

2020 ENGAGEMENT WITH PARKS REPORT



NRPA National Recreation
and Park Association

Because everyone deserves a great park



A child climbs on the newly renovated playground at Catherine Street Park in Baltimore, Maryland, during the 2019 Parks Build Community event.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NRPA

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION 2

KEY STATISTICS..... 3

KEY FINDINGS 4

 Parks and Recreation Is Essential 4

 Park Usage and the Pandemic 8

 Community and Political Support 12

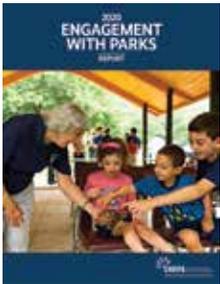
CONCLUSION 14

ABOUT NRPA..... 15

ABOUT THE SURVEY & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS..... 16

COVER IMAGE:

During the opening of a multi-use shelter at Hidden Pond Nature Center in Springfield, Virginia, a Fairfax County Park Authority volunteer shows local children a turtle from the center.
Photo courtesy of Fairfax County Park Authority



INTRODUCTION

Parks and recreation touches the lives of millions of people every day. Parks, trails, public open spaces and recreation facilities are places where people can improve their physical and mental health, gather with family and friends, and reconnect with nature. With vast, diverse offerings, parks and recreation provides a unique, personal experience for every member of a community.

With their goals of advancing community health and well-being, developing climate-ready parks and providing equitable access to their many benefits, the more than 10,000 local park and recreation agencies across the country help make our cities, towns and counties vibrant communities. In turn, the public recognizes parks and recreation's innate ability to improve the lives of every member of a community. When deciding where they want to reside, people seek places that feature well-maintained parks, vast trail networks, pools and other recreation facilities.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has demonstrated the essential value of local parks and recreation. Thanks to the tireless efforts of park and recreation professionals, most parks, trails and other public spaces have remained open and safe during the pandemic. Even at the peak of stay-at-home edicts, parks and trails largely remained open, and frequently served as the sole recreation opportunity available to the public. Many park and recreation agencies also have been vital contributors to their communities' pandemic responses by delivering nutritious meals to community members in need, offering their spaces as emergency shelters for people experiencing homelessness or expanding classroom capacity for schools, and providing childcare and services for families of emergency first responders and essential workers.

Each June since 2016, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) Research team has surveyed 1,000 U.S. adults to better understand how people connect with parks and recreation; the results of these surveys are the basis for the annual *Engagement with Parks Report*. This report provides park and recreation professionals and advocates, policymakers and other key stakeholders with insights about the impact that local parks and recreation facilities have on the lives of every person in our nation.



Madison (Wisconsin) School & Community Recreation offers swimming for all ages year-round.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LORI PHILLIPS

In 2020, NRPA conducted a shorter-than-typical *Engagement* survey because of the dynamic nature of life during the COVID-19 pandemic. The 2020 study focused on a few key questions:

- How frequently do people visit parks, trails and recreation amenities?
- How has the pandemic affected park usage?
- Do adults in the United States see public parks as an essential government service?
- Are people more likely to vote for political leaders who support funding for parks and recreation?

Key findings of the 2020 *Engagement with Parks Report* include:

- Eighty-two percent of U.S. adults agree that parks and recreation is essential.
- Seventy-seven percent of survey respondents indicate that having a high-quality park, playground, public open space or recreation center nearby is an important factor in deciding where they want to live.
- U.S. residents visit local park and recreation facilities more than twice a month on average.
- Three in five U.S. residents — more than 190 million people — visited a park, trail, public open space or other recreation facility at least once during the first three months of the pandemic (mid-March through mid-June 2020).
- Seventy-two percent of U.S. adults are more likely to vote for local political leaders who make park and recreation funding a priority.

2020 ENGAGEMENT WITH PARKS REPORT

Key Statistics

3 in 5

U.S. residents visited a park, trail, public open space or other recreation facility at least once during the first three months of the pandemic (mid-March through mid-June 2020)



2x per month

U.S. residents visit local park and recreation facilities more than twice a month on average



82%

of U.S. adults agree that parks and recreation is essential



77%

of survey respondents indicate that having a high-quality park, playground, public open space or recreation center nearby is an important factor in deciding where they want to live



72%

of U.S. adults are more likely to vote for local political leaders who make park and recreation funding a priority



KEY FINDINGS

PARKS AND RECREATION IS ESSENTIAL

While parks and recreation may be one of many services delivered by local city, town and county governments, it is second to none in bringing our communities together. It provides places for people to increase their physical activity, meet with friends and family, reconnect with nature or help a neighbor in need.

People from all walks of life have a personal connection with their local park and recreation agency. Some may walk on a trail, take a fitness class at the community center, access a nutritious meal, gain a new skill or hobby, or reap the benefits of clean air and water because of preserved open spaces. The tireless efforts of park and recreation professionals are critical contributors to the quality of life in our communities.

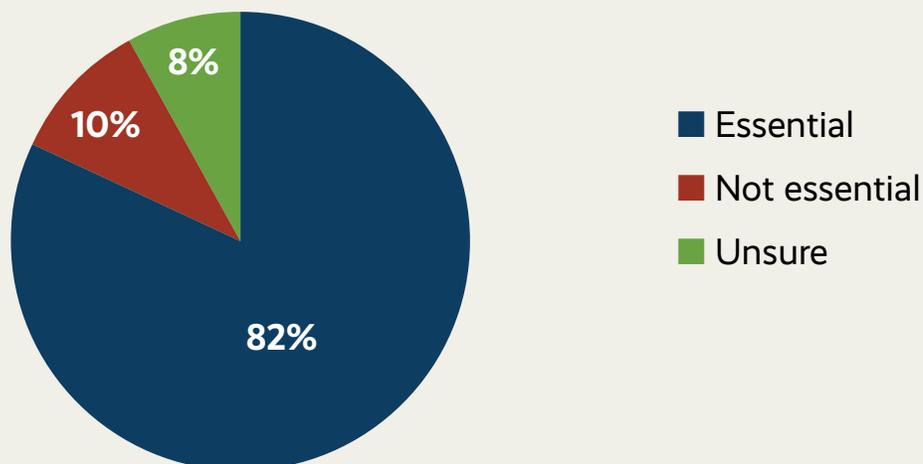
People recognize the essential nature and value of parks and recreation. Eighty-two percent of survey respondents say that parks and recreation is essential to their lives. This sentiment holds true for all segments of the population, but it is particularly robust for Gen Xers and millennials (both at 86 percent) as well as parents (88 percent).

People of all ages and all racial, ethnic and political backgrounds agree that parks and recreation is essential. In addition, access to quality amenities and services is a key determinant in where people choose to live. Nearly four in five survey respondents indicate that having a nearby park, playground, open space or recreation center is an important factor in deciding where they want to live. Nearly all segments of the U.S. population seek easy access to high-quality parks and recreation opportunities, but this is particularly the case for millennials, Gen Xers, those who identify as Hispanic/Latinx and parents.

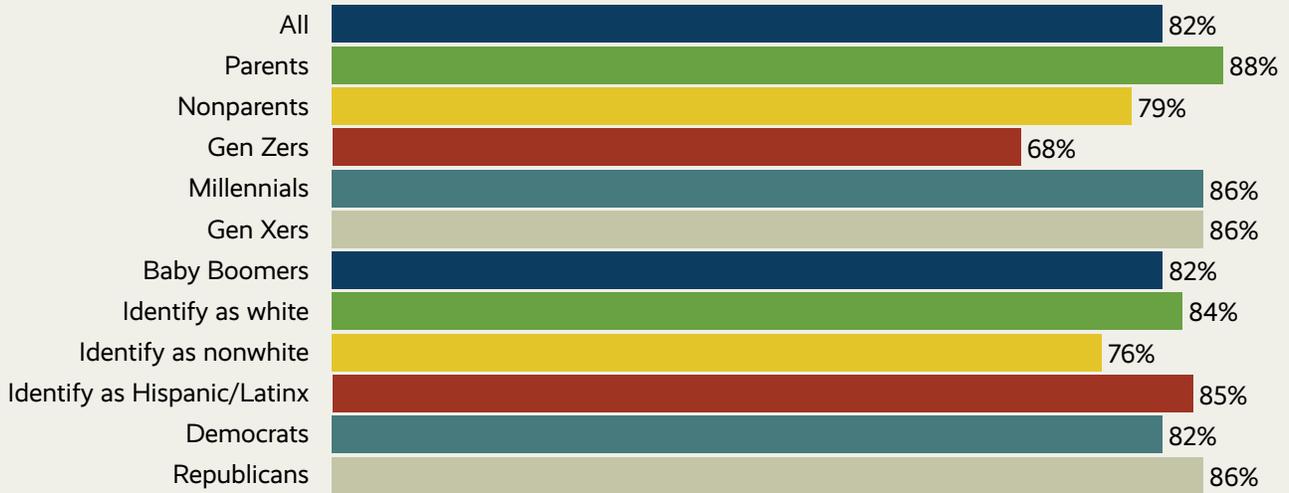
Having access to great parks and relevant recreation opportunities is a fundamental right for all. Indeed, everyone should have at least one park, open space, recreation center or other amenity nearby that they can walk to and from safely. It is especially critical that everyone should be able to walk to and from well-maintained parks and recreation amenities in just a few minutes without having to cross heavily traveled roads or navigate other pedestrian hazards.

Most — but not all — people benefit from having at least one park or other recreation opportunity within a walkable distance of where

Four in Five Adults Say that Parks and Recreation Is Essential
(Percentage Distribution)



People Across the United States Agree that Parks and Recreation Is Essential (Percent of Respondents)



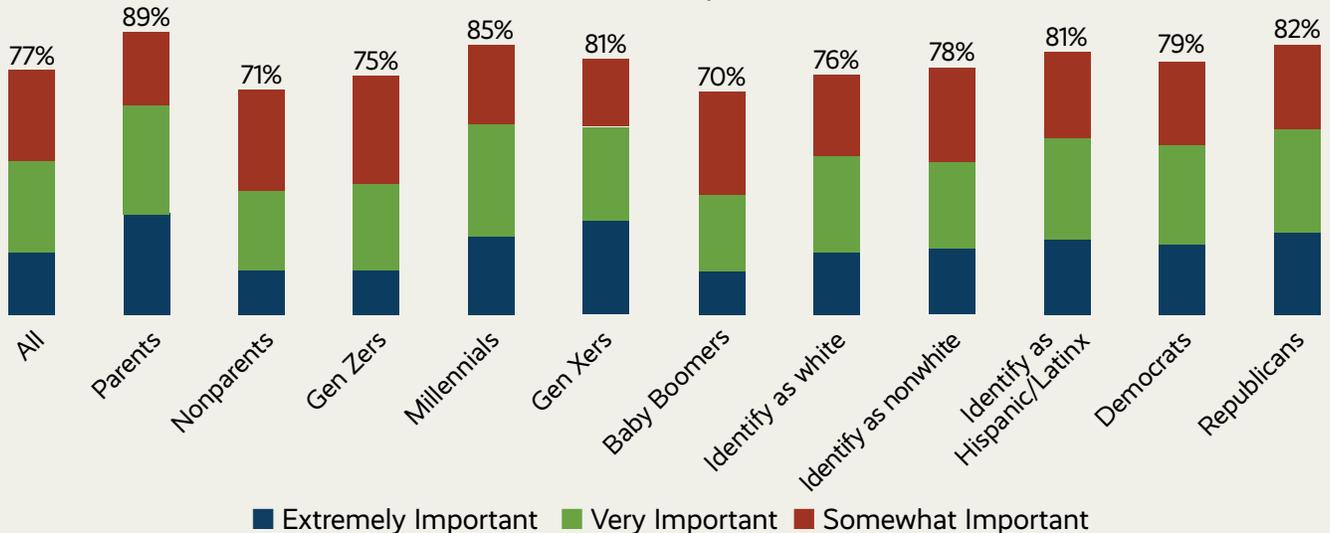
they live. More than seven in ten U.S. residents have at least one local park, playground, open space or recreation center within walking distance of their homes, and 39 percent of survey respondents have one or more nearby park and/or other recreational opportunity. Unfortunately, 26 percent of people are not within walking distance of at least one park or recreational opportunity.

The percentage of survey respondents who indicate they live near a park or other recreational opportunity, however, varies significantly by region and respondent demographics. For example, of the survey respondents, 82 percent in the Northwest and 80 percent in the West report that they can

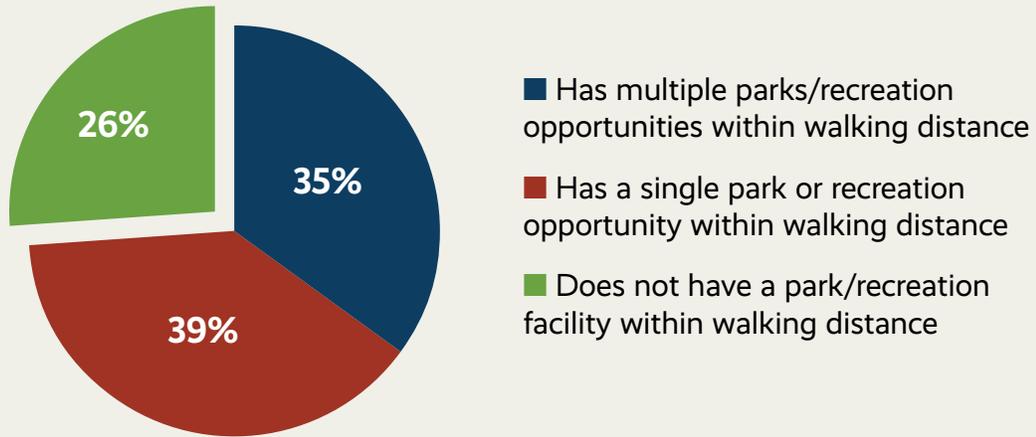
walk to a local park, while 75 percent of Midwesterners and 66 percent of those in the South report the same.

Hispanic/Latinx (84 percent) and nonwhite (81 percent) survey respondents indicate they live within walking distance of a park. Furthermore, Gen Zers (83 percent), millennials (82 percent) and Gen Xers (73 percent) are significantly more likely than baby boomers (65 percent) to report having a park and/or recreation facility that is within walking distance. Parents also are significantly more likely than nonparents to report they reside within a walkable distance of at least one park: 84 percent compared to 68 percent, respectively.

Access to High-Quality Parks and Recreation Is an Important Factor When People Choose a Place to Live (Percent of Respondents)



More than Seven in Ten U.S. Residents Live within Walkable Distance of a Local Park or Other Recreational Opportunity (Percentage Distribution)



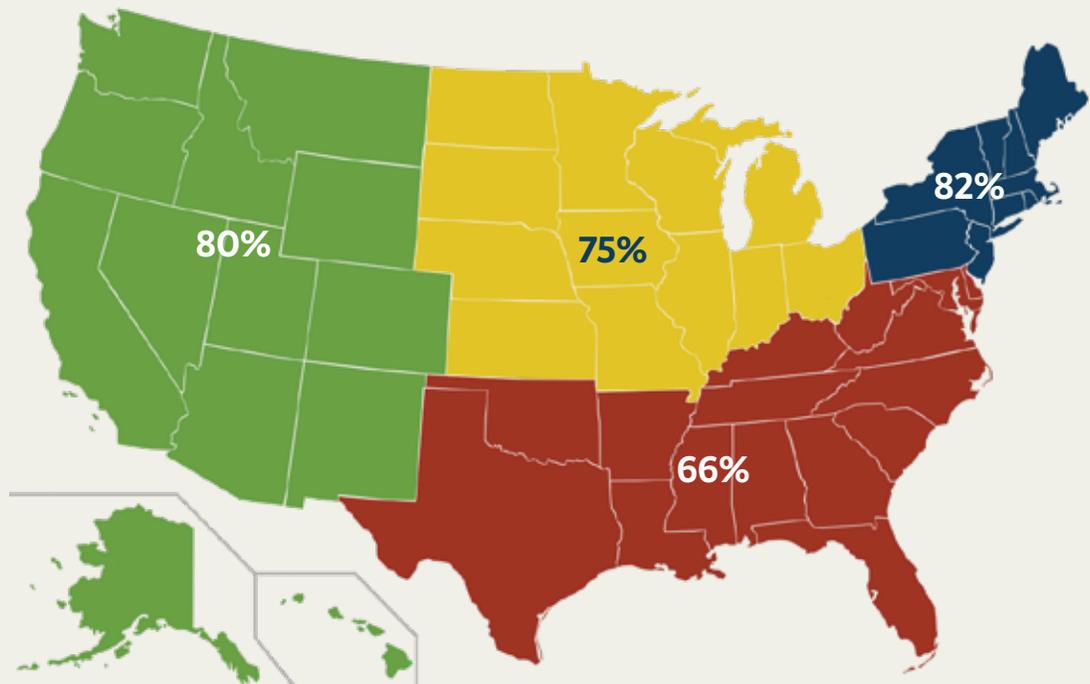
Even with at least one park or recreational opportunity only a short, walkable distance away, a majority of people continues to travel to those locations by automobile. Sixty-three percent of survey respondents indicate that driving is one of the ways they get from their home to a park, playground, open space or recreation center.

Aside from driving, many people utilize an “active” transportation method — walking, jogging, biking, rollerblading — to reach their favorite park, trail or open space. The most common active transportation method is walking — cited by 54 percent of survey respondents. In

addition, one in five U.S. residents bike to a local park or to other recreational areas, while 18 percent either jog or run and five percent rollerblade or skateboard.

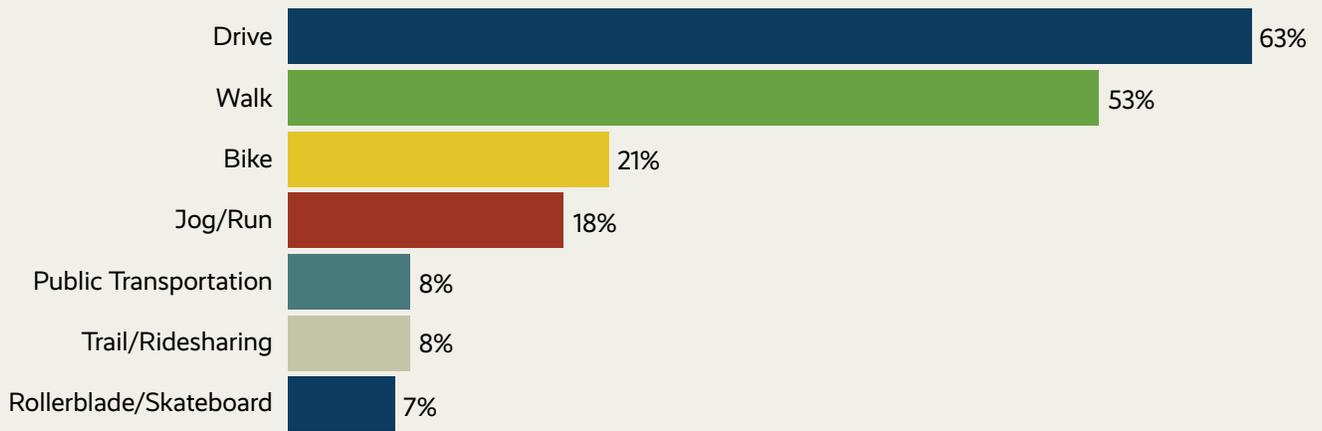
Not surprisingly, people who live within a walkable distance of a park *choose* to walk to the park. The percentage of those who *do* walk to a park or another recreation amenity differs little across major age cohorts, although baby boomers are more likely to drive to a park than are members of other generations. Biking, jogging and rollerblading are more popular transportation options for Gen Zers, millennials, Gen Xers and people who live near a park.

Percentage of U.S. Residents Living within Walking Distance of a Park or Recreational Opportunity, by Region



Driving and Walking Remain the Top Two Ways People Travel to Their Local Parks

(Percent of Respondents Who Have Visited a Park in the Past Year)

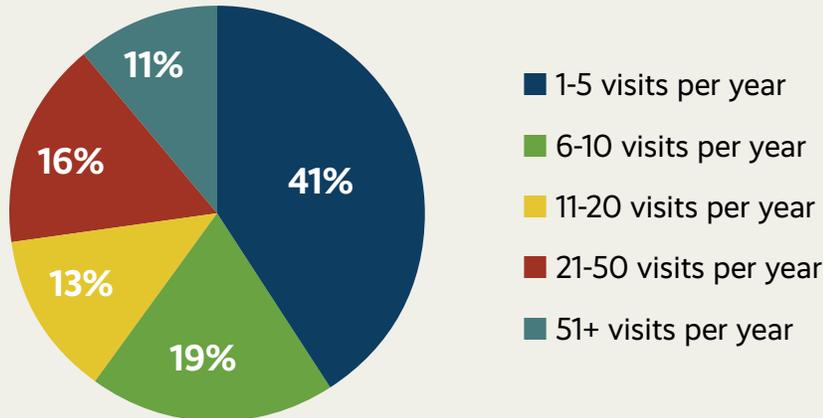


People play in the water at the Northeast Creek Park Splash Pad in Jacksonville, North Carolina.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KEVIN REOPELLE

People Frequently Visit Their Local Park and Recreation Facilities

(Percentage Distribution of Respondents Who Have Visited a Park/Recreation Facility During the Past Year)



Aaron Watson, executive director of Mercer County (New Jersey) Park Commission, holds an owl.

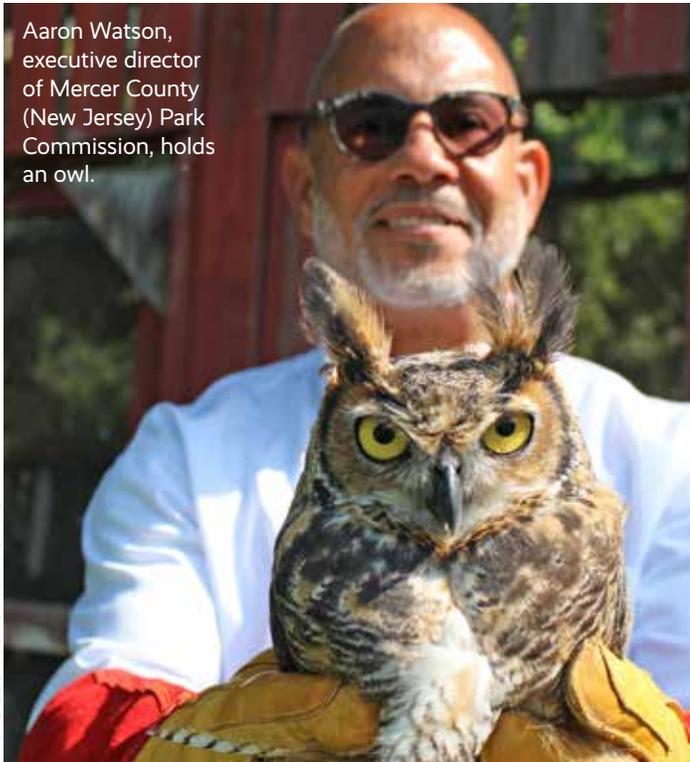


PHOTO COURTESY OF ELEANOR HORNE

PARK USAGE AND THE PANDEMIC

On average, U.S. residents visit local park and recreation facilities a little more than twice a month. But the frequency of these visits varies significantly. Nineteen percent of survey respondents report that they visited a local park facility between six and ten times within the past 12 months; another 13 percent made between 11 and 20 visits. Sixteen percent visited their local park and recreation facilities between 21 and 50 times during the past year, while 11 percent did so at least 51 times. Forty-one percent of survey respondents who visited a local park and/or recreation facility within the past 12 months report having visited those facilities between one and five times.

Proximity and access to multiple nearby park and recreation options are critical to higher parks and recreation use. Of those survey respondents who went to a park at least 51 times during the past year (i.e., weekly), more than half (52 percent) have access to multiple parks within a 10-minute walk. Another 36 percent of weekly park users live within a 10-minute walk of a single park. Of the people who make parks and recreation a weekly or more frequent habit, 12 percent do not live within a walkable distance to a park.

People Visit Their Local Park and Recreation Facilities on Average Twice a Month

(Average and Median Number of Visits During the Past Year)

	All	Parents	Gen Zers	Millennials	Gen Xers	Baby Boomers	Identify as Hispanic/Latinx	Identify as white	Identify as nonwhite
Average number of visits	27.7	25.4	34.6	25.6	23.9	34.0	28.3	29.3	22.6
Median number of visits	8	8	10	8	8	10	10	8	7

Viewed another way — people with walkable access to multiple park and recreation facilities enjoyed these amenities an average of 33.7 times during the past year. At the other end of the spectrum, people who do *not* live within a walkable distance of any park visited such amenities an average of 17.4 times during the past year.

The essential nature of parks and recreation has been on full display since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In many communities across the nation, parks, trails and other public open spaces have been crucial resources available to people seeking a brief respite from the public health crisis. As businesses shut down operations during the spring, many parks and trails remained open, providing people with opportunities to safely enjoy outdoor physical activity with its many attendant physical and mental health benefits. According to NRPA Parks Snapshot Survey data (nrpa.org/ParksSnapshot), 83 percent of park and recreation agencies kept some/all of their parks open during the initial wave of COVID-19 infections in April 2020, while 93 percent did the same with some/all of their trail networks.

Consequently, people flocked to their local parks, trails and other public open spaces. Three in five U.S. residents —



Martina Leforce, Berea (Kentucky) Kids Eat program director, helps prepare food for children in need during the COVID-19 pandemic.

PHOTO COURTESY OF BEREA COLLEGE

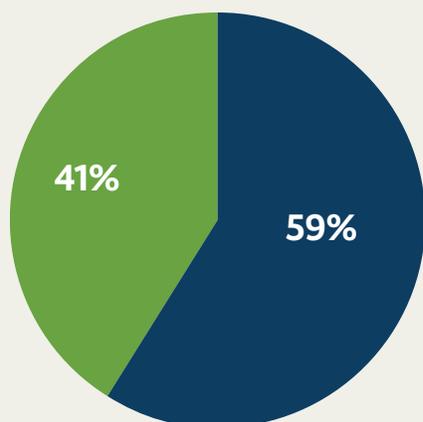
Proximity to Parks and Recreation Facilities Drives Usage

(Average and Median Number of Visits over the Past Year)

	All	Walkable Access to Multiple Parks	Walkable Access to a Single Park	Walkable Access to No Parks
Average number of visits	27.7	33.7	27.4	17.4
Median number of visits	8	10	7	6

Three in Five U.S. Residents Visited a Park or Recreation Facility at Least Once During the First Three Months of the Pandemic

(Percentage Distribution)

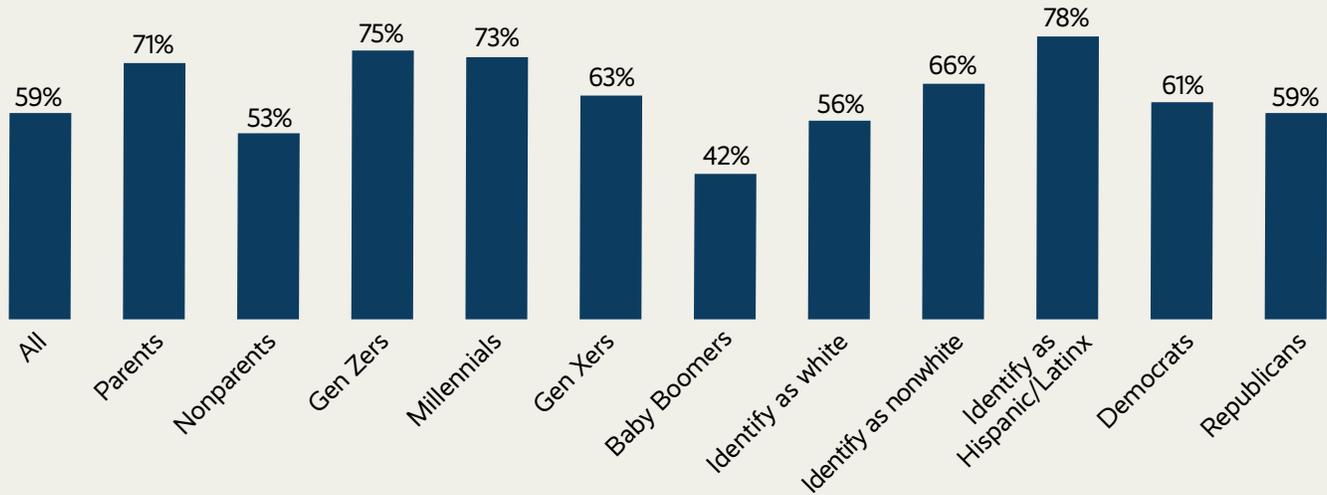


■ Have visited a park or recreation facility at least once between March 15 and June 15, 2020

■ Have not visited a park or recreation facility between March 15 and June 15, 2020

Parks and Recreation Has Been a Vital Respite for People During the Pandemic

(Percent of Respondents Visiting a Park or Recreation Facility at Least Once Between Mid-March and Mid-June 2020)



more than 190 million people — visited a park, trail, public open space or other recreation facility at least once during the first three months of the pandemic — from mid-March through mid-June 2020. Parks and recreation usage was particularly strong among Gen Zers, millennials, Gen Xers, parents, people who identify as Hispanic/Latinx and those who identify as nonwhite.

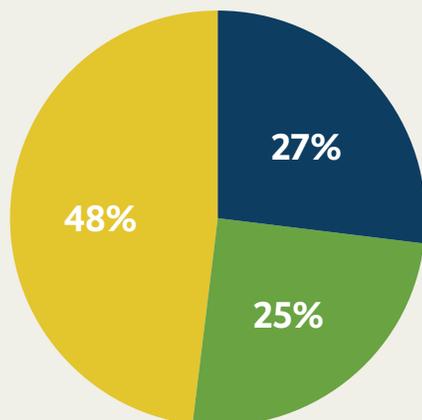
As has been the case with virtually every aspect of life, the COVID-19 pandemic has altered the frequency with which most people engage with their local park and recreation amenities. Still, slightly more than half of people have been visiting parks, trails and other public open space amenities as often — if not more often — since the start of the pandemic

than they had during the same period in 2019. Twenty-seven percent of U.S. residents report that their use of parks, trails and other public open spaces increased during the first three months of the pandemic relative to the same period in 2019. A quarter of survey respondents indicates their parks and recreation usage during the period from mid-March to mid-June 2020 matched that of the same three months in 2019. Forty-eight percent of people report that their usage of parks, trails and public open spaces declined during the early months of the pandemic.

Parks and recreation usage either held firm or increased among Gen Zers, Gen Xers, millennials, people who identify as Hispanic/Latinx and those who identify as nonwhite.

Over Half of U.S. Residents Maintained or Increased Park, Trail and Open Space Usage During the First Three Months of the Pandemic

(Percentage Distribution)



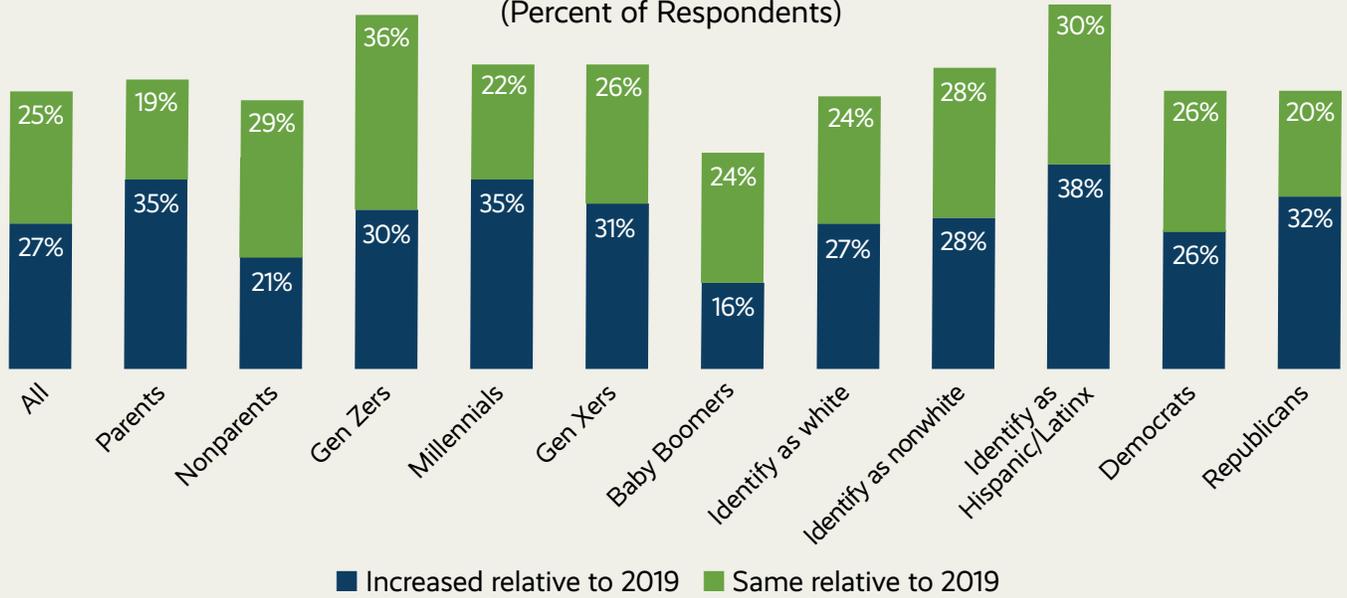
■ Increased usage of parks, trails and open space between March and May 2020 relative to the same three months in 2019

■ Same usage of parks, trails and open space between March and May 2020 relative to the same three months in 2019

■ Decreased usage of parks, trails and open space between March and May 2020 relative to the same three months in 2019

Gen Zers, Millennials, Gen Xers and People Who Identify as Hispanic/Latinx or Nonwhite Are Most Likely to Have Maintained or Increased Park Usage During the First Three Months of the Pandemic

(Percent of Respondents)



Rebecca Moore (second from right), manager of summer day camp and outreach for Northern Illinois Special Recreation Association, helps teach a swim lesson.

PHOTO COURTESY OF JAMES WISEMAN

COMMUNITY AND POLITICAL SUPPORT

Despite broad public agreement that parks and recreation is an essential service, many agencies face tight budget constraints that make it difficult for park and recreation professionals to deliver on their vital mission. Local governments are challenged with meeting the many needs and desires of their constituents in a tight fiscal environment. This is even more true now as most jurisdictions face increased demand for public services and depressed tax revenues in the wake of the pandemic. As political leaders make tough decisions on how to allocate shrinking tax revenues, local government policymakers must understand parks and recreation’s mission and the level of importance that constituents place on it.

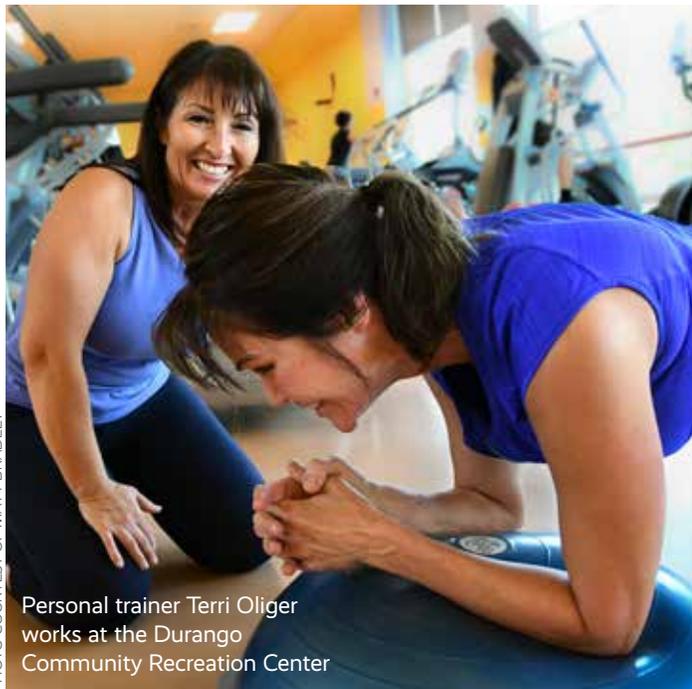


PHOTO COURTESY OF MATT BRADLEY

Personal trainer Terri Olinger works at the Durango Community Recreation Center

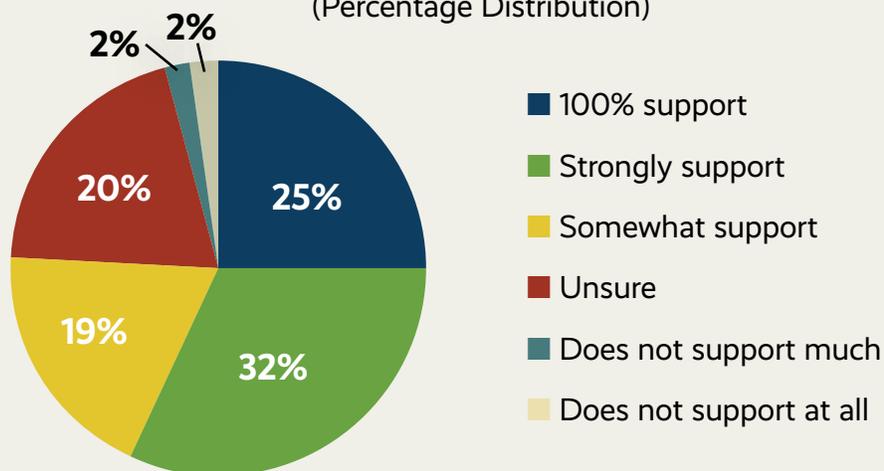
The success and growth of community park and recreation agencies hinge on the support of mayors, county executives and council members. Three-quarters of U.S. adults believe their highest-ranking local political leaders support local parks, with 57 percent of survey respondents describing this support as very strong. These percentages are up sharply from those in NRPA’s *2018 Engagement with Parks Survey*, in which 68 percent of respondents perceived their high-ranking local political leaders as supporting parks.

Local political leaders who make parks and recreation a cornerstone of their agendas are likely to be rewarded at the ballot box. Seventy-two percent of U.S. adults are more likely to vote for a local politician — a mayor, county executive or a member of a local council — if that politician makes park and recreation funding a priority. Only 16 percent of survey respondents indicate that a local politician’s views about parks and recreation play no role in whether they would vote for the candidate.

It is noteworthy that voters’ preference for local politicians who support park and recreation funding is robust across nearly every segment of the population:

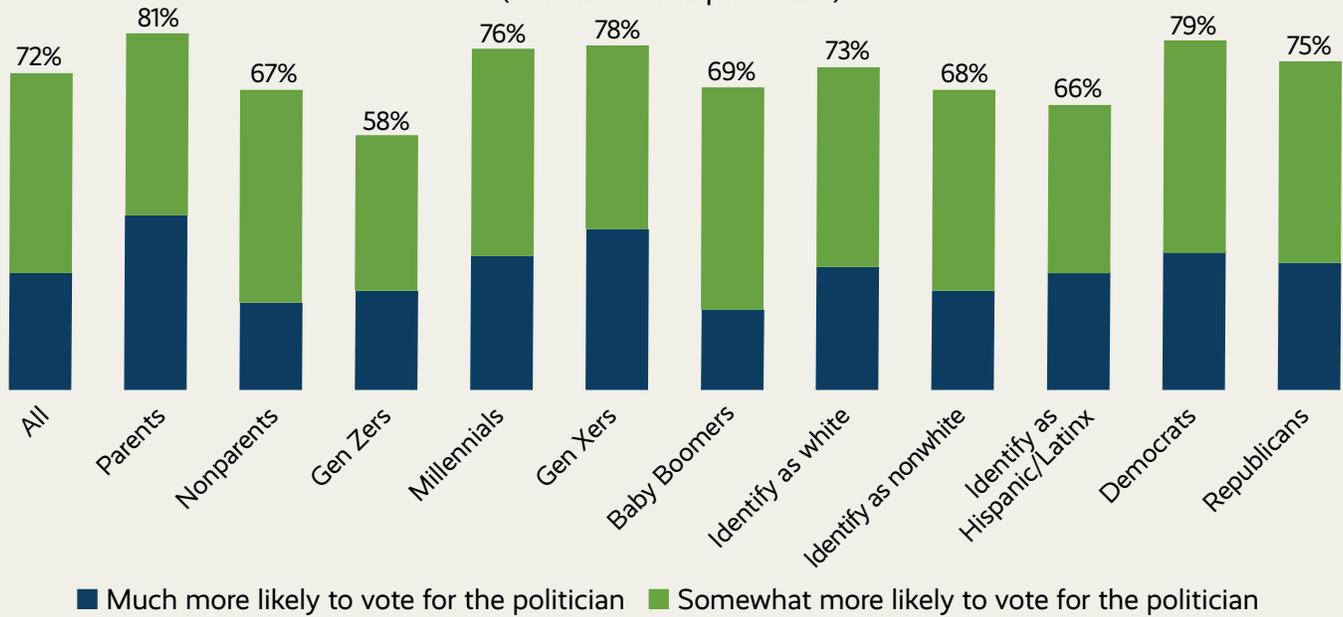
- **Generation:** Millennials (76 percent) and Gen Xers (79 percent)
- **Household formation:** Parents (81 percent) and nonparents (67 percent)
- **Political affiliation:** Democrats (79 percent) and Republicans (75 percent)
- **Location of Residence:** Near a park (75 percent) and not near a park (64 percent)

Three-Quarters of U.S. Adults Believe Their Local Political Leaders Support Parks and Recreation
(Percentage Distribution)



U.S. Adults Are More Likely to Vote for Local Politicians Who Make Park and Recreation Funding a Priority

(Percent of Respondents)



A Paint Night participant creates a painting at Plaza de Cesar Chavez in San Jose, California.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOSEPH HIGARES

CONCLUSION

Parks and recreation is essential — essential for healthy communities, essential for climate resiliency and essential for equity. People on average visit local park and/or recreation facilities more than twice a month, with many making parks and recreation a more frequent habit. It is little wonder that when searching for a new place to live, people seek locations that offer high-quality park and recreation amenities and programming.

The COVID-19 pandemic has extracted a high cost in both human and economic terms. But thanks to the dedication of hundreds of thousands of full-time, part-time and seasonal park and recreation professionals working for more than 10,000 local park and recreation agencies, most parks, trails and public spaces have remained open and safe for all to enjoy. This not only makes life a bit more bearable during these challenging times, but also helps boost the physical and mental health of millions of people.

Even without tabulating the final economic numbers, it is already clear that the pandemic-fueled recession will be devastating on park and recreation agency funding, rivaling the damage inflicted by the Great Recession of 2007 to 2009. Falling tax revenues and rising expenses are putting extraordinary fiscal pressures on governments across the nation, and political leaders are having to make many difficult decisions.

The *2020 Engagement with Parks Report* makes this point clear: It would be myopic for political leaders to put an over-weighted burden on park and recreation budgets. People across the United States have been swarming to their local parks, trails and public open spaces to remain physically active, decompress and reconnect with nature during these challenging times. People value the work that park and recreation professionals and their agencies do. They expect their local political leaders to provide the financial support needed to ensure these essential services remain available to all in the future.



John DeKemper, assistant director of Cornelius (North Carolina) Parks, Arts, Recreation and Culture works with children to plant saplings at an Earth Day event.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NRPA

Kids play on the newly renovated playground during the grand opening of Catherine Street Park in Baltimore, Maryland at the 2019 Parks Build Community event.

ABOUT NRPA

The National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation. With more than 60,000 members, NRPA advances this mission by investing in and championing the work of park and recreation professionals and advocates — the catalysts for positive change in service of equity, climate-readiness, and overall health and well-being.

NRPA brings strength to our message by partnering with like-minded organizations, including those in the federal government, nonprofits and commercial enterprises. Funded through dues, grants, registrations and charitable contributions, NRPA produces research, education and policy initiatives for our members that ultimately enrich the communities they serve.

NRPA places immense importance on research and data to raise the status of parks and recreation and conducts research with two goals. First, NRPA creates data to help park and recreation agencies make optimal decisions on operations, programming and spending. Second, NRPA generates data and insights that support park and recreation professionals in making the case for greater and more stable funding to policymakers, key stakeholders, the media and the general public. The NRPA research team works closely with internal subject matter experts, respected industry consultants and members of the academic community to develop its reports and data resources. Learn more at nrpa.org/Research.

ABOUT THE SURVEY & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the spring/summer of 2020, NRPA commissioned Wakefield Research to conduct a survey of 1,000 U.S. adults, the results from which are the basis of findings presented in the *2020 Engagement with Parks Report*. Wakefield Research collected the survey data through an email invitation and online survey between June 8 and June 18 2020, using quotas to ensure a reliable and accurate representation of the U.S. adult population 18 and older. NRPA designed the survey instrument, conducted the data analysis, wrote the report findings, and is fully responsible for the content.

Thank you to Kevin Roth, Gina Mullins-Cohen, Vitisia Paynich, Roxanne Sutton, Melissa May, Lindsay Hogeboom, Jennifer Fulcher-Nguyen, Kim Mabon and Kate Anderson for making this report possible. Also, thank you to those who contributed the photos included throughout.

A park patron mountain bikes in the Boise (Idaho) Foothills.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MATT COOPER



Christie Bruner (right), community engagement supervisor at City of St. Petersburg (Florida) Parks & Recreation - Healthy St. Pete, helping an AARP board member change the resistance on a hand bike machine.



**22377 Belmont Ridge Road
Ashburn, VA 20148-4501**

800.626.NRPA (6772) | nrpa.org