



Executive summary

The 2021 Metropolitan Council Park and Trail Visitor Study presents findings from a Met Council survey of visitors to the regional park system in the seven-county Twin Cities area. The survey was developed to:

- Help inform planning, policy, and management
- Evaluate and strengthen equitable usage of regional parks and trails in accordance with the 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan
- Update data in funding formulas to help determine where funding goes for parks and trails

What was the survey process?

In total, 5,405 people took the survey during their park or trail visit. The response rate was 52%. Surveys were done at 114 park, trail, park reserve and special recreation feature units across the regional system. Visitors ages 12 and older could participate.

A consultant, Wilder Research, administered the surveys during the 2021 summer season (between May 31 and September 12). The survey asked visitors about their reasons for visiting, activities they participated in at the site, information used and desired for planning their visit, how they got to the site, group size, seasonal visitation, and demographic information.

Met Council staff checked the data for errors and analyzed the results. Staff from all 10 park agencies participated in a summer workshop series to add context to the results. Unless otherwise noted, all analysis in this report uses weighted data. Only statistically significant results are reported.

Are visitors satisfied with their experience when going to parks and trails? What improvements do they suggest?

For parks and trails systemwide, 89% of visitors reported that the facilities on the day of their visit were “excellent” or “very good.” Visitor satisfaction was similar across parks and trails. Satisfaction was slightly lower in historic systems with older facilities (Minneapolis and Saint Paul).

Visitors were asked to name one thing that would improve their visit. For parks, the top suggestions were all issues related to “general maintenance” (20%), followed by “nothing at all” (16%). The most popular suggestions were basic improvements like bathrooms and drinking water access, trail conditions, and improved signage/information. Reflecting on the data, park agencies discussed the need for adequate funding to provide the basic amenities the public needs and how bathroom and water access are key to making new and underserved visitors comfortable in the regional park system.

Who visits regional parks and trails?

Systemwide, 38% of visitors are from outside the geographic area of a given park agency (“nonlocal”) and 62% are visiting from within the park agency’s boundaries.

New and infrequent visitors represented 18% of parks visitors and 6% of trail visitors. These visitors’ answers can help us understand how to attract people who have not before visited the park and trail system.

Adults ages 45 to 64 are the largest share of visitors. Teens, young adults, and adults older than 75 are underrepresented in park and trail visitation. On trails, adults age 25-44 are also underrepresented.



Ramsey, Dakota, and Scott counties have the greatest disparities in young people's visitation, with Bloomington, Three Rivers Park District (Suburban Hennepin County), and Anoka County having the smallest disparities.

Throughout the region, Asian American, Black, and Latino system visitors are underrepresented relative to the regional population. Visitors ages 18-24 were more racially/ethnically diverse than older visitor groups. Carver, Anoka, and Washington counties have the smallest racial/ethnic disparities relative to population, while Dakota County, Minneapolis, Three Rivers, and Bloomington have the greatest. Trail disparities are higher than for parks, but both are large.

Men and women visit parks in equal proportions. Women are underrepresented in regional trail visitation. Minneapolis and Anoka County showed no gender disparities in trail use, while Three Rivers Park District, and Ramsey and Dakota counties, had the widest gender disparities on trails.

Transgender and gender nonbinary visitors represent slightly greater than 1% of system visitation.

Regional system visitation skews slightly towards higher-income earners compared to the regional population. 48% of visitors reported household incomes over \$100,000 per year, and 25% reported incomes under \$60,000. By comparison, 41% of the metro area households earn over \$100,000, while 27% earn under \$50,000. The disparities were greater for trails than for parks. Most agencies had similar findings, with Dakota County having the greatest proportion of visitors with household incomes over \$100,000 (55%) and Saint Paul having the highest of under \$60,000 (34%).

11% of visitor groups included a person with a disability. Except for Saint Paul (15%) and Scott County (7%), all park agencies were about this proportion.

Two-thirds of park visitors go in groups, while two-thirds of trail visitors go alone. White visitors and men are more likely to go alone compared with visitors who are women, nonbinary, and people of color.

What information do visitors need and how do they look for it?

15% of all visitors and 52% of first time/infrequent visitors, looked for information prior to their park or trail visit. Park visitors (18%) more often looked for information prior to visiting than trail visitors (6%), likely since parks attract more new visitors.

When seeking information, visitors most often consulted maps, activity guides, and information about available natural features such as lakes or woods. New visitors were more likely to want details on park hours, parking information, and park rules. Return visitors more often want trail condition information compared with new visitors.

Park and trail visitors use diverse information sources. Most popular included smartphone maps, family and friends, a specific park or trail website, and an onsite map or recreation guide. Other sources used included phone apps, social media, onsite help desk, and emails from the park agency.

White visitors were more likely than BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and people of color) visitors to consult onsite maps, a specific park or trail website, and emails from the park agency. BIPOC visitors were more likely to consult with family and friends and social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others). These findings do not name the most frequently sought sources, but these sources are more popular with one race/ethnic group compared with another.



How do visitors travel to regional parks and trails?

Visitors traveled to parks mostly in cars (59%), but they traveled to trails via mostly people-powered methods (81% by bike or foot). Urban core regional parks and trails have higher rates of people-powered transportation compared with other parts of the region.

On average, 2.25 people traveled in each automobile to get to parks. For trails, an average of 1.59 people were in each visiting car. These averages reflect a declining trend over time as well as the reflect the effects of COVID-19 social distancing guidelines in summer 2021.

What do people do in parks and trails?

The top five primary activities of summer day visitors to the regional parks are walking/hiking (33%), dog walking/dog park (13%), biking (10%), swimming (6%), and jogging/running (5%). Primary activities are those reported by visitors as the main reason they visited on that day.

The top five primary activities of summer day visitors to the regional trails are biking (48%), walking/hiking (25%), jogging/running (9%), dog walking/dog park (6%), and commuting (4%).

The five most popular activities (when visitors could report all the activities they were doing) in the regional park system are hiking/walking (55%), relaxing/doing nothing (27%), observing nature (27%), biking (22%), and meeting up with family or friends (18%).

The five most popular activities on regional trails are biking (54%), hiking/walking (41%), dog walking/dog park (16%), jogging/running (16%), and observing nature (15%).

All visitors, regardless of social characteristics, enjoyed a diverse range of activities. However, analysis of differences in activity patterns among underserved users may help identify how to better serve these communities at parks and trails.

What are key takeaways by park agency staff?

Staff from the 10 regional park agencies as well as Met Council staff met to discuss visitor study findings. Reviewing the data, they identified important implications from the study:

- Adequate, sustainable funding for operations and maintenance of the system is necessary to provide the level of service visitors want. The system requires regular investment from the state, regional, and local levels to maintain visitor satisfaction. Deferring operations and maintenance investments can result in degraded facilities and trigger the need for greater capital investment.
- When regional parks and trails are not adequately maintained, use will diminish.
- Efforts are underway to create a park and trail system that is welcoming to underserved population groups, and these efforts need to be expanded and deepened. Operations and maintenance funding as well as programming funding are important investments to enhance equitable use.
- Visitors have less satisfaction with trails, and trails have greater social disparities in visitor use, than parks. We need to address trail issues in the areas of policy, research, and funding.