Parks Research Update: 2024 Annual Use Estimates

Ismael Ramirez, PhD, Principal Researcher

Metropolitan Parks and Open Space Commission

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Use Estimates Background

- Produced annually since 1995

- Used in formulas to calculate each implementing agency's share of Regional Parks & Trails System grant program dollars

- Allows for monitoring trends over time

- One of two ongoing research responsibilities: Other is Visitor Study, approximately every 5 years

2024 Annual Use Estimates

- The estimates include data from 132 regional parks, trails, park reserves and special recreation features.

- Fourth year of multipliers from the 2021 Visitor Study

- Annual estimated visitation is one way to demonstrate the value of the Regional Park System. Others include climate mitigation and public health benefits

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Calculating Annual Use Estimates

Raw Counts

- Parks staff count all people entering all parks and trails at designated locations
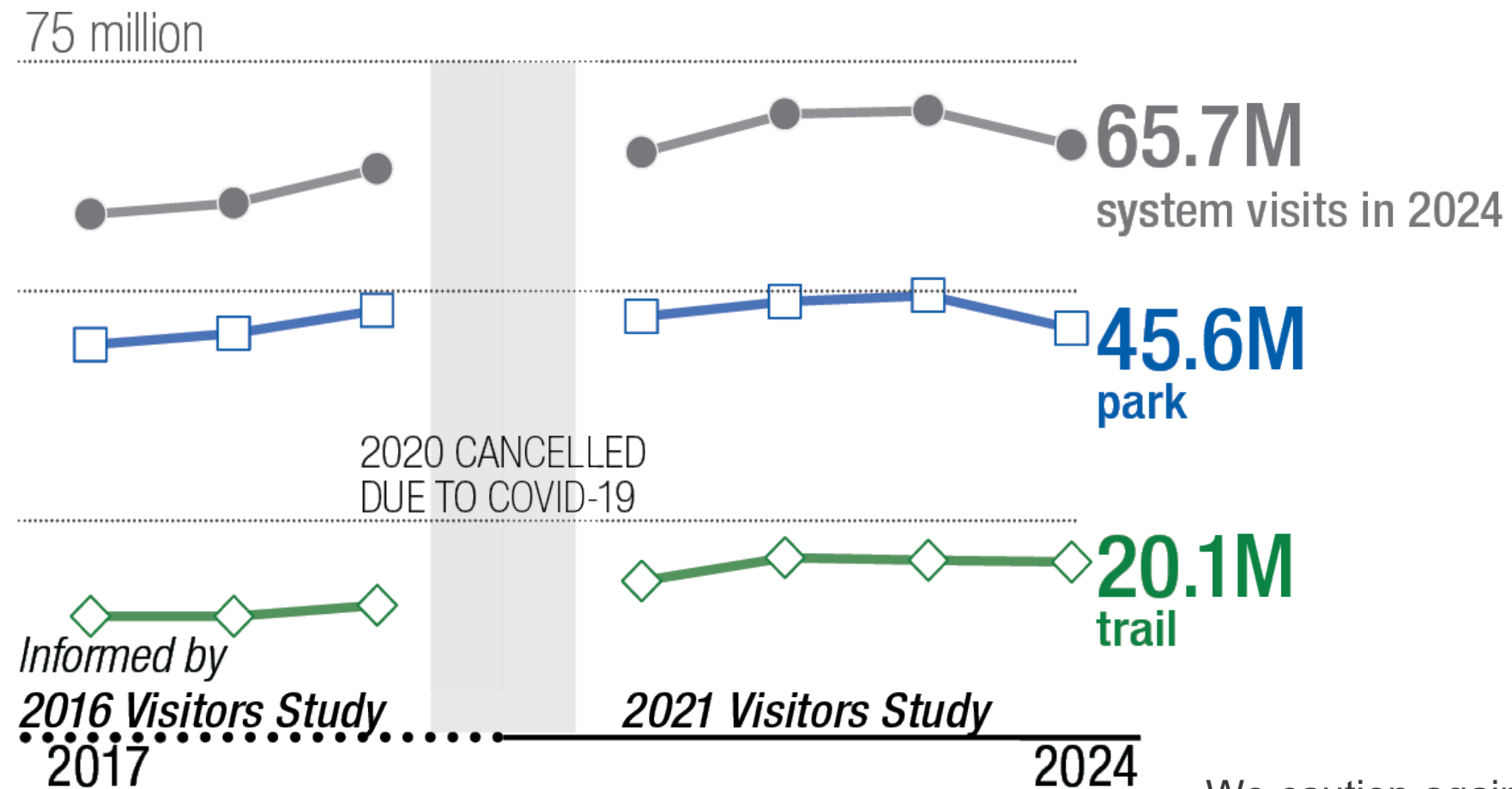- Schedule has randomized times, days, and entrances, Memorial Day to Labor Day (~99 days)

Expansion

- Averaged with previous three years to account for weather, flooding
- Counts are "expanded" to apply to all days and entrances

Special Events / Camping

- Agency-submitted special event, camping use is added in
- Estimated non-summer use based on 2021 Visitor Study multipliers

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Annual Visits to the Regional System

75 million

65.7M
system visits in 2024

45.6M
park

2020 CANCELLED
DUE TO COVID-19

20.1M
trail

Informed by
2016 Visitors Study
2017

2021 Visitors Study
2024

We caution against making direct comparisons across sets of estimates.

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Source: Metropolitan Council's annual parks and trails use estimates (July 2024).

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Why did visitation decrease in 2024?

- Typical variation in sample counts from year to year.

- Consistent and frequent rain during summer counts in 2024.

- Variations across agencies – some up, some down. This is typical.

- Effects of more years with lower vehicle multipliers from 2021 Visitor Study
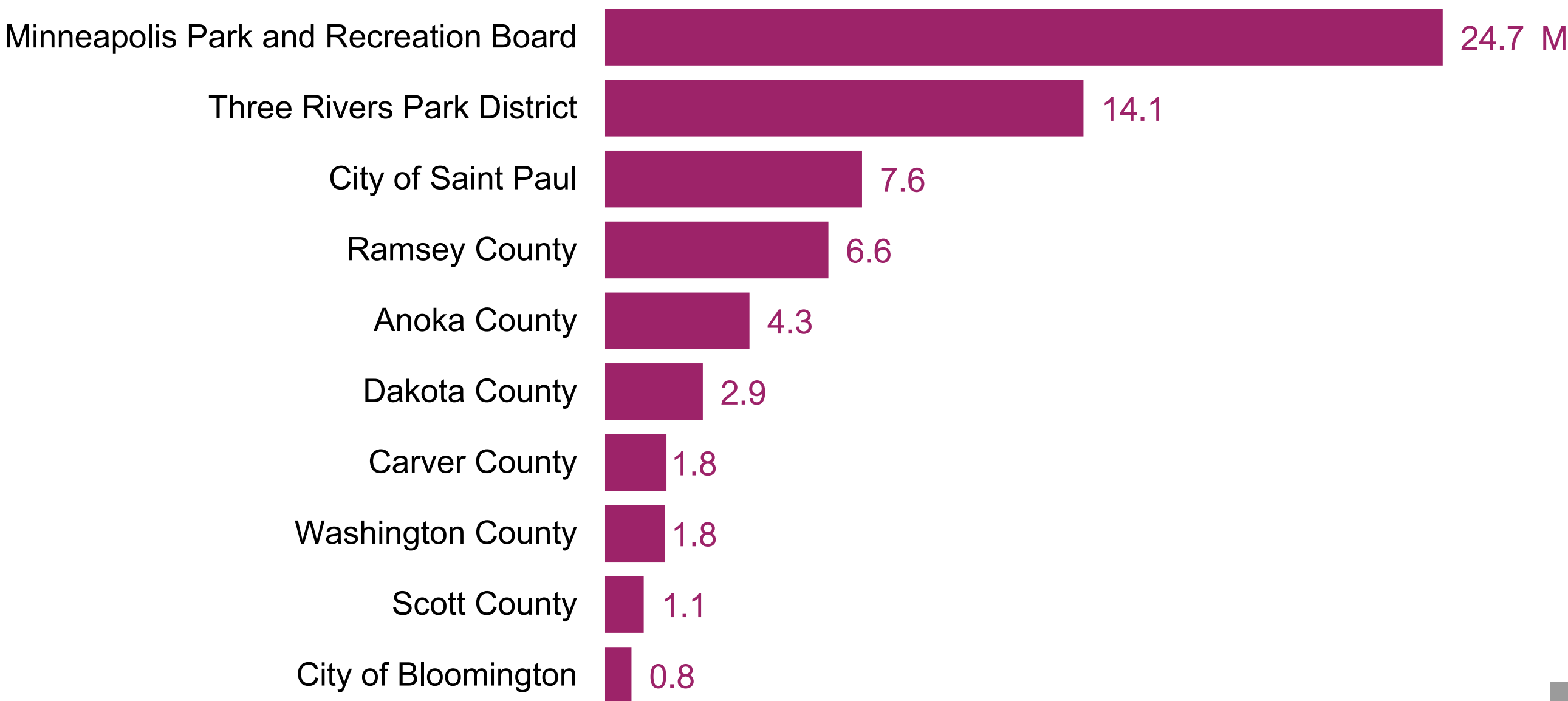
Rain was a factor in visitation

- 44% of the summer counts coincided with rain – the summer of 2024 had record-breaking rains according to NOAA.
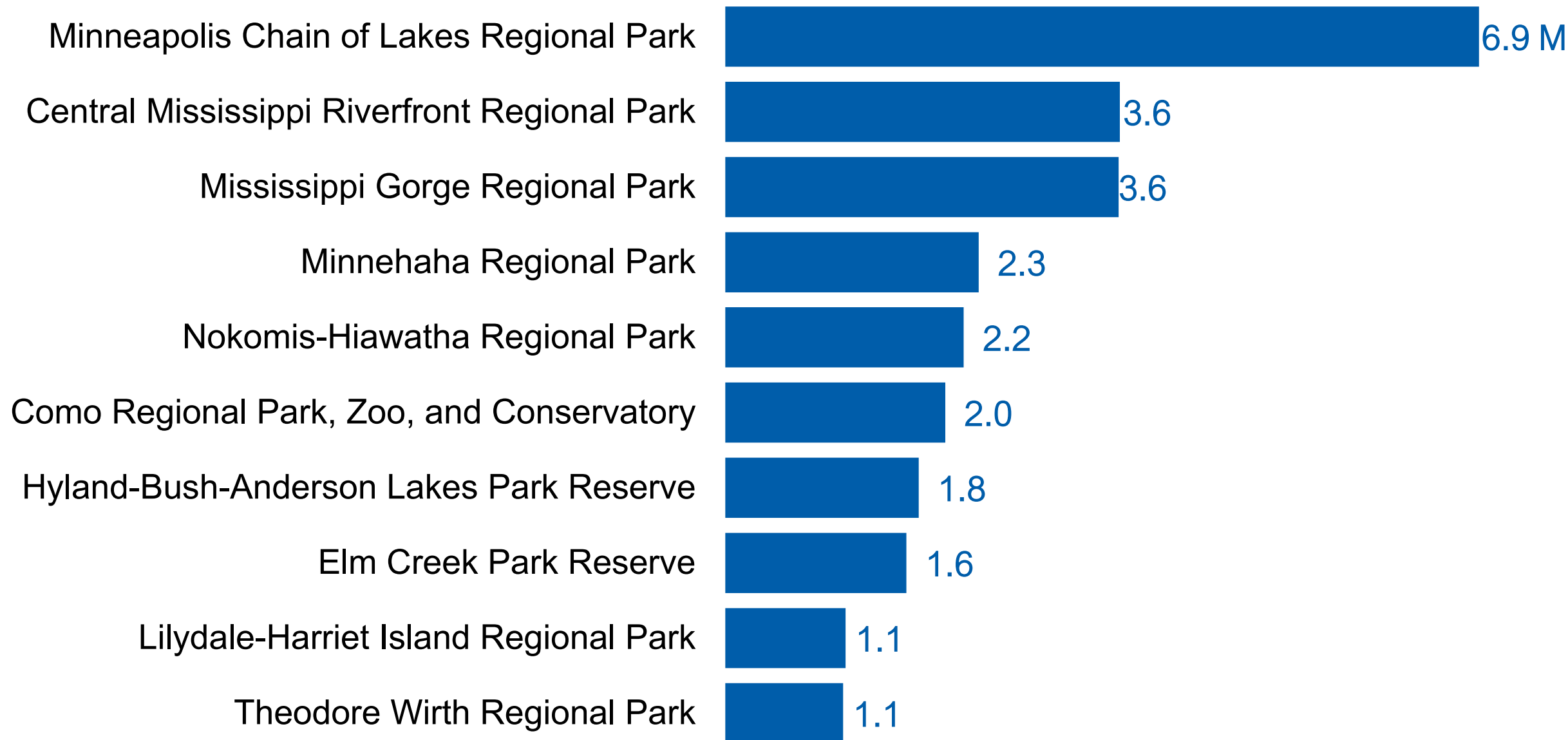
2021	2022	2023	2024
24%	35%	24%	44%

Source: NOAA (January 2025).

2024 Most Visited Parks in the System

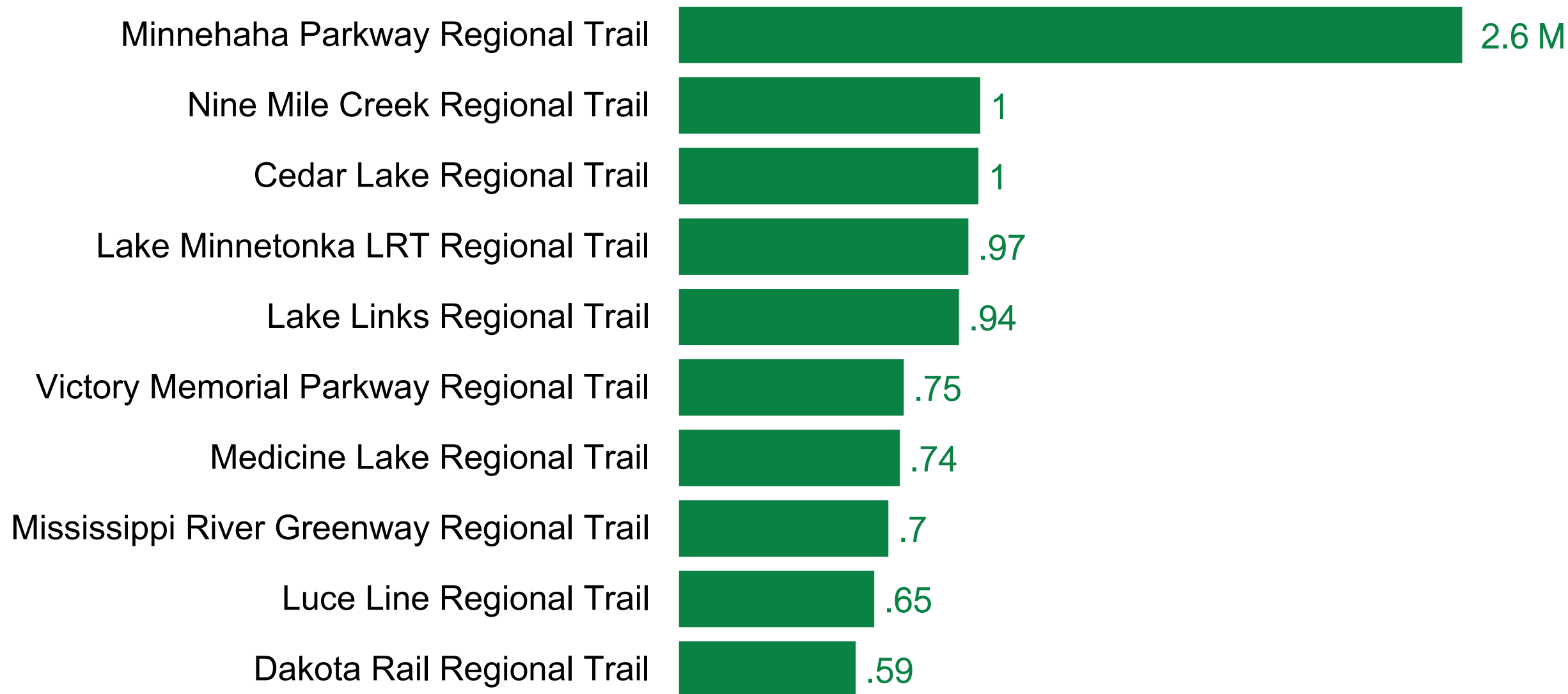| Park	Visits (M)
Minneapolis Chain of Lakes Regional Park	6.9 M
Central Mississippi Riverfront Regional Park	3.6
Mississippi Gorge Regional Park	3.6
Minnehaha Regional Park	2.3
Nokomis-Hiawatha Regional Park	2.2
Como Regional Park, Zoo, and Conservatory	2.0
Hyland-Bush-Anderson Lakes Park Reserve	1.8
Elm Creek Park Reserve	1.6
Lilydale-Harriet Island Regional Park	1.1
Theodore Wirth Regional Park	1.1

Source: Metropolitan Council's annual park and trail use estimates (July 2024).

2024 Most Visited Trails in the System

Trail	Visits
Minnehaha Parkway Regional Trail	2.6 M
Nine Mile Creek Regional Trail	1
Cedar Lake Regional Trail	1
Lake Minnetonka LRT Regional Trail	.97
Lake Links Regional Trail	.94
Victory Memorial Parkway Regional Trail	.75
Medicine Lake Regional Trail	.74
Mississippi River Greenway Regional Trail	.7
Luce Line Regional Trail	.65
Dakota Rail Regional Trail	.59

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Visitor Study Purpose

- Help inform planning, policy, and management

- Evaluate and strengthen equitable usage of regional parks and trails in accordance with *Imagine 2050 Parks and Trails Policy Plan*

- Update data in funding formulas to help determine where funding goes for parks and trails

2026 Visitor Survey Process

Fall 2025 - recruit consultant

Summer 2026- Winter 2026

Pilot study and summer survey

Spring/Summer 2026

Data analysis and workshops with IAs, new multipliers

Fall - Winter 2026

Completed study publication

Winter/Spring 2026/2027

THANK YOU

Ismael Ramirez, PhD

Principal Researcher

ismael.ramirez@metc.state.mn.us

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