Identifying Conflicts & Exploring Resolutions for the Bergen County Park System

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ABSTRACT

The Rutgers Center for Urban Environmental Sustainability (CUES) aims to bring research from the departments of Landscape Architecture and Environmental Sciences out into the public realm to address environmental challenges in New Jersey. CUES is in the process of creating the first official master plan for the Bergen County Park system. During public meetings, CUES obtained community feedback on the Bergen County Park system and user conflicts that occur in the parks. The predominant user conflicts were related to bikers, hikers, and dogs walkers. To understand the nature of the user conflicts, I conducted an analysis of an online public survey that received over 2,000 responses, reviewed meeting notes from eleven public meetings that described the conflicts, and visited the parks where the conflicts were most apparent. Then, I reviewed peer-reviewed literature describing similar conflicts to those occurring in Bergen County parks. Many of the peer review studies researched solutions that resolve issues similar to those observed in Bergen County. However, the parks studied were surrounded by urban landscape, whereas Bergen County parks are largely situated in a suburban setting.

While Bergen County has one of the highest population densities in the country (Kiersz 2015), it does not have all the characteristics of urban development. Thus, the preferences and expectations of Bergen County residents differ from those living in cities. To reduce conflict, it is important to consider how an individual's living standard can factor into how they respond to interventions. Unfortunately, no known studies have been published that test the effectiveness of urban park conflict interventions when implemented in a suburban setting.

METHODS: UNDERSTANDING THE EXISTING USER CONFLICTS

While searching for other park system master plans, I compiled a list that included: Northeastern Illinois, City of Fort Collins, Camden County New Jersey, Temecula California, and Santa Susana Mountains, California. Of these plans, the Illinois and Fort Collins plans were particularly helpful as they addressed how they handled multi-user trail conflicts (Gambill, 2007) (Paved Recreational Trail 2013 Master Plan, 2013).

I recorded common solutions to conflicts that occur in the Bergen County Parks. Many of these solutions were categorized as either hard or soft approaches. A hard approach is defined as a direct intervention on visitor action in a park to correct noncompliance (Geer, Day, McCutcheon, 2017). A soft approach is defined as an indirect intervention on a visitor to prevent noncompliance before it takes place (Bromley, Marion, & Hall, 2013). Tactical Urbanism is the process of implementing pilot projects to fix systematic issues in a city environment (Garcia and Barnes, 2016).

Posting signs is an example of a soft approach that fixes noncompliance in parks (Merry, 2010). It also found that non-direct educational programs were effective to reduce user conflict on the trail. Hard approaches were found to prevent continued acts of non-compliance in the parks by recruiting volunteers. There was some negative sentiment towards the volunteers (Hendricks, Ramthun, and Chavez, 2001). However, there are ways this can be solved!

Tactical urbanism showed that community support can promote swift beneficial change to a community without monetary cost (Lydon, 2017).
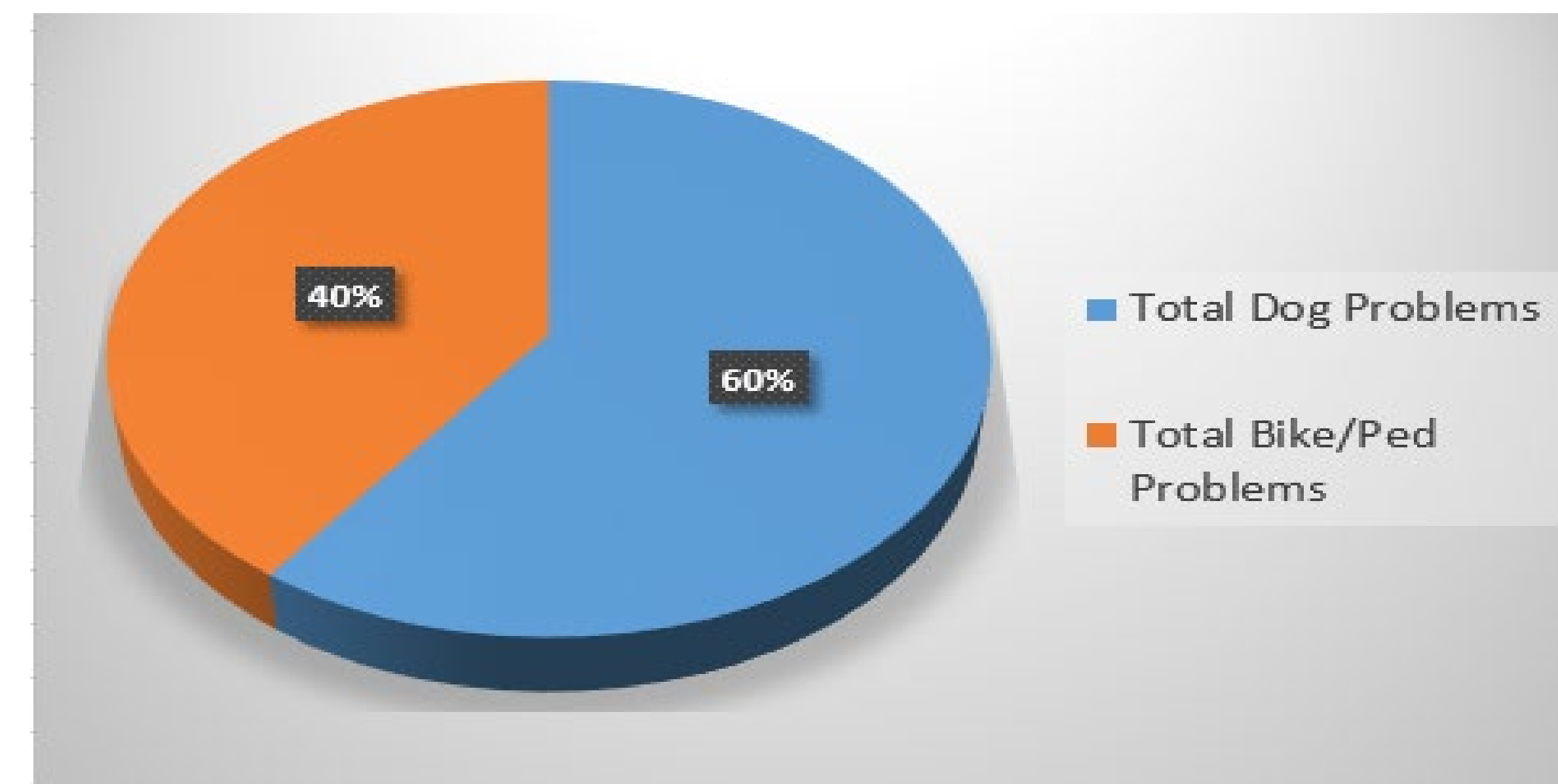
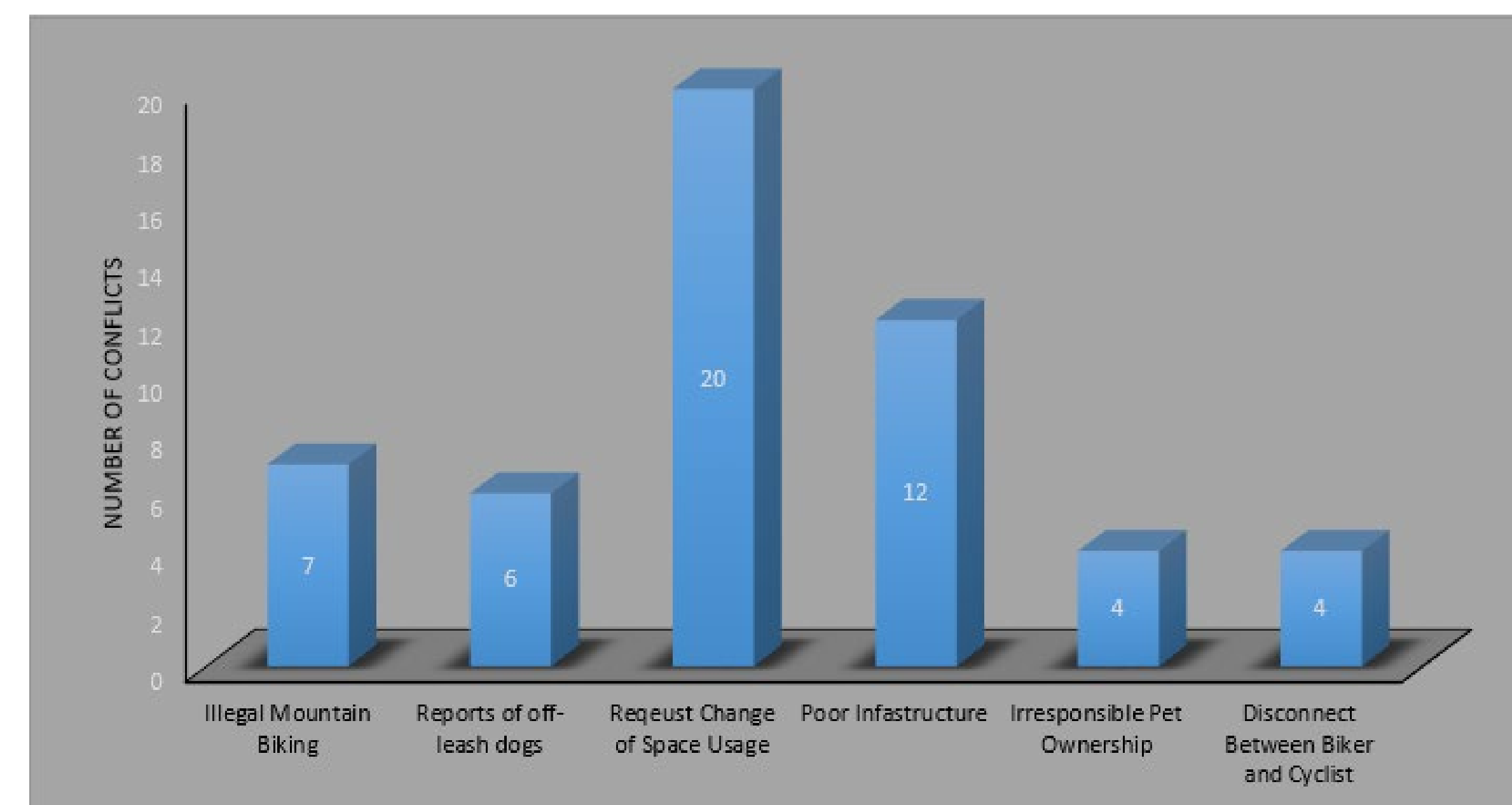## DATA

Figure 1. Number of bike to dog user conflicts

Total Dog Problems 60%
Total Bike/Ped Problems 40%

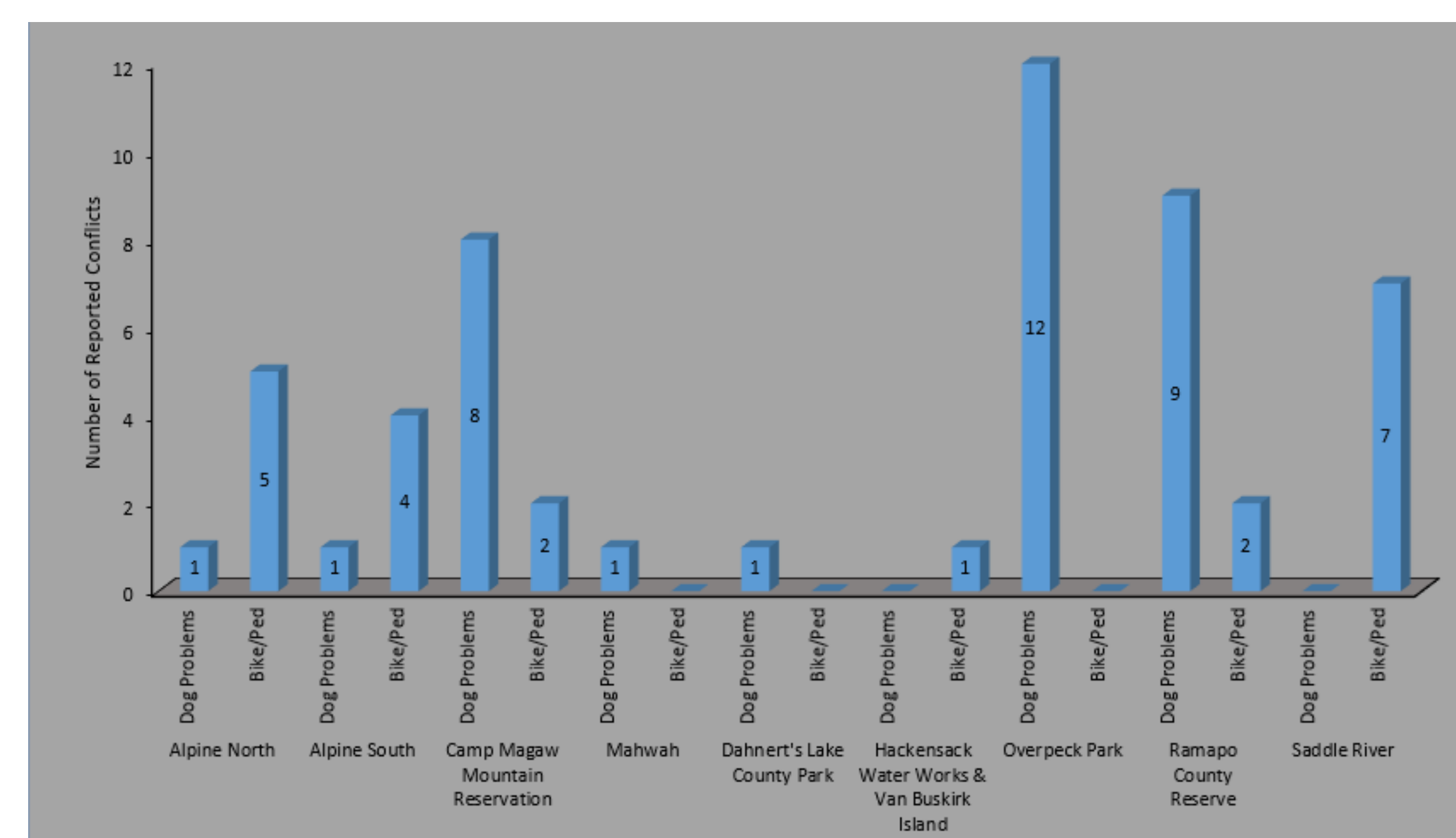Figure 2. User Conflicts Recorded by Category

Figure 3. Dog and Biker User Conflicts Across Parks

FINDINGS/CONCLUSIONS

Findings and Conclusions

Table 1

Problem	Problem Description	Solution	Solution Description
Dog owners fail to clean up	Many reports exist of dog owners neglecting to pick-up after their dog. This can make the park un-enjoyable for all users	Soft approach	Add more signs to encourage owners to clean up their respective dog's waste and provide more trash cans and doggie bags
Dog owners fail to keep their dog leashed	Despite park regulations, dog owners let their dogs roam off-leash	Hard approach	Create a volunteer system to enforce park leash rules for dogs
Dog owners fail to control their dogs in parks	Fights break out between dogs of different weight classes	Soft approach	Restrict certain size dogs to specific dog parks and promote an environment that alleviates potential conflict
Hikers fail to be aware of passing bikers	While on a trail, hikers will at times fail recognize the warning of passing bikes	Soft approach	Expand hiking trails and distinguish part of it as a lane that bikers will pass on
Bikers fail to practice good driving etiquette	While on a trail, bikers fail to give adequate warning to pedestrians before passing them	Soft approach	Create an education campaign on the importance of being a responsible park biker
Mountain bikers are active in Bergen County	Mountain biking occurs in areas of Bergen County where they aren't allowed	Create pilot project using tactical urbanism	Coordinate with the park system to try to set up a pilot project mountain biking trail

RECOMMENDATIONS

Some of the solutions that are recommended may require personal or funds from the Bergen County Park System. The funds can create revenue for park upkeep, reduce injuries, and create a better visiting experience.

- The Bergen County Park System can create a department of volunteers to help mitigate user conflict. Volunteers can be trained to enforce rules for dog owners, bikers, and hikers (Table 1)
- The Bergen County Park System can expand trail widths in existing parks to accommodate more traffic and a wider variety of trail users (Rails-to-Trails Conservancy, 2001)
- The Bergen County Park System can open dialogue with Jersey Off Road Biking Association (JORBA) and search for potential locations where a pilot project for a mountain biking trail can be implemented (Table 1)
- The Bergen County Park System can encourage an educational outreach program to connect with Bergen County Park visitors and inform them of how they can contribute to a positive park environment whether they go as hikers, bikers, or dog owners (Table 1)
- The Bergen County Park System can test the effectiveness of handing out permits to dog owners who want to utilize an off-leash dog park to reduce crowdedness and reduce the chance of conflict that may occur between dogs (Village of Bull Valley, 2017)
- Dog parks can be designated for dogs of a particular weight class. Larger dogs will be allowed to go to dog parks that are their same size. Smaller dogs will also have this privilege. The divide between weight classes can help prevent the different size dogs from getting into fights that could cause significant injury to one another (Beacon Dog Park, 2017)
- The Bergen County Park System can back putting up more signs to make the park rules more visible for all (Table 1)

QUESTIONS FUTURE RESEARCH

- How could Bergen County test these solutions?
- What measurements would be used to consider these solutions successful?
- Do solutions that work in an urban park work with the same effectiveness in suburban parks?
- If not, why not? What can be done to change this?

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