



Introduction and research process

The 2021 Metropolitan Council Park and Trail Visitor Study presents findings from a Met Council survey of visitors to the regional park and trail system. 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

Visitors surveyed at 114 locations, 52% response rate

Wilder Research staff administered the survey during the 2021 summer season (between May 31 and September 12). In total, 5,405 visitors participated in the survey through an interview, a self-administered questionnaire (SAQ), or an online SAQ. An additional 5,013 visitors declined or were not eligible to participate. Response rate was 52%.

Visitors were surveyed at 114 park, trail, park reserve, and special recreation feature units in the regional system. All park and trail units with usage greater than 50,000 annual visitors were included in the sample. Surveys were done at 204 separate location points. Points were selected by a representative of the park implementing agency (“park agency”) where the unit was located. Each park agency had at least 393 completed surveys, with additional modifications to ensure accurate weighting for the analyzed data. One oversampled unit per agency was selected by the Local Technical Advisory Committee and the Met Council to provide a representative sample at that individual unit level.

Survey carried out in two phases

The sampling plan was developed in two phases for the first and second halves of the summer. Using 2019 use estimates, we obtained agency level and oversample quotas as well as consideration of proportional visitation, temporal distribution, and inclusion of units with higher proportion of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color visitors. Wilder Research implemented an extensive quality control process to ensure rigorous data collection, staff safety, and visitor comfort.

At the determined trail locations, staff intercepted visitors to participate in the survey. If visitors came as a group, the person over 12 years old with the most recent birthday was asked to participate in the interview. 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.

The data were checked for errors (cleaned) and analyzed by Met Council staff in winter 2021 and spring 2022. The data are weighted to make sure the number of completed surveys at each unit is proportional to the visitation of that unit according to the 2019 use estimate. Unless otherwise noted, all analysis in this report uses weighted data. Only statistically significant results are reported here. For additional explanation of the survey and analysis process, please email the Met Council’s Community Development Research Department at research@metc.state.mn.us.

Park agencies explored results and contributed to analysis

Park agencies are experts about their systems. A series of workshops explored subsections of this report with agency staff. Staff were invited by their agency’s local technical advisory committee member. A separate workshop was held with agency communications staff. Staff roles attending the



workshops included directors, planners, communications staff, equity staff, and programming staff. This report contains quotes and ideas shared within these workshops to contextualize the data. Met Council parks staff facilitated the workshops.



Research process notes

- This report compares visitor study demographics with information about the region’s residents. Systemwide data are compared to the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan region. Park agency visitor composition is compared to population within the agency’s boundaries. Oversampled parks and trails are compared to population within a five-mile buffer of the unit. Demographic responses are compared to the census or American Community Survey (ACS) data as follows: Age 12 and older for age; all residents for gender, race/ethnicity; age 25 and older for income and education attainment. Comparisons are drawn from the 2020 decennial census and 2016-2020 five-year ACS estimates and relevant results from previous Met Council parks studies.
- The survey results reflect the views of visitors aged 12 and older who agreed to participate in the survey. They are referred to as “visitors” in this report. Their responses may not represent opinions of all regional park and trail visitors.
- Only statistically significant differences (for example, parks vs trails, differences by demographic characteristics) are included in the report. The report notes when statistics should be used with caution due to margin of error higher than 10%. As the report explores segments of the data such as parks, trails, park agencies, or individual units, the data cannot be disaggregated for these units to the same extent as the system overall due to larger margins of error. This results in greater disaggregation of race and gender data at the system level than for subsections.
- Respondents provided additional comments and suggestions for improving the regional park and trail system. Selected comments are included to illustrate the relevant findings throughout the report as well as in the Appendix.
- The sample and methodology in the 2021 Park and Trail Visitors Study is different from previous studies. To read the 2016 report, please visit the Met Council’s parks research page: <https://metro council.org/Parks/Research/Visitor-Study/2016.aspx>.