



**Cover image:** Hikers enjoy scenic views in Eugene, Oregon.

Photo courtesy of City of Eugene (Oregon) Parks and Open Space Division

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## Introduction



With more than 10,000 local agencies nationwide, parks and recreation is vital to fostering healthy communities and ecosystems. By providing public spaces and programming, U.S. residents can engage in various activities tailored to their needs such as health and wellness, social connection, education and family support. As parks and recreation contributes significantly to the well-being and development of communities, ensuring access remains crucial so that everyone can benefit from these valuable resources.

Since 2016, the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) has conducted an annual survey to understand how people connect with parks and recreation across the United States. The survey results form the basis of NRPA's annual *Engagement With Parks Report*. The report provides park and recreation professionals, advocates, policymakers and other key stakeholders with insights into how local park and recreation facilities impact the lives of people nationwide.

On behalf of NRPA, Wakefield Research surveyed 1,000 U.S. adults ages 18 and older between June 24 and July 7, 2024. The firm used quotas to ensure the pool of respondents was a reliable and representative reflection of the U.S. adult population. The margin of error for data contained in this report is +/-3.1 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

## Key Findings of the **2024 Engagement With Parks Report**



More than **276 million** people in the United States visited a local park or recreation facility at least once during the past year.



Being with family and friends is the **top reason** respondents use park and recreation facilities.



97% of visitors report some feelings of inclusion or belonging at their park and recreation spaces.



91% of people agree that parks and recreation is an important service provided by their local government.



93% of U.S. adults support the use of automated technology by their local park and recreation agency — especially for crime prevention, understanding park use and increasing community members' access.

## **Key Findings**

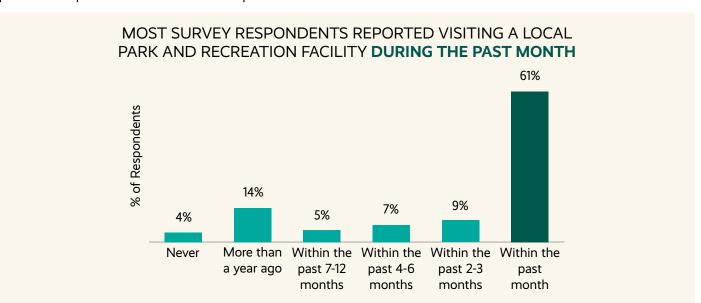


#### **Park and Recreation Access**

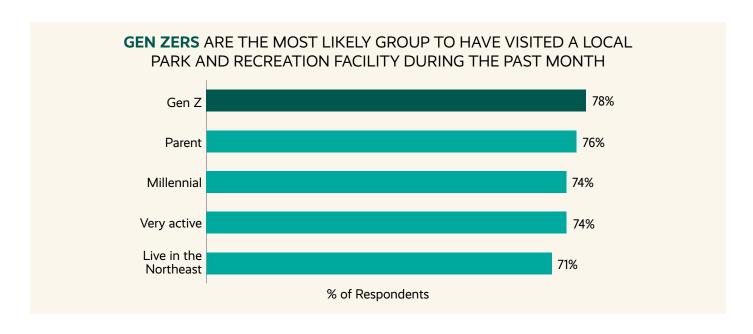
Across the nation, U.S. residents visit park and recreation facilities to take advantage of their diverse offerings and numerous benefits. Public access to these facilities varies by neighborhood depending on factors like the number of parks available, parks' proximity to community members' homes and the availability of transportation options.

#### Visiting Parks and Recreation

Between June 2023 and July 2024, 82 percent of survey respondents — the equivalent of **more than 276 million people** in the United States — visited a local park or recreation facility at least once, most within the previous month. A slight four percent of respondents had never visited a park and recreation resource.



Sixty-one percent of respondents visited their local park or recreation resource at least once within the past month of completing the survey, including 42 percent who visited the same day or within the previous week.



#### Frequency of Visits

On average, people visited their local park and recreation facilities 23 times between June 2023 and July 2024, with the highest average observed for those who characterized themselves as very physically active (an average 31 times) and the lowest for those not living near a park (an average 16 times). "Power users" — those who used park and recreation facilities once a week or more — accounted for eight percent of all respondents. Those in the Midwest and very physically active people were the top two groups of "power users."

## U.S. RESIDENTS WHO **LIVE CLOSER** TO PARK AND RECREATION FACILITIES AND WHO SELF-IDENTIFY AS "**VERY ACTIVE**" VISITED MORE OFTEN.

Average and median number of visits to park and recreation facilities during the past year

	Proximity to Park			Physical Activity		
	All	Live near park	Do not live near park	Very active	Not active	
Average number of visits	23	25	16	31	13	
Median number of visits	6	8	4	9	4	

#### **Proximity to Park and Recreation Facilities**

The majority (73 percent) of survey respondents live within a walkable distance of at least one park or recreation facility, including 36 percent who live within walkable distances of multiple facilities. However, 27 percent — the equivalent of 90 million people in the United States — do not have walkable access to a park or other recreation resource.

ABOUT 3 IN 4 (73%) U.S. RESIDENTS LIVE WITHIN WALKABLE DISTANCE OF AT LEAST ONE PARK AND RECREATION FACILITY

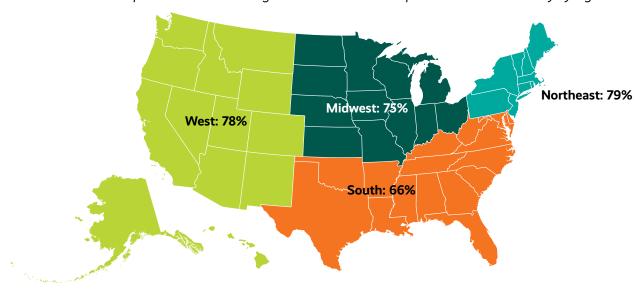




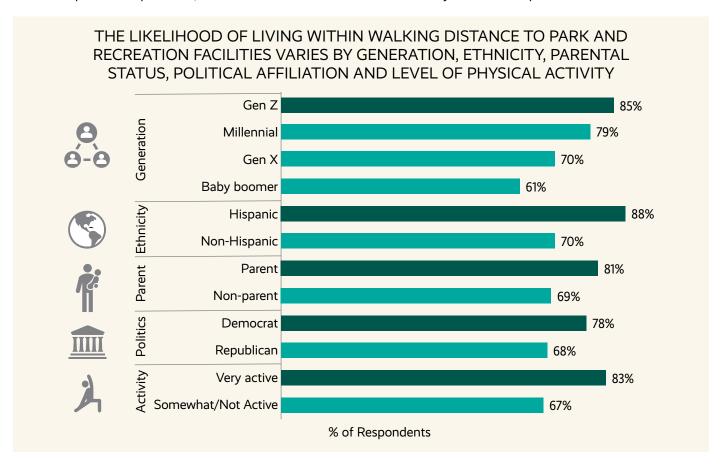
The perceived availability of parks and recreation within a walkable distance varies by region. Compared to respondents from the Northeast and West, those who live in the South are less likely to have facilities close by. Also, a larger share of respondents from suburban areas than those from rural areas reported having facilities within walkable distances.

### RESPONDENTS IN THE **SOUTH** WERE LESS LIKELY THAN THOSE IN OTHER REGIONS TO REPORT HAVING FACILITIES WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE

Percent of respondents within walking distance to at least one park and recreation facility by region



Aside from regional differences, walkability to park and recreation facilities varies within other segments of the population. The likelihood of living within walking distance to parks and recreation is greater for Gen Zers than for Gen Xers and baby boomers; for those identifying as Hispanic compared to those that do not; for parents compared to non-parents; for Democrats compared to Republicans; and for those who consider themselves very active in comparison to those that do not.

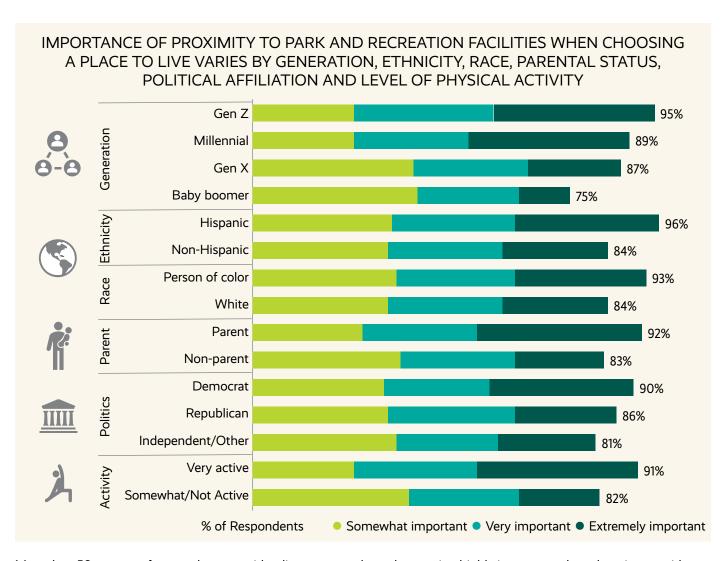


Many residents desire close access to local park and recreation opportunities. In fact, 86 percent of survey respondents said proximity to high-quality parks, playgrounds, open spaces or other recreation facilities is important when choosing a neighborhood or area in which to live.

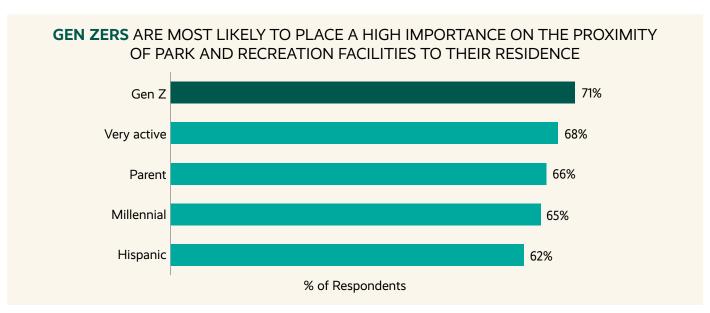
6 IN 7 (86%) U.S. RESIDENTS SAY PROXIMITY TO PARK AND RECREATION FACILITIES IS IMPORTANT WHEN CHOOSING A PLACE TO LIVE



Significant differences emerged when comparing the shares of respondents within different groups who place importance on proximity to parks and recreation when choosing where to live. Living in proximity to park and recreation facilities is more important for Gen Zers than for Gen Xers and baby boomers; for those identifying as Hispanic compared to those that do not; for those identifying as people of color as compared to those identifying as white; for parents compared to non-parents; for Democrats compared to Independents or those of another political party; and for those that consider themselves very active in comparison to those that do not.

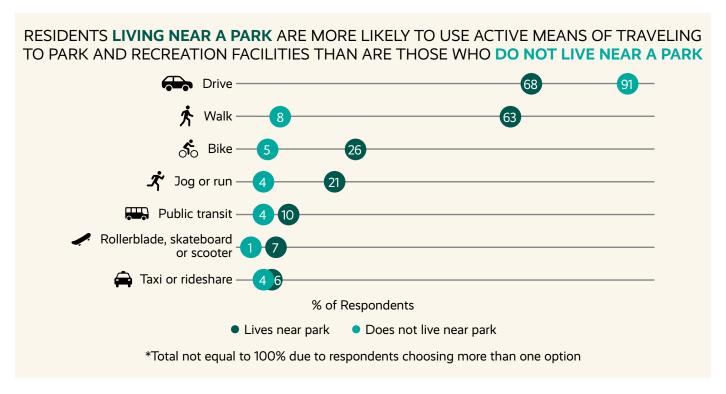


More than 50 percent of respondents consider distance to parks and recreation highly important when choosing a residence. The top five population groups most likely to place the highest importance on proximity ranged from those who are Hispanic (62 percent) to Gen Zers (71 percent).



#### **Traveling to Park and Recreation Facilities**

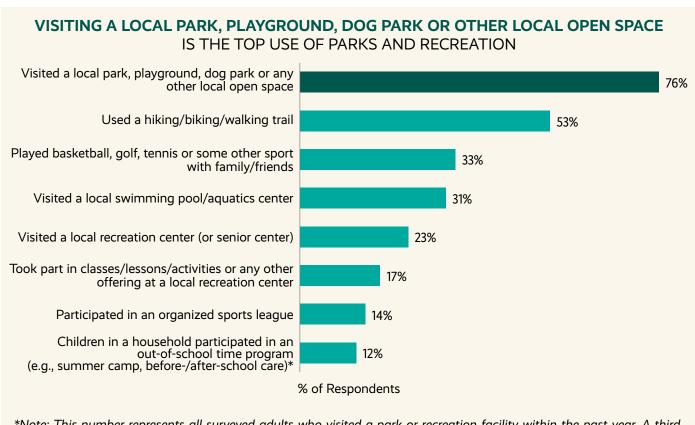
People use many forms of transportation to travel to parks, playgrounds, open spaces and recreation centers. While many people travel by automobile to these areas (74 percent of all respondents), nearly half of U.S. adults (49 percent) access these locations by walking. Proximity to a park increases the likelihood that people visiting such a facility do so by "active" means (e.g., walking, biking, running, rollerblading, etc.). Sixty-nine percent of all respondents with a park nearby say they use one or more of these "active" means to visit local parks. Conversely, 91 percent of U.S. adults who do not live near parks or recreation offerings drive to those amenities.





#### Park and Recreation Use

Park and recreation offerings vary by community, and families and individuals use them differently. Of the more than 276 million visitors between June 2023 and July 2024, three-fourths (76 percent) visited a local park, playground, dog park or other local open space. Gen Zers (82 percent), people in the Midwest (80 percent) and those not living near a park (80 percent) were the top users of parks and recreation spaces in this way. Hiking, biking and walking on local trails was the second-most popular activity, with more than half of all survey respondents (53 percent) taking advantage of these offerings.



\*Note: This number represents all surveyed adults who visited a park or recreation facility within the past year. A third (33%) of <u>parents</u> reported their children participated in out-of-school time programs.

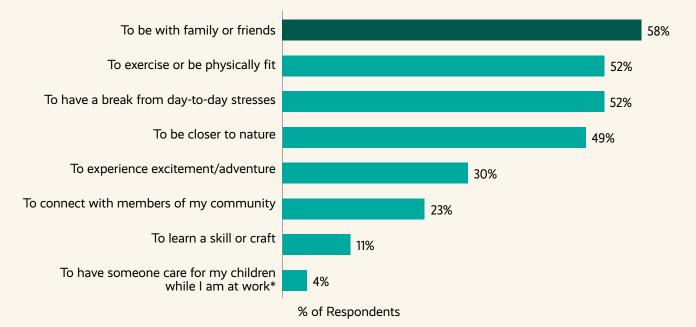
More than half (55 percent) of respondents and/or a member of their household had participated in an activity sponsored by a park and recreation department in the past year, including sports leagues, summer camps, out-of-school time care and classes/lessons. This participation rate is equivalent to more than 185 million people. The groups that were most likely to have personally participated or had a member of their household participate in a park and recreation program within the past three months include parents (65 percent), Gen Zers (63 percent), those identifying as very active (59 percent), those identifying as Hispanic (58 percent) and working adults (53 percent).

#### Reasons for Park and Recreation Use

People engage with park and recreation amenities and programming for various reasons, including for social connections, physical and mental health benefits, and opportunities for new experiences and learning.

Younger adults and very active people are most likely to have engaged in sports activities in their local park and recreation facilities.

#### BEING WITH FAMILY OR FRIENDS IS THE TOP REASON FOR USING PARKS AND RECREATION

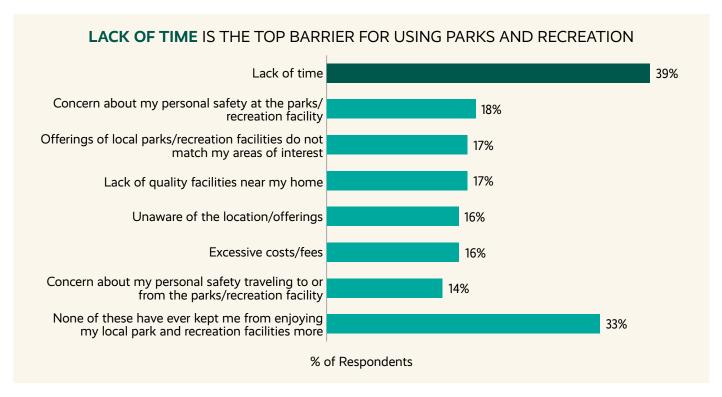


\*Note: This number represents all surveyed adults who visited a park or recreation facility within the past year. Fourteen percent of <u>parents</u> reported having someone care for their children while at work.

#### **Barriers to Park and Recreation Use**

Obstacles may hinder residents from taking full advantage of their local park and recreation opportunities. Overall, 67 percent of respondents reported at least one barrier kept them from using park and recreation opportunities as much as they would have liked during the past year. Nearly two in five (39 percent) U.S. adults said lack of time kept them from fully enjoying their local park and recreation facilities.

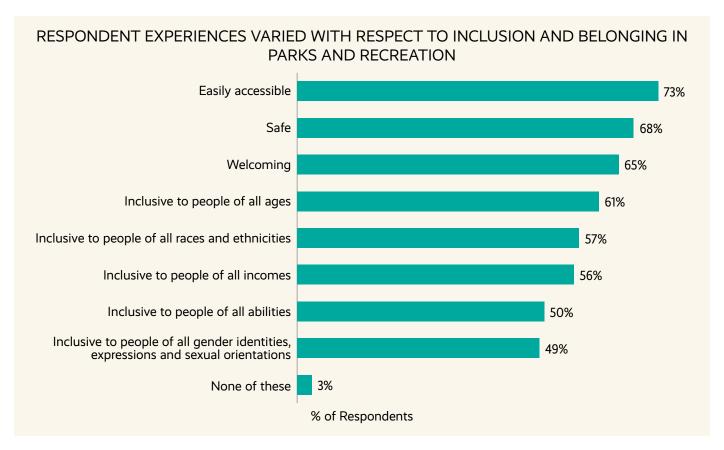
Gen Zers (71 percent) and parents
(69 percent) were most likely
to cite family and friends as their primary
motivation for accessing parks and recreation.





#### Inclusion and Belonging in Parks and Recreation

Safe, accessible, inclusive and welcoming spaces can impact a person's perception and use of park and recreation facilities. Nearly all (97 percent) respondents experienced one or more instances of inclusion and belonging at their park and recreation spaces. These experiences varied among respondents. While easy accessibility was experienced most frequently (73 percent), 27 percent of respondents did not agree.



Feeling welcome within park and recreation spaces can influence whether one takes advantage of the programming and activities offered. People who experience safe, accessible and inclusive park and recreation facilities visit those places more often than do those who do not share the same experiences. For example, respondents who felt a sense of inclusion for people of all ages visited a park nearly twice as often (24 times), on average, as did those who did not have this experience (13 times).

#### 

## SEVERAL GROUP DIFFERENCES BY GENERATION, INCOME AND RACE/ETHNICITY EMERGED FOR EXPERIENCES OF INCLUSION AND BELONGING

Have experienced

Have not experienced

Percent of respondents reporting experiences of inclusion and belonging at park and recreation facilities by select demographics

Park and Recreation Experience	Generation		Income		Race/Ethnicity	
	Gen Z	76%	Less than \$35K	66%	Hispanic	74%
Easily accessible	Millennial	70%	\$35-75K	77%	People of color	63%
	Gen X	69%	More than \$75K	75%	White	76%
	Baby boomer	76%				
Safe	Gen Z	73%	Less than \$35K	64%	Hispanic	62%
	Millennial	68%	\$35-75K	63%	People of color	57%
	Gen X	60%	More than \$75K	73%	White	72%
	Baby boomer	73%				
Welcoming	Gen Z	74%	Less than \$35K	70%	Hispanic	58%
	Millennial	69%	\$35-75K	68%	People of color	60%
	Gen X	64%	More than \$75K	61%	White	66%
	Baby boomer	58%				
Inclusive of all ages	Gen Z	63%	Less than \$35K	53%	Hispanic	66%
	Millennial	58%	\$35-75K	57%	People of color	55%
	Gen X	56%	More than \$75K	67%	White	63%
	Baby boomer	69%				
Inclusive of all races/ethnicities	Gen Z	58%	Less than \$35K	51%	Hispanic	49%
	Millennial	57%	\$35-75K	53%	People of color	46%
	Gen X	48%	More than \$75K	61%	White	60%
	Baby boomer	65%				

Park and Recreation Experience	Generation		Income		Race/Ethnicity	
Inclusive of all incomes	Gen Z	60%	Less than \$35K	47%	Hispanic	46%
	Millennial	53%	\$35-75K	53%	People of color	41%
	Gen X	50%	More than \$75K	60%	White	60%
	Baby boomer	63%				
Inclusive of all abilities	Gen Z	53%	Less than \$35K	43%	Hispanic	45%
	Millennial	50%	\$35-75K	50%	People of color	40%
	Gen X	44%	More than \$75K	54%	White	54%
	Baby boomer	56%				
Inclusive of all genders	Gen Z	52%	Less than \$35K	38%	Hispanic	43%
	Millennial	46%	\$35-75K	45%	People of color	39%
	Gen X	46%	More than \$75K	55%	White	52%
	Baby boomer	54%				

#### These data show that:



Baby boomers were more likely to experience inclusion than were other generations.



People identifying as white were more likely to experience accessibility, safety and inclusion than were people of color and those identifying as Hispanic or people of color.

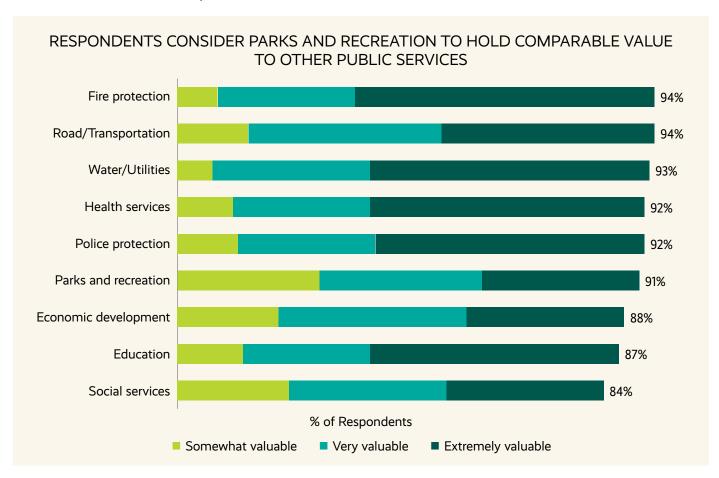


People in a higher income bracket were more likely to experience accessibility, safety and inclusion compared to those with lower incomes.



#### Value of Parks and Recreation

Park and recreation agencies are crucial components of a broader system of public services across towns, cities and counties. In fact, nine in 10 (91 percent) U.S. adults agree parks and recreation is a valuable service their local governments provide. This robust support spans across generations, genders, regions, races/ethnicities and political views, among other demographic groups. In comparison to other public services, parks and recreation is considered as valuable as fire, road/transportation, water/utilities, health and police services.



Most (92 percent) respondents indicated that it is valuable for local and state governments to sufficiently fund parks and recreation to ensure that every community member has access to amenities, infrastructure and programming. Nearly three-quarters (72 percent) of these adults consider this funding highly valuable.

Those who consider it extremely valuable for local and state governments to sufficiently fund parks and recreation tend to be:

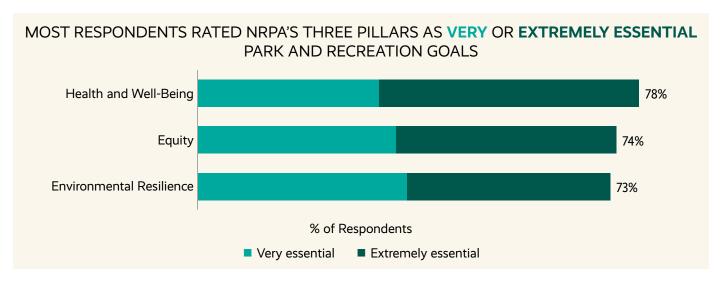


#### **NRPA's Three Pillars**

NRPA's Three Pillars are central to organizational efforts to support the role of parks and recreation in advancing the well-being of individuals and communities nationwide. They can serve as focus areas for park and recreation agencies in advocacy, program development and community engagement. The three pillars include:

- Health and Well-Being: Advancing community health and well-being through parks and recreation.
- Equity: Striving for a future where all people have access to the benefits of quality parks and recreation.
- **Environmental Resilience:** Promoting healthy, resilient and equitable community-driven solutions to build a better future for everyone.

Most (93 percent) respondents agree that NRPA's Three Pillars are essential goals for their local park and recreation agencies; between 73 and 78 percent report that each of the three pillars are very or extremely essential.



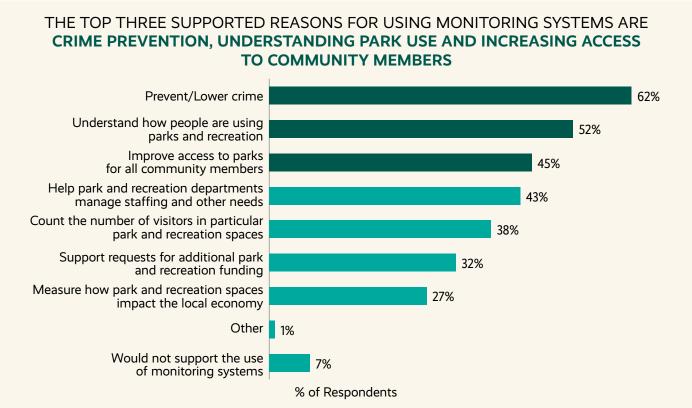
#### **New Park Technologies**



Park and recreation agencies seek ways to improve their services, including through the adoption of new technologies. To gauge public perceptions of emerging trends, we asked survey respondents about their support of data collection from monitoring systems like cameras, counters and cell phone data in park and recreation spaces. Overall, 93 percent indicated they support their local parks in using these devices for data collection.

Respondents selected reasons why they would support data monitoring technologies in parks and recreation. The top three reasons were to prevent crime (62 percent), to understand how people use parks and recreation (52 percent) and to improve access to parks for all community members (45 percent).

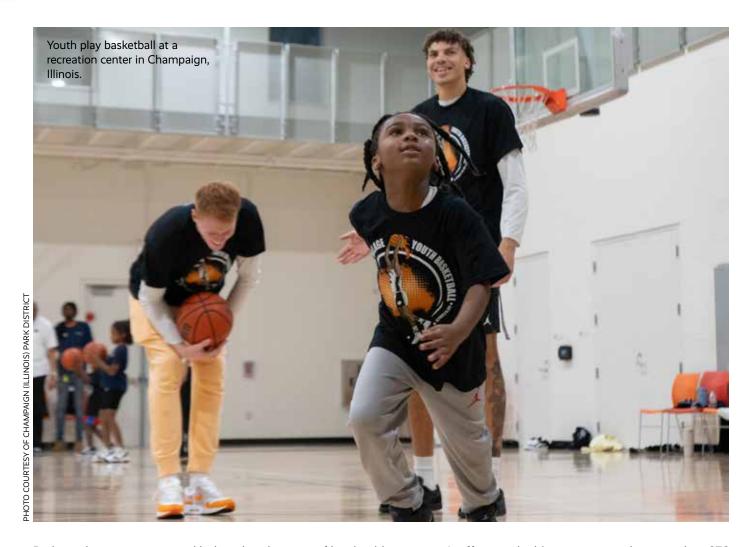




Written comments from respondents paralleled the top reasons for using monitoring systems with safety and security as a predominant theme. However, some noted concerns for privacy or how the data would be used. One respondent said, "I understand how this might be useful for [park and recreation] agencies, but I'm also concerned about the safety of the data, especially citizens' cell phone data." Another commented, "I have no issues as long as no personal info is collected/stored."

Fifty-nine percent of respondents were aware whether their local park and recreation agency was using or not using this type of technology in public spaces, while 41 percent were not sure. Ideas for increasing public awareness of the use of these monitoring technologies in public spaces include posting signage in monitoring locations (noted by 65 percent of respondents), sharing data online (46 percent) or at public meetings (43 percent), announcements on social media (46 percent) and press releases (43 percent).

## Conclusion



Parks and recreation is a vital hub within the array of local public services. It offers invaluable resources to the more than 276 million people who visited park and recreation spaces during the past year. Park and recreation agencies' role in promoting health and wellness, fostering social connections, providing educational opportunities and family support positively impacts communities. Despite many benefits, continued work must be done so that every community member has access and feels included, safe and welcome in the park and recreation space.

Park and recreation professionals can use the results from the 2024 Engagement With Parks Report as proof of the strong support they have from, and the valued services they provide to, communities. The information in this report also serves as a tool to use when speaking to local political leaders, stakeholders and the media to advocate for increased funding and resources. Professionals may also find the data useful for encouraging open dialogue with community members to address barriers to park use and explore ways to create more welcoming spaces. Finally, the data presented in this report series are not only a snapshot of the public's engagement with their local parks and recreation facilities, but also a reminder of the hard work and dedication of park and recreation professionals.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to Samantha Serrano, Melissa May, Dianne Palladino, Danielle Doll, Lindsay Collins, Alexandra Klein, Kim Mabon and Kate Anderson for making this report possible. Thank you also to the many park and recreation agencies who contributed to the images featured throughout this report.

## **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 vision 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 and analyzes data to help park and recreation agencies make optimal decisions on operations, programming and spending. Second, NRPA develops data and insights that support park and recreation professionals making the case for greater and more stable funding to policymakers, key stakeholders, the media and the public. The NRPA Research team works closely with internal subject matter experts, respected industry consultants and the academic community to develop its reports and data resources. Learn more at <a href="https://research.com/nrpa.crg/Research">nrpa.org/Research</a>.



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