections on place, identity, and belonging in Richmond, Kentucky. We adopted a participatory, low-barrier approach by placing a community journal, labeled the *Richmond Community Journal*, in Purdy's Coffee, a locally owned shop and informal gathering space in the heart of downtown. The journal sat on a central coffee table near the ordering counter, surrounded by four comfortable chairs. Each page included a simple prompt at the top: "What does Richmond mean to you?" Participants were invited to respond freely in writing or drawing. A pouch of colored pencils was

included to encourage creativity, but no additional instructions, restrictions, or guidance were given. The goal was to elicit spontaneous, authentic expressions from anyone moved to contribute. Over approximately four months, we informally monitored the journal's use and collected the completed notebook at the end of the period. It contained around 85 filled pages. Contributions varied widely, from poems and essays to sketches, doodles, and brief reflections, all offering personal insight into how individuals perceived and experienced Richmond.

To engage with this material, we employed a narrative inquiry framework, which centers on how people use stories to make sense of their experiences over time and across place (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This approach allowed us to treat the journal not as a data set to be dissected into discrete themes, but as a narrative tapestry, a collective text shaped by multiple voices.

In addition to narrative inquiry, this study also draws on autoethnographic sensibilities. As researchers with our own histories of place, movement, and belonging, we reflected on the journal entries through a deep personal lens. Our stories are interwoven with those of the anonymous contributors, creating a dialogic relationship between individual experience and community expression. This blending of participant voices and researcher's reflection allowed for a more textured understanding of place attachment as something both shared and unique.

Rather than using traditional coding procedures, we engaged in multiple rounds of close reading, journaling our own reactions alongside the entries, and interpreting the emotional and symbolic content in relation to existing literature on place, leisure, and identity. In this way, the project became both a study of community and a reflection on how we ourselves have come to understand home.

While data collection occurred in 2016, this manuscript represents a longitudinal revisit of the original project. Reengaging with the material several years later allowed us to examine not only the participants' evolving relationships to place but also our own. The result is a composite narrative that illustrates how informal leisure spaces, like a coffee shop, can become vital sites of emotional connection and community storytelling.

Findings: Stories of Place, Memory, and Home

This section weaves together personal reflections and participant responses from the Richmond Community Journal to explore how individuals attach meaning to place. Three themes emerged: Memory and Movement, Loss and Resilience, and Redefining Home Through Community. Each reflects how place attachment is shaped by lived experience and informal leisure settings.

Theme 1: Memory and Movement

Place is more than geography, it is a container for memory, emotion, and transition. Many journal entries revealed a dynamic relationship with home, often marked by movement, change, and growing pains. For both participants and researchers, attachment to place was not static but evolved through life events and reflection.

One journal contributor wrote, “Richmond is where I came to college. Richmond is where I failed tests. Richmond is where I learned what love is.” For me, Maynard, Massachusetts, was the first place I called home, a red house with blue shutters, neighborhood friends, and a brand-new kindergarten classroom. I remember my dad lifting me onto the kitchen counter so I could pick marshmallows out of the cereal box while my mom rocked my baby sister to sleep. That house held joy and belonging.

But we moved. The cold of Massachusetts gave way to the humidity and cow-lined pastures of Bowling Green, Kentucky. I left behind my friends and searched for new ones. Children don’t ask where you’re from, they ask if you want to play. I learned that belonging can be rebuilt.

A journal contributor wrote, “You carry home with you. Even when you leave, it lingers.” Our new home on Morningstar Drive became a playground for flashlight tag, scraped knees, and midnight snacks. But change came again, my parents divorced, and we moved into a townhouse near the golf course. I began to sense that home was both what had been and what might come next.

Theme 2: Loss and Resilience

Not all memories tied to place are joyful. Several journal entries touched on pain, grief, or unresolved transitions. These contributions, though anonymous, spoke to the deep emotional geography of everyday spaces. A journal contributor wrote, “I miss the Richmond that used to be. The friends who moved. The places that closed. The me I used to be.”

At the townhouse, I taught myself to cook pancakes and learned, by accident, that foil doesn’t belong in microwaves. I blew one up just before my tenth birthday. Later, my mom got married. Krisz, my stepfather, was from Hungary. He hung a tire swing in the yard and taught me fractions at the kitchen table. We moved again to a creaky wooden house built in the 1950s.

But beginnings often carry new endings. Krisz joined the Navy. He was gone more than he was home. The house quieted. My mom took a job in Lexington, and the moving truck came once again. Another journal contributor wrote, “Sometimes I feel like I never stayed long enough anywhere to belong.” The journal held many similar reflections, losses of people, of time, of stability. But these were not hopeless. They revealed how individuals, despite upheaval, found strength in memory and meaning in place.

Theme 3: Redefining Home Through Community

The most powerful moments came when participants, and we as researchers, reframed home not as a fixed location but as a felt sense of belonging. In this way, Purdy’s Coffee and the act of journaling became symbolic rituals of rootedness. Someone added to the journal, “Richmond is a discovery. Richmond is where my heart is. Richmond is Purdy’s Coffee Shop. Richmond is home.” For me, Richmond became the place I chose. It wasn’t where I was raised, but it’s where I learned who I wanted to be. We moved to a house with bay windows and a porch swing. We hosted Christmas parties and backyard barbecues. I learned how to drive my rusty Jeep and change its oil. That house held joy too, until it didn’t. Another divorce came. This time, I did break. A journal

contributor wrote, “Home isn’t where you live. It’s where you return, inside yourself or out.” College felt like escape and discovery. Richmond gave me the freedom to write my own story. For many contributors, it was the same. They spoke of friends made in coffee shops, conversations that changed their lives, quiet mornings with a warm mug and no plans.

These are not grand events; they’re micro-moments of meaning. As Cooper-Marcus and Francis (1998) remind us, “Places root us, to the earth, to our own history and memories, to our families and larger community.” The voices within the community journal reflected a wide spectrum: joy, grief, resilience, transition. Some entries were deeply poetic. Others were raw, brief, or humorous. But across all of them, a consistent emotional thread emerged: place matters, even (and especially) when it is informal, unstructured, and ordinary. Purdy’s Coffee served as more than a café. It became a third place, a symbolic town square where people could pause, reflect, and connect. For those who wrote in the journal, and for those of us who returned to it years later, it became clear that when stories are shared in community, they offer something essential: a sense of home.

Conclusion

Place is not only where we are, but also who we are. It contains our memories, transitions, losses, and hopes. As this project shows, place attachment emerges not from grand events, but from the ordinary leisure moments that quietly shape identity: sitting in a coffee shop, writing in a journal, reflecting between sips.

The stories collected in the Richmond Community Journal reflect a spectrum of human experience. For some, Richmond was temporary; for others, it was home. But across these varied voices, a consistent emotional current flowed, connection, memory, and the search for belonging. These reflections remind us that even unremarkable spaces can become deeply meaningful.

In the field of recreation and park administration, there is growing recognition that informal, unstructured leisure plays a critical role in well-being and social cohesion. Micro-moments, greeting a barista, reading a journal entry, lingering in conversation, are the connective tissue of community. These are the spaces where people process change, create meaning, and locate themselves within place.

Revisiting this project years later underscores its lasting significance. In an era of digital overload and physical mobility, the need for emotional rootedness is more urgent than ever. As scholars, practitioners, and neighbors, we must continue to invest in and protect the third places, those quiet, everyday settings where identity, memory, and community quietly take root. As Steiner and Williams (2017) suggest, oral histories and personal storytelling are essential tools for understanding how people relate to place and the natural world, especially in recreational and community contexts.

Acknowledgements

The authors express sincere appreciation to the team at Purdy’s Coffee in downtown Richmond, Kentucky, whose warm hospitality and support made this project possible. Special thanks are

extended to the anonymous contributors to the community journal, participants' heartfelt stories, sketches, and reflections provided a rich, authentic portrait of place, memory, and connection.

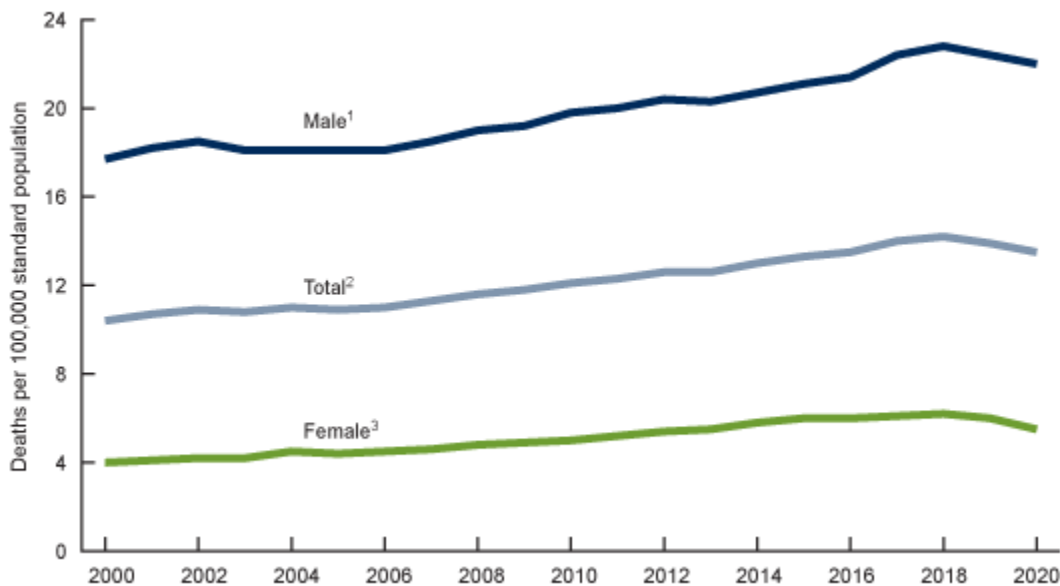


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(Peer-Reviewed Article)**The Mental Health Crisis and Recreation***Liam Kaune, Eastern Kentucky University**Brian Clark, Eastern Kentucky University***The Mental Health Crisis**

In the previous five years, newsreels and social media feeds were, and still are, heavily saturated with headlines reading ‘mental health,’ ‘depression rates,’ and other keywords related to mental health. Mental health is the state of mental well-being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, recognize their abilities, learn effectively, work productively, and contribute to their community (World Health Organization, 2022). The COVID-19 Pandemic was a powerful catalyst for the deterioration of mental health worldwide (Chhabra et al., 2022; Supke et al., 2024). This deterioration is so severe that the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) declared a ‘Mental Health Crisis’ in the United States. Many mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, bipolar disorder, eating disorders, body dysmorphia, and burnout, were exacerbated by the pandemic, yet remain difficult to identify and quantify. The specific mention of suicide rates highlights the tragic effects of the crisis. Because deaths must be accurately cataloged and recorded, suicides and overdoses remain the ‘bellwether’ for mental health, and the ringing is loud and clear. Between 2000 and 2020, the overall suicide rate increased by 30% (Garnett et al., 2022).

Figure 1. Suicide Rate from 2000-2020*NCHS Data Brief No. 433 (Garnett, Curtin, & Stone, 2022)*

There was an increasing trend in mental health issues before the pandemic, visible in Figure 1, which was exacerbated by ‘pandemic-related factors’ (Garnett et al., 2022). The suicide rate for

females aged 10-14 has increased by a factor of 3, and for the 15-25 age range, it has increased by 87% (Garnett et al., 2022). One contemporary study suggests that the mental health crisis continues to deteriorate, despite ‘initial hypotheses and hopes’ (McKenney et al., 2025, p. 4). The authors of this study report that, for transition-age youth, self-report ratings for symptoms of anxiety and depression are higher in 2022 than in 2020 or 2021 (McKenney et al., 2025). The pandemic only compounded what already existed as a mental health crisis and continues to plague the country.

Possible Solutions through Recreation

The myriads of factors relating to the mental health crisis prevent a clear and straightforward solution. However, the CDC maintains that public health practices are the most effective method to combat the crisis and asserts that a focus on positive and negative mental health ‘drivers’ like environmental or societal factors can prevent mental distress (CDC, 2025). CDC seeks to target these ‘drivers’ through the cooperation of organizations and individuals at all levels of government and community (CDC, 2025). Their goal through this approach is to “prevent mental health conditions before they develop or worsen” (CDC, 2025). Such cooperation between entities to reduce the mental health crisis may prove effective in the realm of recreation: another pair of researchers suggests that coordination and joint programming between public health agencies and parks and recreation departments can accomplish more work with fewer resources by increasing the ability to share goals, data, and knowledge (Risisky & James, 2022, p. 5; World Health Organization, 2022). The field of Recreation sits at a critical intersection between diverse groups of people, myriad activities, and cultures within the United States. Through innovative recreation programs, encouraging and providing access to green spaces, and cultural change, the recreation industry can take a leading role in a public health defense that may help mitigate the effects of the mental health crisis (Risisky & James, 2022, p. 1; World Health Organization, 2022).

How Recreation Can Positively Impact Mental Health

Benefits of Physical Activity

Exercise, one of the primary goals of recreation in the US, is essential for maintaining positive mental health. Expert research also suggests that exercise can reduce the burden of COVID-19. A 2023 study conducted a cross-sectional and longitudinal survey in Germany and China, examining the relationship between exercise and positive mental health. By measuring the relationship between an individual’s amount of exercise and positive mental health, the researchers were able to determine a positive relationship between the two factors in two different countries: the authors state, “Despite the different national COVID-19 contexts, similar result patterns were found in both countries” (Brailovskaia et al., 2023, p. 1193). Furthermore, the identified patterns indicated that regular physical activity, regardless of category, was associated with a positive relationship with positive mental health, and that individuals who regularly engaged in physical activity were at a lower risk of experiencing a high mental burden from COVID-19 (Brailovskaia et al., 2023, p. 1194). This finding aligns with other research that suggests a relationship between physical activity and positive mental health outcomes (Bai et al., 2024). This data provides helpful insights into the mental health crisis. First, there is a clear relationship between physical activity, regardless of its type, and positive mental health outcomes, which means exercise can also serve as a potential deterrent against the psychological burden of COVID-19 (Bai et al., 2024; Brailovskaia et al.,

2023). Second, recreation programs are not limited in programming options. Local public health initiatives can coordinate with recreation organizations to effectively target specific audiences and increase the number of participants across a broad range of programming, rather than trying to convince all groups to participate in a single type of activity.

Benefits of Time Spent in Nature

Beyond exercise, recreation programs, and public health initiatives, another effective remedy for this crisis is time spent in green spaces. COVID-19 has significantly contributed to the mental deterioration of Americans, but as mentioned prior, the mental health crisis existed before the pandemic (CDC, 2025; McKenney et al., 2025). Research suggests that one contributing factor is the advancement of technology, specifically social media. There appears to be a link “between screen time use and increased anxiety and depression in college students” (Deyo et al., 2023, p. 3025). Increased screen time is linked to a sedentary lifestyle, which further exacerbates mental health symptoms and limits the possibility of spending that time engaged in other activities (Deyo et al., 2023). While the researchers further proved the relationship between screen time and adverse mental health outcomes, they also found data that suggested more time in nature resulted in lower depression and stress (Deyo et al., 2023). This research reaffirms the importance of time spent in nature for the mental health of college students. Despite a lack of apparent effect from time spent in nature on anxiety, the evidence suggests that time spent in nature can yield a reduction in other negative mental health outcomes. Other research agrees with these findings (Bettmann et al., 2024; Pomfret et al., 2025). Pomfret and colleagues (2025) suggest that outdoor adventure activities confer high-level, long-term psychological benefits upon participants. They claim that regular participation in adventure activities can enhance identity development, improve emotional well-being, and create an environment in which long-lasting and positive transformations can occur (Pomfret et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the researchers state that public health officials can also utilize this research. They claim that their findings can be applied to public health policy because “These findings... offer insights into how to prevent the onset of mental health conditions and enhance mental health for those with diagnosed conditions through actively engaging with nature-based settings” (Pomfret et al., 2025, p. 19). Both of these studies suggest that recreation can be highly influential in shaping public health legislation and combating negative mental health outcomes (Deyo et al., 2023; Pomfret et al., 2025).

Even though time in nature appears to be a remedy to the mental health crisis, efforts to administer it can be frustrated by a lack of accessibility. During the pandemic, Bergeron (2024) suggests that options for stress relief and social interaction were inaccessible to urban communities without green spaces or with overcrowded parks. Additionally, many individuals from these communities suffered from a higher rate of pre-existing conditions, making them more susceptible to the effects of a lack of exercise and increased stress (Bergeron, 2024). The lockdown revealed just how isolated many Americans, especially those in urban environments and within communities of color, are from nature because of historical practices like redlining, displacement, and income-based segregation (Bergeron, 2024).

However, there are examples of urban environments that effectively utilize green spaces. Germany is a country that effectively integrates natural environments into its cities. The Ruhr Valley is one such example. Once a mining region, the area was once home to numerous factories and pieces of mining infrastructure that lay derelict and unused. Germany utilized public funding over the course of 10 years to transform several unused industrial sites into extensive areas of green space (Burgess, 2015). To effect change, the parks and recreation industry must be innovative. Burgess (2015) claims that through innovation, community engagement, and interagency collaboration, nations can transform previously derelict spaces into cultural hubs with green spaces. Finding community-based and innovative planning solutions to integrate nature into urban environments can be indirect but is critically important for public health.

Implications and Recommendations

Public Policy Solutions

From a public health perspective, solutions are broad. Strategies such as ‘point-of-decision prompts’ (e.g., ‘take the stairs’ signs on elevators), targeted community media campaigns, and social-support strategies in community settings show some evidence of being effective aids in increasing physical activity (Kahn et al., 2002). However, these methods need to be supplemented with collaborative policies between public health organizations and recreation organizations to better address the community's needs (Risisky & James, 2022). As a public health objective, similar strategies can be implemented to increase rates of exercise and encourage spending time in green spaces. Education on healthy activities through community-wide campaigns shows evidence of increasing those behaviors (Kahn et al., 2002). Additionally, creating or enhancing accessibility to locations for physical activity, in conjunction with informational outreach activities, has been shown to have a positive relationship with increased rates of physical activity (Kahn et al., 2002).

One of the most critical issues in accessibility is creating walkable environments. Research indicates that walkable environments (like those found in Chicago or Philadelphia) have a strong positive relationship with adults meeting aerobic physical activity guidelines (Althoff et al., 2024). Public health objectives should be focused on creating walkable and green cities. Increased access to natural spaces has been shown to play a key role in promoting positive mental health (Bergeron, 2025; Deyo et al., 2023). Public health officials and recreation professionals should utilize this research to advocate for policy changes, both large and small, within their respective communities.

Programming Solutions

From a programming perspective, solutions to increase physical activity can be highly personalized and varied. The type of physical activity matters far less than simply engaging in physical activity (Brailovskaia et al., 2023). This means that recreation programmers can meet people where they are with a variety of activities. As long as people engage in some form of exercise, research suggests they will be less likely to experience negative mental health symptoms (Brailovskaia et al., 2023; Bai et al., 2024).

Time spent in nature can also be a protective factor (Deyo et al., 2023). Programmers should consider implementing natural elements in their programs. For example, traditionally indoor activities, like board games, painting, music, and yoga, can be feasibly conducted in a natural space. Programmers can enhance the benefits of a program through a modest amount of extra effort and creativity.

Adventure programs can also yield positive mental health results (Pomfret et al., 2025). Nature-based adventures like hiking and climbing can produce long-term psychological benefits to participants through the completion of challenging objectives (Pomfret et al., 2025). Programmers can also implement small-scale versions of adventure through day hikes or challenge courses at a low cost, without completely altering existing program schedules.

Discussion

The mental health crisis is a serious issue that continues to plague the United States. Through this research, public health officials have actionable statistics upon which they can begin formulating and advocating for policy. Much of this research shares a common theme of a desire to apply these results to policy change (Deyo et al., 2023; Pomfret et al., 2025). By advocating for a healthier, less sedentary lifestyle, increasing time spent in green spaces, and addressing accessibility issues to green spaces by borrowing from other nations, it is possible that recreation professionals can begin to lay a foundation for future generations. This foundation of preventative mental health measures would alleviate the issues of the current mental health crisis and create a roadmap for future generations to prevent such a crisis from striking again.

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