

2021 *City Park Facts*: The Year in Parks



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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 64.8 million people, or roughly 20 percent of the United States population.

Since 2000, we have asked park professionals, planners, and GIS specialists to complete an annual survey to help us track what is going on in the parks systems of the largest U.S. cities. This year's edition reflects the incredible work from 495 public and private parks and recreation organization across each of the 100 cities, including 202 private organizations such as conservancies and 'friends-of' groups.

City Park Facts was compiled by Will Klein, Project Manager for Parks Research, and Kirsten Mickow, Project Manager for Urban Analytics. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out to Will Klein at william.klein@tpl.org.

Investment in parks

This past year, \$8.4B was spent on parks and recreation, with \$7.7B spent by public agencies and \$.7B (8%) from non-profit and other private organizations. This continues a trend of increasing philanthropic funding of public parks, as illustrated by the hundreds of millions of dollars announced to remake waterfronts and improve recreational trails in Detroit and Buffalo from the Ralph C. Wilson Jr. Foundation. Additionally, volunteers contributed 7.2M hours of time across the 100 cities, estimated as equivalent to \$200M in spending.

This year's data primarily reflects spending prior to COVID-19, and is about the same as we reported last year. However, we anticipate seeing a reduction in spending in next year's survey that will reflect budget cuts and revenue losses from the pandemic. Among the primary park agencies in the 100 cities surveyed, 63 reported facing a COVID-19 related budget cut, averaging 10 percent but running as high as 30 percent in some cities. Collectively, park organizations reported an estimated \$1B in budget cuts over two years, with nearly 80% of that representing direct budget cuts to city park agencies (with the remainder representing cuts to non-profits and other public agencies).

While public spending has crept up in recent years, it still has not caught up to its pre- Great Recession levels. Adjusted for inflation, public spending on city parks in the 100 cities has decreased from \$126 per person in 2007 to \$117 per person today. This decade of underinvestment is reflected in the enormous backlog of deferred maintenance reported this year. Among just 46 cities reporting data, they averaged \$250 million in deferred maintenance or nearly \$12 billion in aggregate. To put it in context, that is roughly equal to the entire maintenance backlog of national parks, which had more than 237 million recreation visits last year.

In terms of benchmarking, the median city spent \$95 per person on parks and recreation this year, with 91% of that from public spending (\$87), 5% private spending (\$5), and 4% from volunteer hours (\$3). City park and rec agencies employed 40,000 full-time staff and 20,500 seasonal workers, with the median agency employing 6 full-time staff per resident and 2.9 season staff per resident. For more benchmarking data, including how your city compares in terms of operating spending per capita or acres per staff, please see the associated data tables.

Park space and its distribution

This year continues a trend of increasing access to close-to-home parks, with 75% of all residents in the 100 most populous cities now living within a 10-minute walk of a public park, up from 67.5% in 2012. This increase represents over 6M additional people who now live within a 10-minute walk of a park relative to each city's first year of being included in the ParkScore index.

Based on our analysis, residents who identify as people of color have about the same and in some cases better 10-minute walk access compared to white residents. This is also true when comparing by income or age. But we know that doesn't give a complete picture of park access. For the first time, we've added a measure of equity into our findings that compares the *amount* of park space between neighborhoods in each city by race and income.

This analysis reveals a stark park equity gap. On average, among the 100 cities, residents of neighborhoods where most people identify as Black, Hispanic and Latinx, Indigenous and Native American, or Asian American and Pacific Islander have access to 44 percent less park space per person than do residents in neighborhoods that are predominantly white. This disparity is most significant in Hispanic/Latinx neighborhoods, where residents have access to 54% less park acreage per person than those in white neighborhoods. In 70 of the 100 cities, residents in neighborhoods of color have access to less park space than those in white neighborhoods.

Across the 100 cities, residents of low-income neighborhoods have access to 42 percent less park space per person than do residents of high-income neighborhoods. In 66 of the 100 cities, residents in low-income neighborhoods have access to less park space than those in high-income neighborhoods.

Collectively, there are about 2M acres of city parkland among the 100 largest cities, of which about 1.7M acres are 'natural' acres and the rest are 'designed' acres. This is about the same size as Yellowstone and larger than a couple of states and its collective size is a good reminder of the critical importance of city parks for climate and health resilience.

In terms of benchmarking, the median city manages about 6,000 acres of parkland (about 50/50 split in terms of designed/natural acreage), or 9% of its populated land area. The median city has 72% of its residents within a 10-minute walk of a park and has 30% less park space per person in neighborhoods of color relative to white neighborhoods. To see how your city compares in terms of 10-minute walk statistics or the new park space ratios, please see the associated benchmarking tables.

Fastest Risers – Percentage of residents within a 10-minute walk of a park

<i>Since last year</i>				<i>In the last 3 years</i>			
City	Delta	2021	2020	City	Delta	2021	2018
Henderson, NV	8%	67%	60%	Henderson, NV	18%	67%	49%
Irvine, CA	6%	89%	82%	Columbus, OH	16%	68%	52%
San Antonio, TX	5%	48%	43%	Cincinnati, OH	15%	87%	71%
Cincinnati, OH	4%	87%	82%	Irvine, CA	14%	89%	75%
Albuquerque, NM	3%	90%	87%	Dallas, TX	14%	73%	60%
Colorado Springs, CO	3%	77%	74%	Chula Vista, CA	13%	68%	55%
Plano, TX	3%	78%	75%	Houston, TX	12%	61%	49%
Austin, TX	2%	62%	60%	Charlotte/Mecklenburg, NC	11%	39%	28%
Dallas, TX	2%	73%	71%	San Antonio, TX	11%	48%	38%
Charlotte/Mecklenburg, NC	2%	39%	37%	St. Louis, MO	10%	98%	88%

Table 1. Cities with the greatest increase of population within a 10-minute walk of a park

Activities and programming in parks

One of the biggest trends is the rise of the shared-use agreement between parks and rec and school districts. In this past year, 58 of the 100 cities reported having a joint-use agreement in place with a school district to share use of green schoolyards, an increase of 30% since 2018 (44 cities). This has driven significant increases in 2 of the 6 amenities that are often in schoolyards:

- Basketball hoops: 5% increase in this last year, 22% increase since 2018, 54% increase since 2015
- Playgrounds: 4% increase in this past year, 10% since 2018 and 29% since 2012.

This year's survey also demonstrated how critical parks have been to navigating the COVID pandemic and recovering from it. Among the 100 cities,

- 98 reported using parks to address COVID-19 either directly or via coordination with public health staff
- 70 reported using parks for free meal distribution
- 57 reported us park and rec facilities for COVID-19 testing, PPE handouts, or vaccinations
 - At least 18 have reported using parks and recreation facilities for vaccinations
- 84 reported working with public health staff
- 32 reported using park and recreation facilities for emergency classrooms and childcare – usually places where students could get free high-speed internet access and safely participate in distance learning when on-campus school classrooms were closed

Additionally, while quantitative data is still hard to come by, the vast majority of cities reported that close-to-home park use was up during the pandemic, as people desperately sought safe opportunities to get some physical activity, connect with nature, enjoy the fresh air, socialize safely, and just clear their heads for a mental health break. This often added strain to parks staff, dramatically increasing the maintenance burden at a time when staff were stretched thin due to pandemic staffing reductions and safety precautions.

Planning

The half-mile level of service standard for park access has been widely adopted by city park agencies, with 95% of the 77 city park agencies who reported data using the ½ mile goal either as a single goal or in conjunction with additional targets (e.g. ¼ mile within the urban core). Trends among planning efforts included: incorporation of equity and green infrastructure into the planning process, interest in better collecting data on park quality and park usage, and formalizing partnerships with community partners.

The majority of cities have recently updated their parks master plan within the last 6 years (median city plan is 6 years old, average is 10 years old), with equity and green infrastructure increasingly incorporated. Among the primary agencies in each city, 72 reported having a parks and green infrastructure plan, while 47 reported having developed a framework, master plan, or needs assessment that addresses equity, diversity, or inclusion goals. As park agencies expand their scopes, they are frequently contracting with local community partners. Among the 75 city park agencies reporting data, they collectively contracted with 3,361 community partners last year, with the median city contracting with 16 partners.

Park and rec agencies are beginning to supplement traditional usage counts with new technology. 85 agencies (49 city agencies, 36 other public agencies) reported using technology or devices to count visitors. The most common type of usage counted were trails and/or vehicles, with 57 agencies reporting tracking this type of usage with devices such as those made by Eco-Counter, Diamond Traffic Products, TRAFx, or Wee Counter (K-Hill). 27 agencies reported tracking usage via registration and/or reservation software, such as those made by ACTIVENet, RecTrac, or CivicRec. Less common were reports of technology used to count people in a space, with slightly higher reports of indoor people counting via technology such as Flonomics or Sensource (12 agencies) than neighborhood park usage counting via technology such as Streetlight Data, Numina, Soofa, Big Belly or Sensource (6 agencies).

32 public park agencies reported collecting demographic data on who uses parks and/or who the parks serve. Significantly more public agencies (118) reported tracking park quality or the condition of park assets.

For more information on any of these data points, please see the associated data tables or reach out to us at William.klein@tpl.org.