



2018 City park facts

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The logo for The Trust for Public Land, featuring the organization's name in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters on a green rectangular background with a vertical gradient.

THE
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The Trust for Public Land creates parks
and protects land for people,
ensuring healthy, livable communities
for generations to come.

Our Center for City Park Excellence helps make cities
more successful through the renewal and creation of parks
for their social, ecological, and economic benefits to
residents and visitors alike.

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Welcome to the 2018 edition of *City Park Facts: The year in parks*

THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND BELIEVES that residents, park professionals, planners, media members, and all those who love parks need solid data that elucidates the realities of urban park and recreation systems. Data is knowledge, and knowledge is power. *City Park Facts* includes information on the 100 most populous cities in the United States. Collectively, these cities are home to 64.5 million people, or roughly 20 percent of the United States population.

Instead of being organized by topic, the 2018 edition of *City Park Facts* focuses on the city by developing individual profiles that highlight key facts and unique features of each park system. In this introduction, we provide a national overview of the major urban park systems around the country and cover the most significant and noteworthy

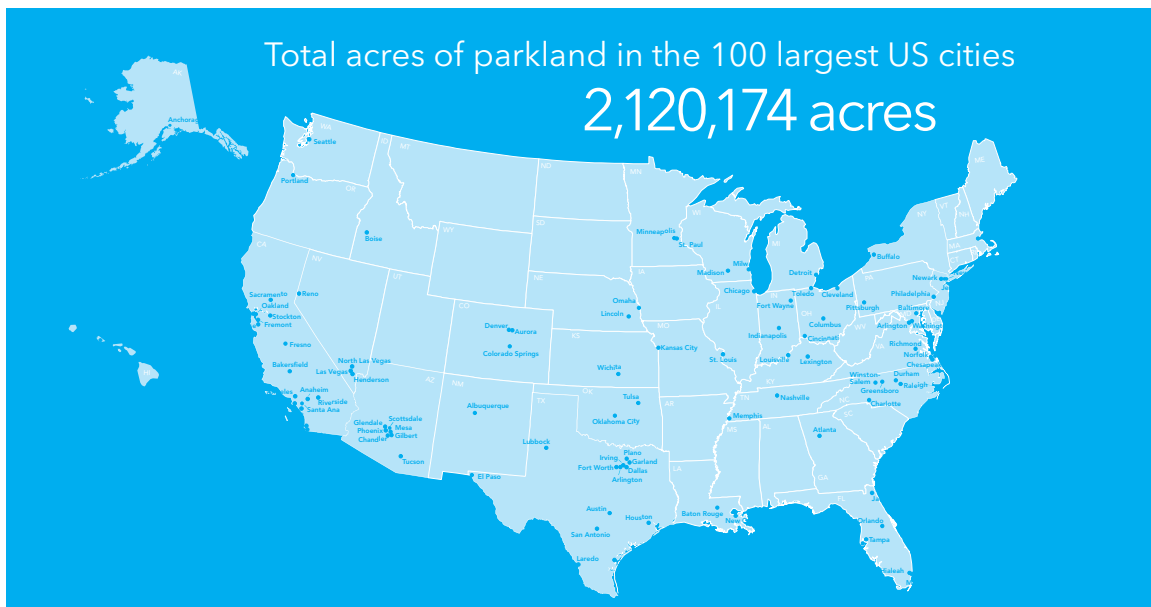
trends we have seen through our work in the past year, as well as offer some speculation on what may happen in the years to come.

Using this data

All the information found within the report, and much more, is available for download.¹ If you use our data please credit us as “The Trust for Public Land” and let us know where our research is being used.

How do we collect this information?

Since 2000, we have asked park professionals, planners, and GIS specialists to help us track what is going on in the parks systems of the largest U.S. cities. This is done through an annual survey sent to all public parks agencies—city, state, regional, and federal—to fill out each year.



Executive summary: What happened in city parks in the past year?

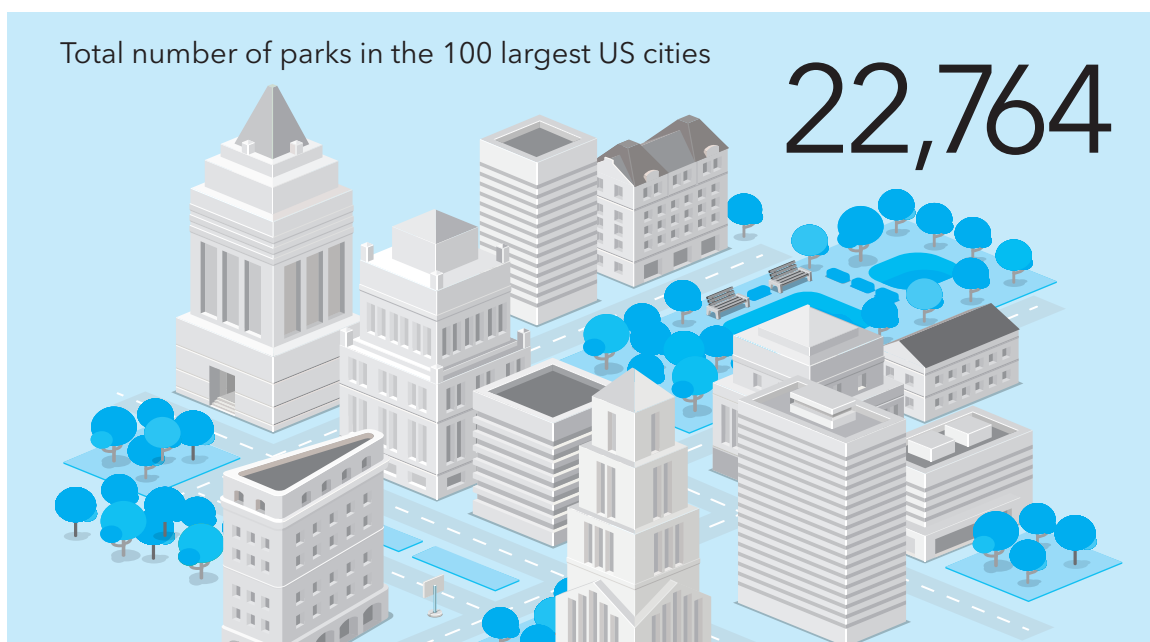
Our role in collecting and disseminating this data annually gives us a first-hand perspective on the state of parks and recreation across the country. In this report, we shed light on some of the most prominent trends we have seen over the past year, as well as highlight some of the current challenges facing a flourishing urban park system. Topics include spending on parks and recreation, acres of parkland and the importance of access to these parks, the growing role of nonprofit partners and volunteers, trends in recreation, current societal and political events taking place in parks, and more.

Parks and acreage

The total acreage of all parks in the 100 largest U.S. cities is **2,120,174 acres** and spans **22,764 total parks**. This number is likely an

underestimate of publicly accessible parkland since it does not include joint-use schoolyards which function as parks in many cities, nor many other public spaces informally used as parks. The median size of a park in the largest U.S. cities is **3.8 acres**, a figure which remains unchanged from previous years.

The percentage of people living within a 10-minute walk to a park in the 100 largest cities is **70 percent**, a slight increase from 69 percent in 2017. In October 2017 the Trust for Public Land, in partnership with the National Recreation and Parks Association (NRPA) and the Urban Land Institute (ULI), launched the 10-Minute Walk Campaign, with the goal of putting a park within a 10-minute walk of everyone living in the U.S. The Trust for Public Land's ParkServe® project



has mapped access to parks for almost 14,000 cities and towns across the U.S., almost 80 percent of the nation's population.²

Public agency spending

This year saw an increase of 6 percent in public spending on city parks, continuing a slight upward trend of the past five years. The combined public parks agencies reported a total of \$7.5 billion in spending, up from the \$7.1 billion that we reported in 2017. This trend is likely a result of department budgets being rebuilt slowly as cities recover from the Great Recession of 2008. The median figure that the 100 largest cities spend per resident on parks and recreation is \$83, when looking at public and private spending combined, and \$82 per person of public agency dollars.

Despite this recent good news, public agency budgets still face a particular set of financial challenges. Although budgets seem to be recovering, this process is slow. Agencies remain underfunded, a chronic reality of the country's park systems. Furthermore, parks agencies are among the first departments to be cut in times of fiscal crisis, according to a 2017 study by Penn State University and the National Recreation and Parks Association.³

Usually, increases are a result of more capital spending, rather than on operations, maintenance and programming. Spending on operations and maintenance has grown by about 3 to 5 percent annually over the past five years. Capital spending, on the other hand, varies widely, sometimes with as much as a 23 percent increase from one year to the

PUBLIC AGENCY SPENDING		
Year	Total spending per resident	Operating spending per resident
2018	\$82	\$87
2017	\$83	\$83
2016	\$76	\$81
2015	\$89	\$87
2014	\$73	\$84

next, as was the case from last year to this year. Capital budget increases indicate new and re-built park facilities and amenities, repairs to significant park infrastructure, and the acquisition of more parkland.

Even with increased capital spending, public agencies are often left to look for additional sustainable sources of operating revenue to help bolster daily operations and maintenance activities as well as programming. Operating dollars are what keep the grass mowed, the weeds pulled, and the trash cans emptied in parks across the country. And while there's no argument that these tasks are crucial to keep parks and their cities beautiful and functional, the challenge to find enough sustainable operations and maintenance funds remains.

Total spending on parks in the 100 largest US cities

\$8,020,190,754



Park partners: nonprofits and volunteers

One way to ease funding pressures on agencies and add more money into the mix is through private and philanthropic dollars. While past editions of *City Park Facts* reported on a select group of parks conservancies, this year's report includes a more robust depiction of the role these groups play. We identified more than 160 nonprofits in the 100 largest cities, and collected data to determine just how big a factor these groups are in urban park systems.

For the purpose of this report, nonprofit park organizations are those qualifying under section 501(c)3 of the federal tax code. These organizations can be citywide advocacy or partnership organizations, or be focused on a specific park or group of parks. These groups are often called “conservancies” or “friends of” groups. They typically have a working relationship with one or more public park agencies and contribute funding, volunteers, and advocacy to their

park systems. Outside the larger cities, park nonprofits are often small, with a staff of one to two people and a host of volunteers working to support their efforts.

Over the past year, these groups spent roughly \$500 million on public parks in the largest 100 cities, including on programming, capital improvements, maintenance, and operations. As a result, contributions by these nonprofit partners made up 6.2 percent of the total spending on parks and recreation in the past year. Furthermore, an additional \$433 million in value was contributed in volunteer time to both public and nonprofit parks agencies in the past year.⁴ With public and nonprofit dollars combined, a total of just over \$8 billion was spent on parks in the most recent fiscal year.

Increasingly, more parks agencies—both public and nonprofit—are working with volunteers to provide recreation programs, support efforts in planting, watering and weeding, and even for assistance in constructing capital projects. Over the

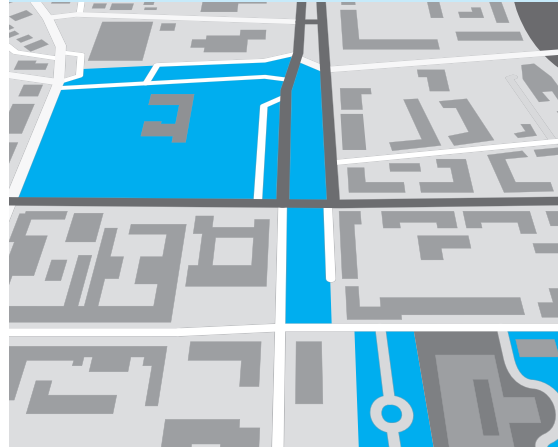
past year, nearly 1.1 million volunteers contributed 16.9 million hours in work to the park systems of the 100 largest U.S. cities. Put another way, it is like adding another 8,330 full-time positions to these parks and recreation agencies.⁵

Parks nonprofits play a key role in organizing and deploying volunteers on a citywide basis. The largest and oldest example of this is the Partnerships for Parks program, jointly managed by the City Parks Foundation and the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation. Through the brand of “It’s My Park,” Partnerships for Parks organizes volunteer training and tools for volunteer workdays in over 300 parks across the city. With over 2,000 park properties, New York City benefits from hundreds of “friends groups” that commit time and materials to maintain and improve many neighborhood parks, squares, and plazas. One of the key features of many city volunteer programs, including “It’s My Park”, is the organizing of focal volunteer workdays, often several over the course of a year, that work to put as many volunteers in as many parks as possible on a single day. Similar events are held in cities across the country, with two other notable examples being Philadelphia’s “Love Your Park” and Austin’s “It’s My Park Day” events.

All of these citywide efforts focus on connecting citizens with local parks and establishing relationships with public agency officials. In many ways, the biggest events serve as icebreaker activities where the goal is to encourage and develop ongoing

Median size of a city park

3.8 acres



public-private collaborations. Getting people out and into their parks encourages a feeling of ownership and investment in the space, and ideally creates newly minted park advocates. Each of the parks nonprofit organizations has a variety of offerings to help encourage activism, including training programs for volunteers, grant opportunities, the ability to raise funds for improvements, programming or maintenance under the organization’s umbrella and the lending of tools and resources to make the volunteer days a success. Large scale volunteer days like those described above may be solutions for cities that struggle to stay on top of upkeep for their parks.

Recreational trends

We track over two dozen park amenities in our annual data collection survey, ranging from the traditional like baseball diamonds, to the latest trends such as pickleball courts and splash pads. This section is an overview of some of the top recreational trends in cities we have seen over the past few years. These trends tell us as much about what people

prefer to do in their leisure time and for physical fitness as they do about what life is like in America's largest cities.

As summers grow increasingly hotter, interactive water features such as splash pads, spray grounds, and spray showers are growing in number in city park systems around the country. These features are a great replacement for wading pools or kiddie pools. Activated by sensors or at the push of a button, they use less water than traditional pools, and since they do not require lifeguards, seasonal positions are freed up for other areas of parks and recreation work. While these water features have replaced some pools, there has not been a noticeable downward trend in the number of pools across the country.

Dog ownership has risen by 29 percent in the past decade and with half of those dog owners living in the 25 largest metro areas, dogs and their parks are a key ingredient of any park system.⁶ As people move to cities and bring their pets with them they look for places for their dogs to play; the number of off-leash dog parks in the largest cities has grown by 40 percent since 2009.

At their simplest, dog parks are fenced or separately designated areas for dogs to run and play. Common features include separate sections for small and large dogs and surfaces such as grass, gravel, mulch, or dirt. Dog parks run the gamut from simple fields to elaborate spaces resembling children's

Total basketball hoops

20,655



playgrounds, with tunnels to run through and obstacles to climb over and around. Some dog parks even have dedicated swimming holes and drinking fountains.

While many urban residents love dog parks as much as their furry friends do, these parks can also be highly contentious. Parents of young children might be nervous about having dogs and their kids in close proximity. There are often tensions over owners failing to pick up pet waste. Other people do not want precious chunks of their local park fenced off for animals only, while some may bristle at not being able to take their dog and their child to play in the same park (dog parks often do not allow children for fear of injury to the kids or the dogs).

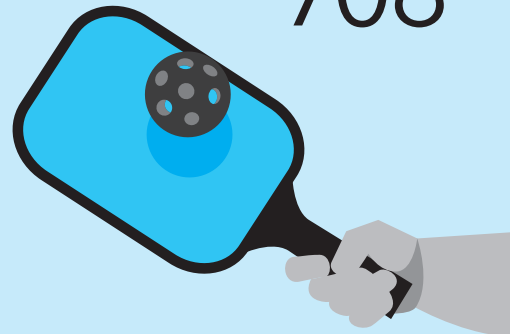
Despite these issues, the benefits of dog parks are many and varied. Dogs need to be walked regularly, so dog parks can help activate neighborhood parks at off-hours or in bad

weather when usage by others is low. They also provide a positive social setting for dog owners and dog lovers to meet and mingle, forming valuable community connections. Finally, dog owners are often strong and vocal advocates for their parks and this influence spans beyond their fenced-off area.

Two somewhat surprising sports that have seen a rise lately are pickleball and disc golf. Pickleball has been around since the 1960s but has seen strong growth lately. Developed by “three dads on Bainbridge Island in the Seattle area,” it combines tennis, badminton and ping-pong and is played on “a badminton-sized court with a slightly modified tennis net.”⁷ Many park and recreation agencies have

Total pickleball courts

708



found that volleyball or tennis courts can do double duty for pickleball, making it a simple addition to many systems. While we have only tracked pickleball for the past two years, we see numbers growing dramatically.

Disc golf is another activity that is less well known but is becoming increasingly popular. It is played with small heavy plastic discs similar to Frisbees. The course is similar to that of traditional golf where each has a tee, a fairway and a green that has a hole, which in disc golf is an open metal basket mounted on a pole. The sport is a great example of a shared use amenity, meaning that it can co-exist with other park activities and uses and is therefore a simple addition to most parks. Another benefit is that disc golf attracts an engaged community that supports the upkeep and improvements of the parks they play in.

Nine disc golf courses were added across the largest cities in 2017, bringing the current total to **195 courses**. This number is less than that of traditional golf courses (421 in 2018) and represents only a small subset of an estimated 6,000 disc golf courses on public parkland across the United States.⁸

Total off-leash dog parks

775



Newsworthy: parks, civic action, parkland alienation and big plans

Parks and civic action

Parks have always been a setting for the public voice, dating back to celebrations of the repeal of the Stamp Act in 1766 on Boston Common, America's oldest public park. 2017 saw renewed energy around civic action, with parks at the heart of many of these gatherings. Beginning with the International Women's March in January 2017 and continuing with a large number of protests, gatherings and demonstrations through that year, parks and other public spaces once again drew large numbers of people for a variety of issues. A New York City-based nonprofit, New Yorkers for Parks, worked to track these demonstrations and their turnouts through their Civic Action Tracker, and found 640 confirmed actions and 647,063 attendees in 2017 in New York alone.⁹ Much of this action took place in public parks, squares, and plazas such as Washington Square Park and Union Square, underscoring that parks are a crucial part of the public realm in which people can gather and make their voices heard.

Parks were also thrust into the spotlight in regards to a different political issue, that of Confederate monuments. After the deadly clash in Charlottesville, Virginia over the removal of a statue of General Robert E. Lee, the call to move or relocate statues and rename parks and other spaces saw increased urgency. Many cities set in motion removals that they previously had been postponing. Of 77 monuments in parks in 23 states, 13 statues were removed in 2017, with another nine covered up pending further discussions and

negotiations. Additionally, four parks have been renamed in the past year.

Two cities in particular showcase the wide range of responses to this issue: Richmond, Virginia and Memphis, Tennessee. In Richmond, the statues that line Monument Avenue honor a number of Confederate war leaders. After vigorous public debate, Mayor Levar Stoney established a commission of concerned citizens to look at a variety of responses, from outright removal of the statues, to re-interpretation via signage and programming, to the addition of other famed city figures. Shortly thereafter, the Mayor adjusted the commission's charter to focus on placing the statues in an historical context. The commission continues to meet and discuss opportunities and hopes to issue recommendations in 2018.

In 2013, the Memphis city council renamed two downtown parks which had previously commemorated confederate leaders. However, statues of Jefferson Davis and Nathan Bedford Forrest remained, as did the graves of Forrest and his wife, which had been moved to one of the sites in the early twentieth century from a nearby cemetery. The state legislature responded to the renaming of the parks with the Tennessee Heritage Protection Act, passed in 2013 and amended in 2016, which prohibits the removal, relocation, or renaming of a memorial that is on public property, including parks.



Parks offer common ground for people to make their voices heard.

The City of Memphis sold the two parks in late December 2017 to a newly created nonprofit corporation called Memphis Greenspace, which is not bound by the Tennessee Heritage Protection Act because of its status as a private entity. The parks were sold for \$1,000 each, and the sales agreement stipulated that the parks would continue to function entirely as public spaces. The statues of Davis and Forrest were removed later that same night. Memphis Greenspace has planned additional park improvements and is negotiating the return of the remains of Forrest and his wife to the cemetery from which they came. While so far the transfer of these parks seems like a successful solution, a lawsuit has been filed to determine whether the act was legitimate.

In many places, recently amended state laws bar cities from moving or removing confederate statues. Memphis and Richmond are worth watching as possible precedents in this movement, and this is an issue to keep an eye on in the years to come.

Parkland alienation

In recent years, alienation and removal of parkland without due process has continued to be an unfortunate trend for many cities. Most states require a public process through hearings or votes by the public or by elected officials to convert parkland to other uses. The process can take many forms and is known as temporary or permanent alienation.

In Manhattan, a very public battle is taking place over the 1.5-acre Marx Brothers playground, used temporarily for construction activities related to the 2nd Avenue subway, as to whether the site is a park (which would require approval by the State Legislature and Governor) or a playground (which doesn't require approval). The result could be a 68-story tower with mixed housing, retail space, and school facilities.

Similar battles have played out across the country. In Fort Wayne, Indiana, Indiana Tech proposed building new athletic facilities

in the city's Memorial Park; in Stockton, California it was debated whether a golf course should be converted to public parkland or sold for private development; and the city of Corpus Christi, Texas has sold off parkland for residential development in recent years.

Big plans for parks

In Tulsa, Oklahoma work continues on Gathering Place: Tulsa's Riverfront Park, a new project along the Arkansas River. The George Kaiser Family Foundation (GKFF) is leading the effort to transform the existing River Parks by connecting three adjacent waterfront parcels (over 100 acres) to the



Many cities manage miles of bike and multi-use trails which serve as active transportation infrastructure.



Tulsa's River Parks invite people down to the Arkansas River.

existing riverfront park system. The first 66.5-acre phase of the park will open in 2018, featuring a one-of-a-kind children's adventure park. Gathering Place: Tulsa's Riverfront Park is the largest privately funded public park project to date.

In Fort Worth, Texas there is a project underway to improve flood control along the Trinity River. This would allow for more development in the downtown area, and would greatly improve and expand

the existing 1,000 acre Gateway Park. Development is led by the Trinity River Vision Authority.

Both the Tulsa and Fort Worth projects indicate that significant private and public investment is a way that cities are looking to differentiate themselves through their park systems, and provide benefits for residents and visitors as well as increase economic development.

On the horizon: what we're watching in 2018

The lessons of the past year and projections for the future can be summarized by one word: collaboration. The role of volunteers and nonprofit partners is expected to grow as cities and their park systems increasingly lean on each other and work together to achieve lofty goals.

EQUITY AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.

More and more public park agencies are working to address issues of equity when it comes to their park investments and improvements. Both the Minneapolis Park Board and the City of San Francisco Recreation & Parks Department have rolled

out plans to guide funding for repairs and improvements for parks that have been neglected, prioritizing those in underserved communities. The County of Los Angeles voted to approve additional parcel taxes in November 2016 which would add \$94.5 million annually for city and county parks and beaches, with an emphasis on low-income communities and communities of color. The City of Philadelphia has launched the Rebuild Philadelphia initiative, funded through an innovative city soda tax (though this is still pending judicial challenges) as well as through private donations that would result in \$500 million spent on parks, libraries



Volunteers are an important force in keeping city parks beautiful. Here, park lovers in San Francisco plant flowers at the Visitacion Valley Greenway.



and community centers. The overall goal is to reinvest in communities by investing in public facilities and infrastructure that will promote equity and fairness and spur additional economic development in the neighborhoods that need it most.

GENTRIFICATION, DISPLACEMENT AND PARKS. Improvements to local parks can spark worry over potential hardships being caused for nearby residents. Nonprofits and community groups, as well as advocates for housing, transportation, and local businesses have been increasingly active in working to prevent this while still improving parks as needed. Many nonprofits engage in community processes to ensure participation by local governments, housing and transportation advocacy groups, and residents when building new parks or improving existing ones.

Exemplary projects around the country provide valuable insight on how partnerships

between funders and nonprofit organizations can be crucial to park system success. These include the 11th Street Bridge Project in Washington, D.C., the Rebuild Philadelphia Initiative, and Los Angeles River Revitalization Project.

This is an exciting time for city parks. Both public and nonprofit parks agencies are working together to help shape and support the two million acres of parkland in the 100 largest cities, 160 nonprofit agencies now raise a significant portion of the total spending for parks, and volunteer hours provide indispensable time and effort. The future is collaborative.

What do you think?

We want to hear from you! We love talking parks, numbers, facts, and figures. You can write us at ccpe@tpl.org.

References

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