

# **Dog Park Use in Christchurch and Potential Improvements**

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## *Executive Summary*

- What is the current use of dog parks and what changes can be made to benefit the community as a whole?
- There has never been a study of dog park usage in New Zealand and there is very limited literature worldwide relating to dog parks. Dog parks need to be maintained and they draw on cities financial resources. Therefore it is important to find out if they are being utilized by dog owners, and if the facilities and location of these parks are benefiting dog owners throughout the city of Christchurch. With the assistance of City Care this report aims to research and examine usage and adequacy of dog parks through the city of Christchurch.
- The main method in which we used to research dog parks was through a questionnaire which would give us qualitative and quantitative data. 81 questionnaires were completed at 3 different dog parks Styx mill, The Groynes and Victoria Park. Alongside questionnaires, data on dog ownership distribution across the city was collected and manipulated into a map.
- Key findings to come out of this research showed high usage of dog parks, especially on weekends and overall satisfaction with facilities, with The Groynes proving to be the most popular. Most dog owners drove to dog parks due to their peripheral location in the outer suburbs of the city. Key findings also included suggested improvement to facilities specifically; covered areas, more bins and better car parking facilities. Overall there is satisfaction with dog parks a more central dog parks was identified as being of great benefit, although this has limitations of available space and interaction with other recreational areas in the inner city.
- Major shortcomings/ limitations of this research relates to the proportion of questionnaires collected in each dog park, and the differing facilities in these parks. Alongside this GIS analysis would have provided a clearer map in relation to dog distribution across the city.
- Future research on the subject of dog parks should concentrate on the number of dog per suburb and how these compare to the current location of dog parks. More recent data needs to be collected on this and GIS map analysis would provide comprehensive examination of the ideal location of dog parks, and would highlight exact areas in need of more dog park facilities.

## *Introduction*

The following report examines and discusses the use of dog parks in Christchurch and changes that possibly need to be made, an area of research in the academic world that is relatively under-studied, particularly so in New Zealand. The core research question of which this report is formulated around is “What is the current use of dog parks in Christchurch and what changes can be made to benefit the community as a whole?” This question was researched using three main dog parks in Christchurch that are all comparable; The Groynes and Styx Mill located in the north of the city and Victoria Park towards the south of the city. The primary objectives of this study are the following; to gain an extensive and accurate overview and understanding of if or how the current dog parks in Christchurch are being used, who is using the dog parks in Christchurch, which dog parks are being used the most and why, what (if any) changes need to be made to the current dog parks to benefit the community as a whole and is there a need for a dog park to be created at a new location. These objectives were achieved through our main research tool, a questionnaire consisting of thirteen questions designed to give us relative answers to these questions without prompting for particular responses.

What makes this an exceptionally interesting and intriguing area of study is the fact that it is under-studied, which allows us to be the first to research this topic in Christchurch. City Care (our community partner) has little to no information regarding the use of the dog parks they manage in Christchurch which therefore means the present state of knowledge regarding this topic is scarce. On a global scale, there are some studies and research that have been done in this field that gave us an approximate view of how we might conduct our research and what we might find when doing so. But as none were a realistic comparison to our planned research it is fair to say that we were leading the way for research regarding the current use of dog parks in Christchurch and what changes may need to be made.

The first component of this report will examine the current literature that is available regarding this or similar areas of research. It will also highlight previous studies that we have drawn from to formulate ideas about our methodology as well as discussing why this area of research is of interest to our community partner, City Care. The report will then move on to outline and discuss the methods that were used for this study. This will involve both how our information was collected and how we used and analysed that information. Next will be the largest section of the report consisting of our results, findings and discussion. Within this section we will comprehensively illustrate and discuss our results which for the most part will be presented as graphs. We will establish the significance of our results both to the wider relevant literature and to answering our research question and objectives and then thoroughly discuss the patterns we found and limitations we encountered. The last academic component of this report will be in the form of a conclusion drawing together our main findings in relation to our topic, highlighting our recommendations to City Care and briefly commenting on areas of research we feel should be assessed in the future.

The final sections of the report will consist of acknowledgements to external contributors to the research and a complete reference list of all referred to within the report.

## *Review of Relevant Literature*

There is very limited literature on research projects relating to dog parks, in New Zealand and worldwide. A study of such nature has never been undertaken, therefore the literature in which we reviewed provided illustrations of research methodologies as opposed to insight into what our results may look like or what has happened in other ‘dog parks’ research. The literature which we reviewed also provided an overview of the broad topic ‘animal geography’ and we were able to see a historical progression of research.

The first authors in which we focused on were Emel (2002) and Wilbert (2009). These journal articles provided an overview of past research and a historical progression of the subject of animal geography. Wilbert (2009) was particularly useful as it was a comprehensive overview of zoogeography and went on to develop ideas of animals being considered in the urban space. It was from such readings that we further explored the concept of animals in the urban space, and how dogs fit into the urban environment. Overall both authors were able to clearly demonstrate and deepen our understanding of how the subject of animal geography has changed over time. From a typically ‘zoogeography’ approach, to a deeper cultural examination into how animals can be seen as a powerful symbol of place.

Secondly, research by Ioja et al (2011) in Romania showed important ideas on how dogs are perceived by owners and non owners in a public park setting. Valuable insights offered in this reading illustrate the diverse ways in which dogs can be viewed in public space, an important thing to note here is that they can at times be feared and similarly dog owners can feel segregated due to the presence of their dogs. Such ideas presented by Ioja were influential in our decision to visit Hagley Park as a site of research alongside The Groynes, Styx Mill and Victoria Park. Hagley Park is an area not specifically set aside as a dog park, it is an area used for a number of recreational purposes. Therefore by visiting Hagley Park we are able to see how dogs integrate into a park with multiple uses.

Whilst the above listed readings helped broaden our understanding of animal geography and dogs in the public space, the most valuable literature which we would replicate research methodologies from was that of Gillespie et al (1996) and Downes et al (2011). Gillespie’s research demonstrated methods and ways of carrying out research relating to specific dogs, events and dogs in everyday life and public space. We have replicated methods in her research and have drawn on her ideas of experiencing the research subject for ourselves. It was through examining her auto ethnographic research that we decided to physically visit dog parks and areas where dog owners will be. This will allow us to converse with dog owners to gain a deeper understanding and form a relationship with dog owners who we are wanting to extract information from.

Alongside Gillespie et al (1996), Downes’ (2011) research on the distribution of cats and dogs in Ireland was the template which we used to develop our research on numbers of dogs per suburb throughout the city of Christchurch. In his paper Downes presents clear maps which show pet distribution across Ireland by using a shaded colour spectrum, then offers explanations of such spatial patterns. This paper provided a valuable template and clear

format which we would endeavour to replicate when communicating dog ownership patterns throughout the Christchurch.

Finally, once we had examined current literature we were able to draw on ideas and methodologies of previous academics and formulate our own research methods, which would help answer our research question.

### *Methodology*

Our primary method of collecting information to determine what the current use of dog parks in Christchurch is was through completing research in 3 different dog parks around the city; Victoria Park, The Groynes, and Styx Mill. We focussed on these parks because they all have large fenced areas for dogs to be off the leash which meant our data is all comparable.

At these dog parks we interviewed dog owners using a questionnaire consisting of 13 questions that gave us information pertaining broadly to four categories; travel to the dog parks, satisfaction of facilities, possible new dog park locations and general demographic information. The questions varied in format between structured and open-ended, giving us both qualitative and quantitative responses.

It is important to note that in some cases, for example if it was windy, the interviewee would ask us to record their answers for them. We feel this was a limitation to our research as it discouraged people from expressing their opinions freely.

In total we ended up with 81 completed questionnaires that were compiled from visiting the dog parks on numerous weekdays and weekends which enabled us to have an accurate overview of many different dog park users' and their opinions. This in turn will allow us to make more accurate recommendations that benefit the community as a whole.

From these questionnaires we had to formulate all the answers into useable data. For the answers of the structured questions, such as Question 5 "How well do the current facilities here meet your dog park needs?" which was answered by ranking on a number scale, this was relatively easy to do as all that had to be done was counting and grouping the same ratings. This then gave us straightforward data to use for graphs and results.

However for the open-ended questions this was a more difficult task. It involved taking the qualitative data and quantifying it so that results and relationships were able to be drawn out, giving us useful and readable data. For example for the question "In what ways could the facilities at this park be improved?" we had many different responses. We took all of the different answers and interpreted and categorised them according to their similarities. We could then do a count of how many responses were in each category which gave us more applicable and accurate data.

Once all the data was in the same numeric format we were able to draw conclusions and illustrate our results through things such as graphs.

A second part of our method was to visit Hagley Park, a park that does not have a designated, fenced dog park area. We did this to 1) gain observations of if dog owners visited Hagley park with their dogs and if so how they used the park with regard to on or off the leash and 2) to informally interview park users, both with and without dogs to gauge whether they would be in favour of creating a fenced dog park within Hagley.

Another method we used to answer the second component of our research question “what changes can be made to benefit the community as a whole?” was to contact the Christchurch City Council and get the number of registered dogs per suburb. From this we made a colour graded map that shows the number of dogs per suburb, allowing us to see where the highest registered dog numbers are and if the dog parks in Christchurch are meeting the needs.

A limitation to this was the fact we were unable to obtain a map that showed accurate suburb boundaries in Christchurch which meant we were unable to produce a more sophisticated GIS map.

We also obtained information from City Care regarding the approximate land areas of each of the dog parks enabling us to work out whether areas suggested for new dog parks have enough available space to be a viable option.

Overall we feel the combination of these methods gave us enough relevant information to continue our research and get sufficient results.

### *Findings and Implications*

#### **Groynes**

As the largest dog park in Christchurch and from personal observation, the busiest park also we discovered that this was the highest rated dog park by users. It has a large fenced area with different sections for large and small dogs as well as having exercise activity facilities such as jumps and tunnels. From our data in figure 1 we see that no one rated the Groynes less than 4/5, resulting in this dog park being rated by the users as the best dog park in Christchurch. However it is the least central in Christchurch being on the northern outskirts of the city creating a spatial and temporal problem for travelling here.

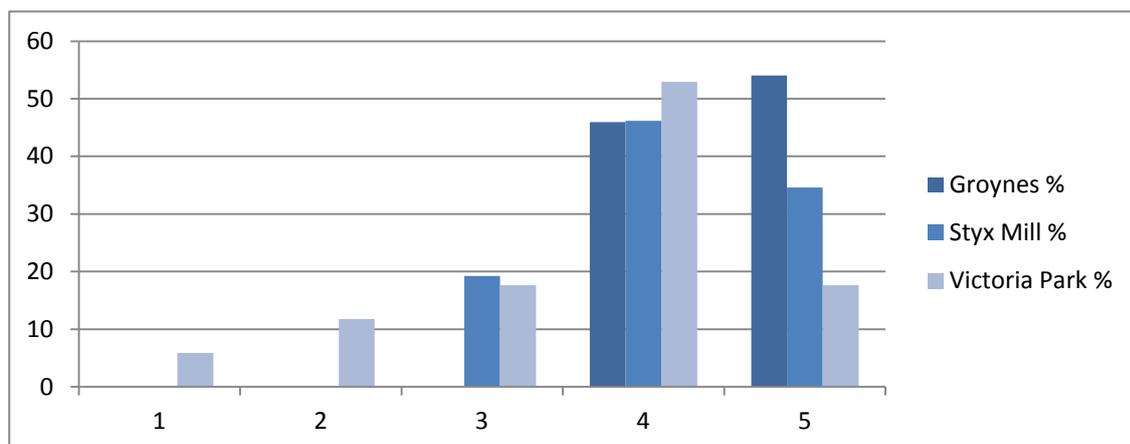


Figure 1. Scaled facility ratings of all the surveyed dog parks.

Correlating the data for the scaled rating of the facilities and the average travel time to get to the park we can see in figure 2 that 54% of the users are travelling over 15 minutes to get here and in some cases past other dog parks to get here. This generates the idea of proximity vs. quality and that people are willing to travel further if the facilities are better.

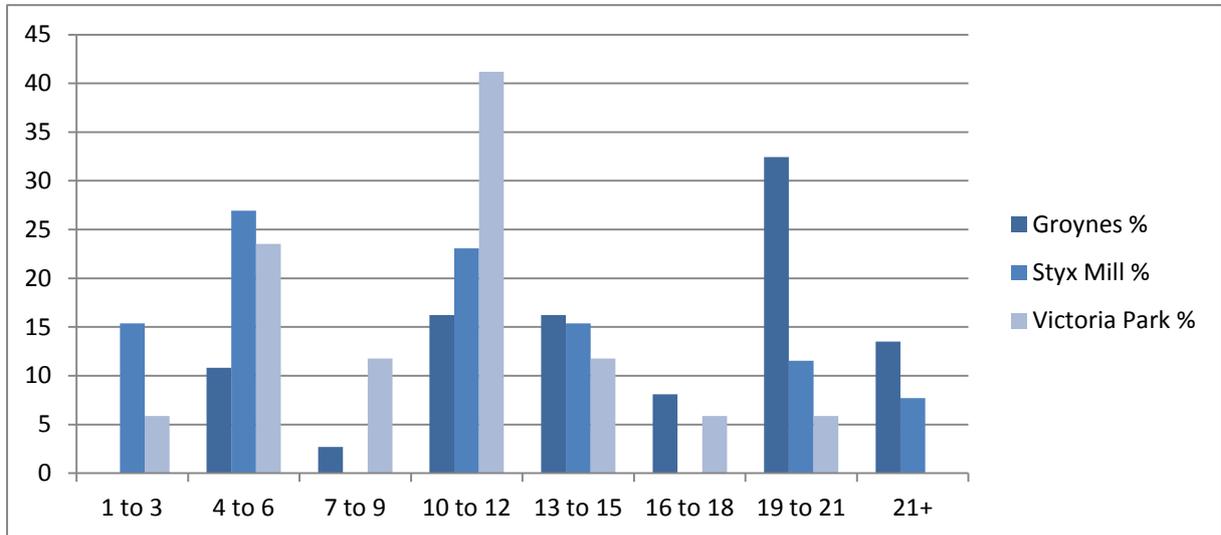


Figure 2. Approximate travel time of users to dog parks.

We found that most of the users would only come here once or twice per week (figure 3). This correlates to the average travel times presenting the idea of proximity vs. usage. People are willing to travel further to use this dog park due to the better facilities but as a result are less likely to come here more than once or twice a week.

The idea that proximity plays a role in the frequency of dog park visits suggests therefore that if a more localised off leash dog park was created or if existing dog parks brought up to similar standards as the Groynes, we would expect to see the frequency of dog park use increase. If this were to be implemented the number of people travelling by car may decrease as there is a shorter distance and people may be more willing to walk.

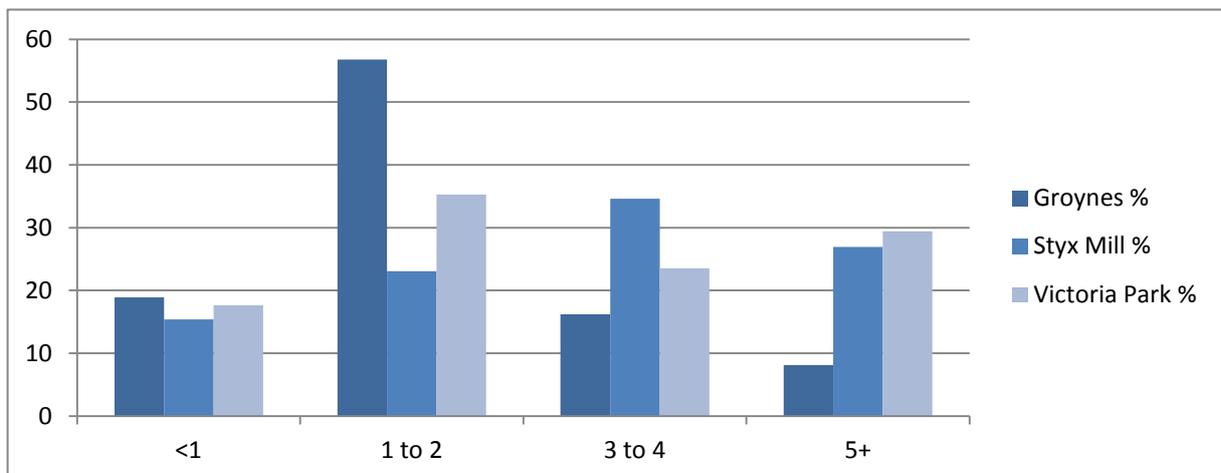


Figure 3. Approximate dog park usage per week.

Due to the further distance to travel we see that there is a large portion of people travelling to this dog park by car with 97% of people driving (Table 1). This creates a spatial problem of the lack of car parks especially at peak times such as after 3pm weekdays or weekends. This was a problem raised by many people as a way the facilities could be improved.

	Groynes	Styx Mill	Victoria Park
Drive	97%	77%	88%
Walk	3%	23%	12%

Table 1. Modes of transport.

The Groynes is the largest dog park and most used in Canterbury, but the lack of toilets was another suggestion by dog park users as a way the park can be improved to accommodate these large numbers which use the dog park each week.

### **Styx Mill Dog Park**

Styx Mill is located in the northern suburbs of Christchurch and is one the most easily accessed dog parks, due to its close proximity for many people (Figure 7). However it is also the smallest park in Christchurch being less than 28000 square metres creating an issue of there being not enough space here.

The average travel time for this park is 10 to 12 minutes (figure 2) which is considerably less than the Groynes but we still saw a large proportion of people driving to the dog park with 77% driving to the park. However this supports the idea that a dog park in a closer proximity providing better accessibility to the surrounding are will have more people walking, which is shown by 23% of Styx Mill users walking compared with 3% of thee Groynes users.

We also found there was an older population using the park with users predominantly in the age group of 41-60. There is a clear relationship between the older age groups and seating facilities. This presents concern when looking at the amount of older people using the park which was 62% over 41 and 15% over 61 (Figure 4). It was clears to see why a need for more seating was an issue raised by a large portion of people.

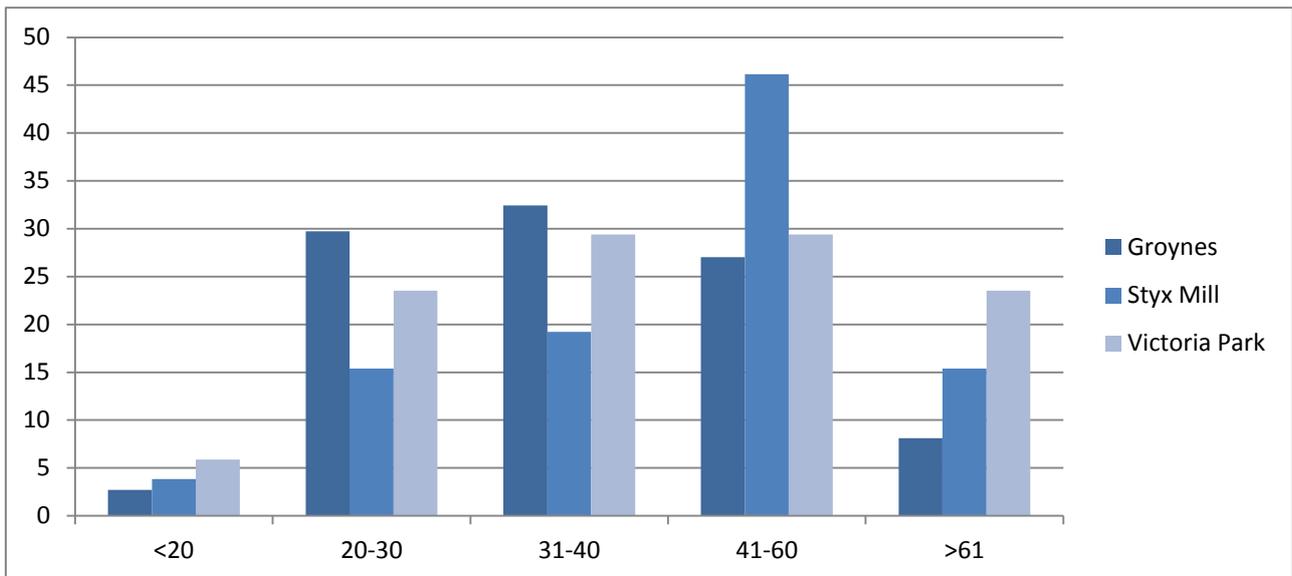


Figure 4. Age distribution of dog park users.

What we can see from our other results is that there is a large request for more space and activities for dogs. Many of the people surveyed said that the facilities here could be improved if there were water activities. Previously the small lake that was there was able to be used by the dogs but it has recently been fenced off due to poor water quality presenting health risks. Potential remediation of this lake for use could be a positive way to increase number using the park. 25% of the people raised the issue of a need for water activities as well as 32% of people wanting dog exercise activity facilities such as Tunnels and Jumps.

### Victoria Park

Victoria Park had the lowest scaled rating out of the dog park we surveyed (Figure 1). We believe this was due to a combined number of factors. Firstly people were not happy that the park was getting made smaller by the construction of a new reservoir. This is already a small park being only 36000sq meters. The construction also creates pollution in the forms of noise and visual as well as creating a dusty and dirty environment. Many users said they did not enjoy coming here because of this but used it during the week out of convenience promoting the idea of proximity influencing the amount of dog park usage each week.

When looking at the usage graph (Figure 3) we found that the frequency of people who used Victoria Park was diverse which would indicate that people in the near suburbs may be visiting the dog parks many times a week due to proximity but people in further suburbs visit only once or twice a week. The time taken to travel to this park supports this (Figure 2) as most people take around 10 to 12 minutes to get there whether driving or walking (Table 1).

## Facilities

There was a general consensus among the users that ways in which the facilities could be improved were if dog exercise activities were built and there were plastic bags for dog poo and more bins to put them in. But mostly they want space as the recent reservoir has intruded into the dog park.

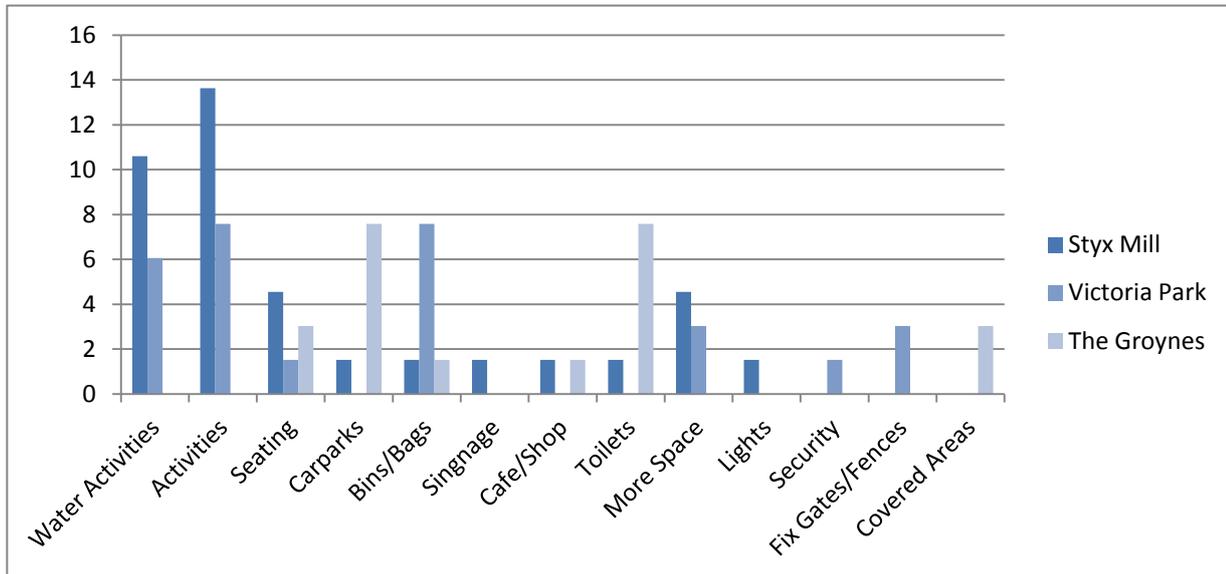


Figure 5. Possible facility improvements of each dog park.

The above graph is a compilation of data from every dog park on the facilities the public deemed as needing improvement. However with a graph of this nature the number of people surveyed across the dog parks varies and therefore acts as a limitation on the data. This is only a minor fault as general trends for each park are still visible.

At The Groynes the main way in which the facilities could be improved was with more parking and the construction of toilets. Another popular suggestion was for covered areas for the owners for weather protection. These suggestions are at the more luxurious end when comparing them to the needs of Styx Mill and Victoria park. The Styx Mill suggested improvements were for more space and more activities with significance to the water activities such as using the lake. Victoria park suggested similar ideas, also asking for more space and more activities such as obstacles and water activities. Some very simple ideas such as poo bins and bags also rated very high amongst the public.

Overall between all the parks, activities for the dogs whether including water or not were the most asked for improvements to the current Christchurch city dog parks. Basic amenities such a Bins and Bags were also among the highest picked improvements; this could be a cheap and simple improvement that would also tidy up the parks, possibly increasing the visitors. There were other suggestions such as building a cafe or shop and having lights cover the park but these received minimal requests as only a few mentioned it. These requests however seem unnecessary as there are more pressing needs.

As each dog park we surveyed is at a different standard the requirements for improvement vary. This was seen with the mentions of cafes and shops only coming from The Groynes and Styx Mill both dog parks that are at a high standard. This is a slight limitation within the research as once a dog park actually becomes sufficient, the tendency for people is to then look for improvements or select desires. However this has barely entered our research.

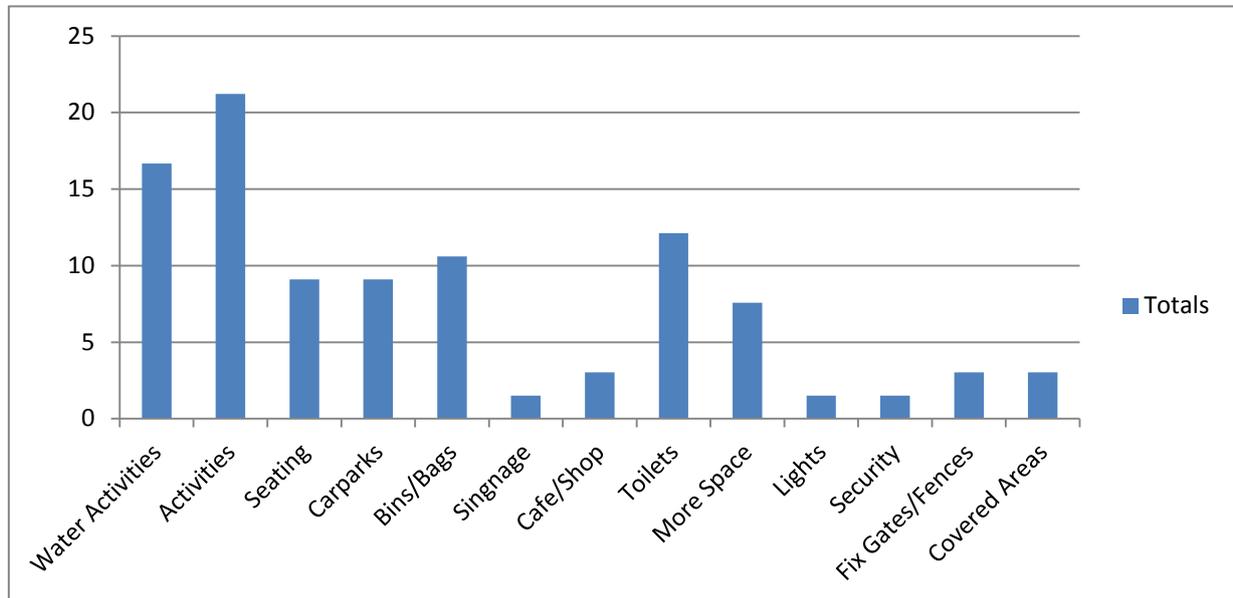


Figure 6. Total facility improvements

### Dog Distribution

In order to understand the data about travel times to dog parks, data on the registered dog numbers within Christchurch's specific suburbs was mapped onto their respective suburbs.

The below map (figure 7) then gives understanding of the current dog distribution within the wider Christchurch region. The map shows that the number of dogs in the northern and eastern suburbs is higher than that in the west. The development of the western suburbs over the past 50 years will be a huge factor for the dog numbers increasing in the western parts of Christchurch. The correlation between travel times and this map supports the fact that people are willing to travel further to their preferred dog park. From data collected it was seen that although The Groynes is quite far out of the way people from the suburbs of Bishopdale, papanui and redwood are willing to make the trip. It was confirmed from personal observations that that although Styx Mill is the closer of the 2 dog parks The Groynes was the busier of the 2. It is also shown by the modes and times of travel data that Styx Mill dog park users are people from the immediate area. The Travel Times to the Groynes in particular shows that people are willing to drive that extra 5-10 minutes for the better facilities. Victoria Park was a lot less used than The Groynes for example and although the dog distribution is slightly lower in the southern suburbs it was found that only people in the closest suburbs were utilising this park. This is shown in Figure 2 and table 1 where the average time taken was around 10-12 minutes to the park, so whether the individual is walking or driving they must have travelled from the closest suburbs.

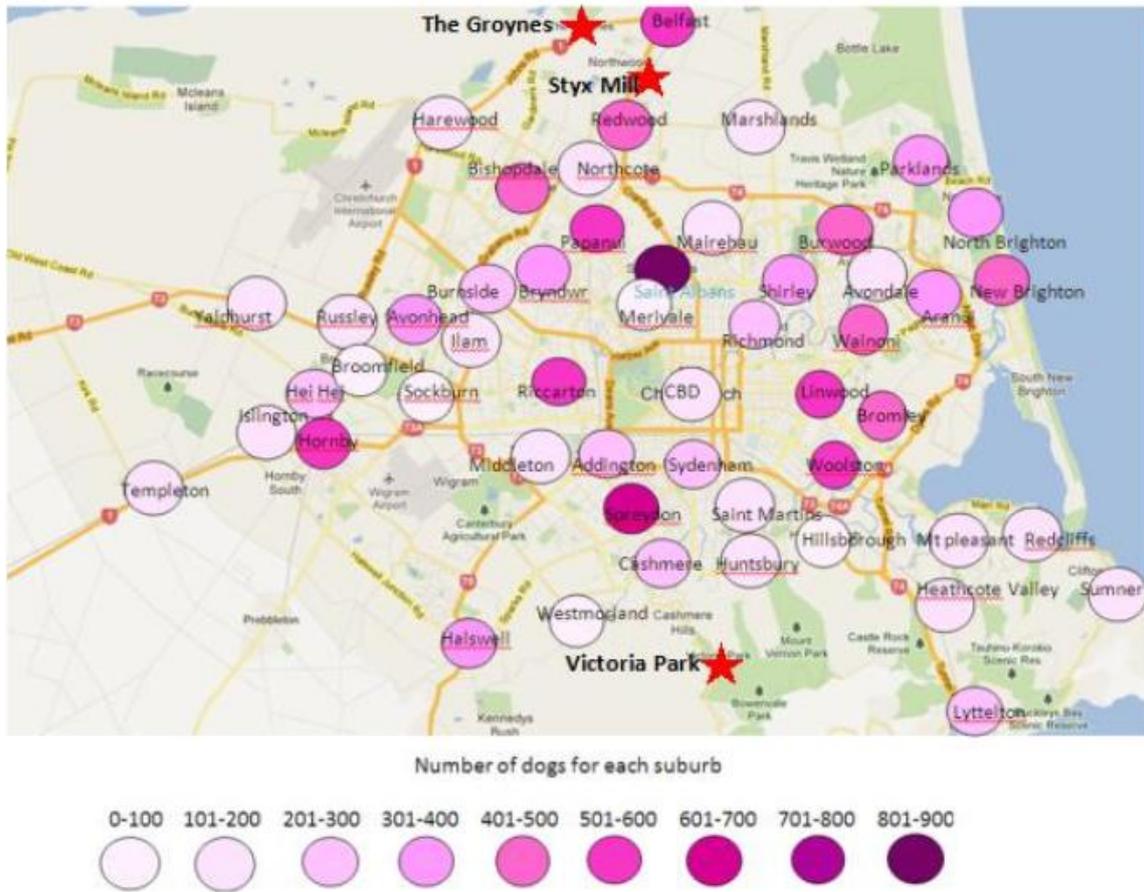


Figure 7. Dog distribution of Christchurch suburbs

From this map(Figure 7) it is obvious that there is severe lack of dog parks in the central and western suburbs of Christchurch. During the interviewing process, when asking people where they would best think a new inner city dog park could be beneficial the most common answer was Hagley Park. The map(Figure 7) supports this as a plausible location with the number of dogs surrounding the Hagley area are high.

### *Conclusion and Recommendations*

We feel we have stepped into an area of study which is not well understood and gathered good results which can be used in the future to benefit the community as a whole. We have found themes in dog park users and their feelings on the quality of the facilities and consider the findings highlighted in this conclusion to be the most relative and important. From the large numbers of surveys we completed we have results which seem to be reasonably reliable. Regarding the first component of our research question “What is the current use of dog parks in Christchurch” we have found that the use of the three dog parks we used for our study is relatively constant with only one park being slightly busier than the other two. We found that people generally drive to dog parks with an average time of over 10 minutes and do not necessarily drive to their closest one. This shows people are willing to drive significant distances for better facilities which highlights the importance dog park users place not only in the location of the parks but also the quality of the facilities. It is on this note, that we

recommend City Care considers a new dog park-with facilities similar to those at the Groynes, at an inner or central city location. This was a recommendation also voiced by many of the study participants, with many suggesting Hagley Park would be the 'ideal' location.

Pertaining to the second component of our research question "What improvements can be made to benefit the community as a whole" we found many requesting that the facilities at Styx Mill and Victoria Park dog parks be brought up to the standard and quality of those at the Groynes. This involves relatively simple and low cost improvements (in comparison to some suggested for the Groynes) such as more activities for the dogs, fencing and seating. However the requests that came from users of the Groynes were on a more luxurious level, such as covered areas and better toilet facilities. We feel it would be of greater value to the community if improvements were made to the other two dog parks so they were at a similar standard to the Groynes, before the Groynes improvements are developed. In doing so, this would more than likely have a great significance on the distance users have to travel, meaning the dog parks would be used more equally and possibly would increase the number of dog park users as a better dog park in the area may entice new users.

An area of study that would be beneficial to concentrate on more thoroughly in the near future is the number of dogs in each suburb and how these compare to the location of the current dog parks. Unfortunately the data we had to use for this was not the most recent or accurate due to the recent un-documented changes in living circumstances due to the earthquakes. However if research was to be done in this area it would be an extremely efficient way of evaluating whether the dog parks in Christchurch are in applicable locations and whether there are any potential areas that are in need or would benefit from the creation of a dog park-provided it has decent facilities. We know that this is an important aspect to consider from our review of literature regarding previous studies of dog (and cat distribution) in Ireland by Downes (2011) which shows the spatial distribution of dogs (and cats) across Ireland. This paper provided valuable insights into these patterns and could be used as a basis of a study in Christchurch.

We consider the broader significance of our research and subsequent findings to the relatively un-studied topic of dog parks in Christchurch to be of great value. Being the first to complete a study such as this in Christchurch has opened the door for further research to be done in Christchurch and also for the study to be somewhat replicated in other areas around New Zealand.

We also consider our findings particularly significant for City Care as previously they had no concrete knowledge on how the dog parks were being used and what improvements people deem necessary. Now they are aware of these facts they have the knowledge to be able to make perhaps more relevant decisions regarding funding towards dog parks and how it could be spent.

The conclusions we have arrived at are all relevant and applicable and we deem to be extremely reliable as they are direct results of our research which was conducted appropriately and professionally.

### *Acknowledgements*

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