



Visitor demographics: Equitable use and social characteristics of visitors

The Twin Cities regional park and trail system continues to rank high nationally for an impressive commitment to preserving open space and offering recreational amenities. The 2040 Regional Parks Policy Plan commits the Met Council to work to “strengthen equitable usage of regional parks and trails by all our region’s residents.” To this end, Met Council research must identify to what extent visitation patterns reflect the region’s population. Additionally, understanding how underserved populations enjoy the regional system can help inform future investment decisions.

Exploring visitation patterns reveals that not all population groups equally experience the benefits of public investment in parks and trails. In this section, demographic characteristics are compared between the survey sample regionwide and the 2020 Census regional population.

Young people and BIPOC visitors visited in lower proportion than would be expected given their proportion in the regional population. Men and women visited parks in expected proportion for the population, but a gender gap existed for trail use. The survey asked additional demographic questions including nonbinary and transgender identities, disability status, household income, and languages spoken at home. These questions cannot be compared to the census, but the survey findings show linguistic, ability, and gender identity diversity in all 10 park agencies. Disparities in park and trail visitation by age, race, ethnicity, income, and gender persist in the Twin Cities.



Age

Younger people underrepresented in park, trail visitation

Young people ages 12-24 are underrepresented in both park and trail visitation systemwide, as are age 25-44 in trail visitation (Figure 5). In contrast, age groups 45-64 and over 65 are overrepresented in park and trail visitation relative to their proportion in the population.

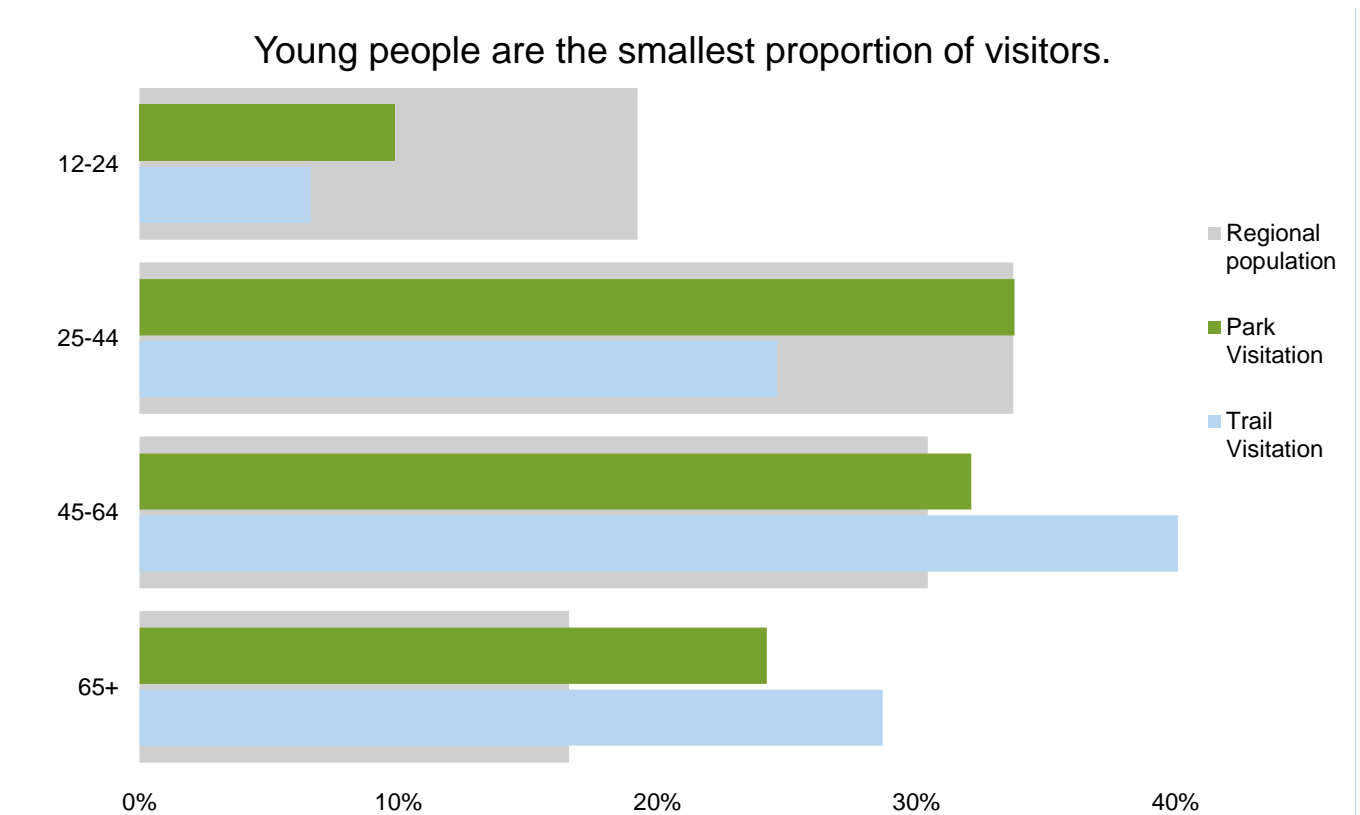


Figure 1: Age of surveyed visitors 12 and older for parks and trails across the system compared with the seven-county regional population (percent)

Age disparities see across park agencies

The situation of “missing” youth visitors exists across the regional park and trail system. All park agencies had statistically significant age differences between youth visitors compared with the population within agency boundaries (Figure 6). Dakota, Ramsey, and Scott counties had the greatest disparities, with youth visitor proportion less than 1/3 of the youth population. Agencies with smaller youth populations had smaller disparities. The margin of error of the percentage of visitors age 12-24 at the agency level is, on average, plus or minus 2%. Due to small numbers of youth responses, results disaggregated by parks vs trails cannot be reported. Despite these caveats, all park agencies have age disparities in youth visitation.



Age gap for youth exists across the regional system.

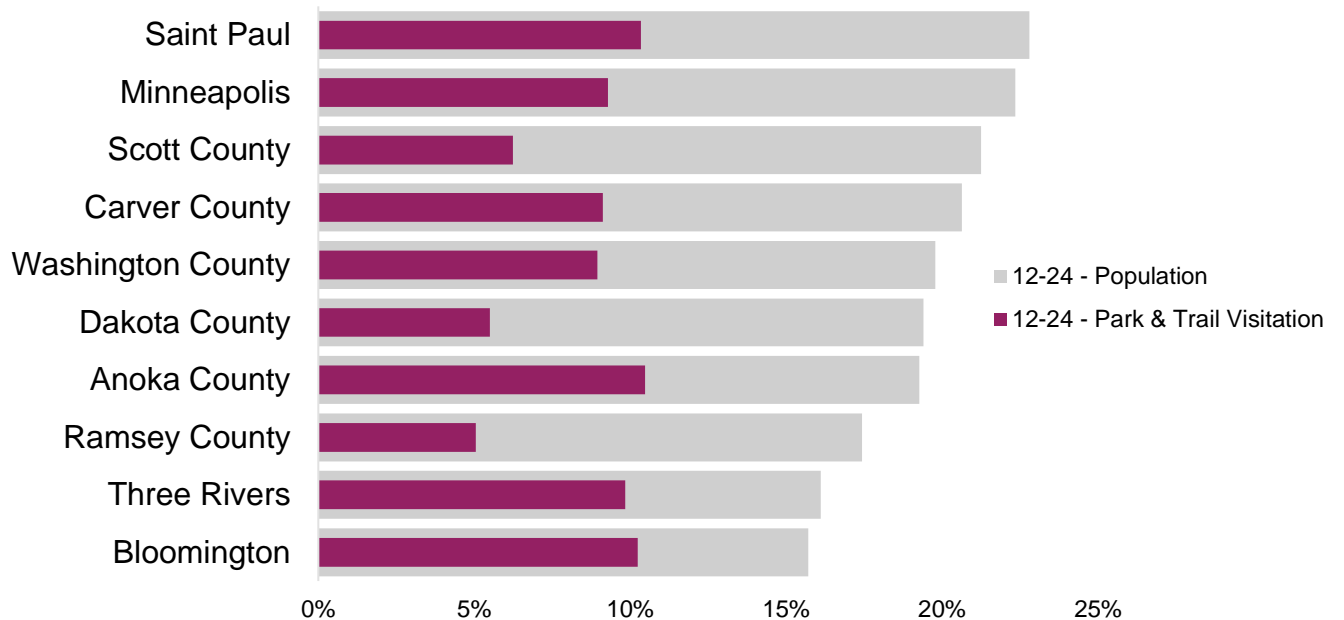


Figure 2: Comparison of youth visitation by park agency compared with population (percent)

Groups including youth more likely to visit parks than trails

The visitor study asked respondents, “Including yourself, are there any youth (under age 18) in your group today?” Groups including visitors younger than 18 were more than twice as likely to be visiting parks than trails (Figure 7). Similar patterns were observed comparing parks and trails for individual park agencies (Figures 8, 9). Of the oversampled park and trail units, Como Zoo and Observatory, Lake Minnewashta Regional Park, and Lake Elmo Regional Park were most popular among groups with youth and children (Figure 10).



Yes: Does your group have youth under 18?

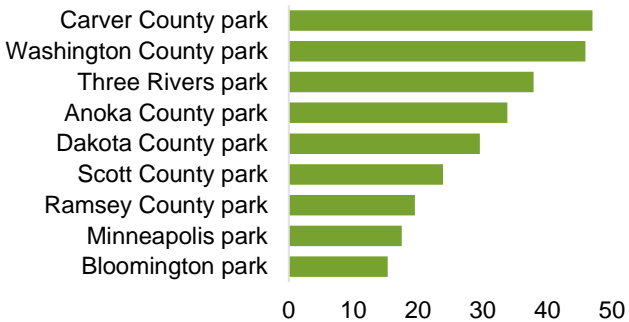
Groups with children under 18 visit parks at more than double the rate for trails.



Figure 3: Percent of groups with youth visiting parks, trails across the system



Percent of visits from groups with youth under 18, parks



Percent of visits from groups with youth under 18, trails

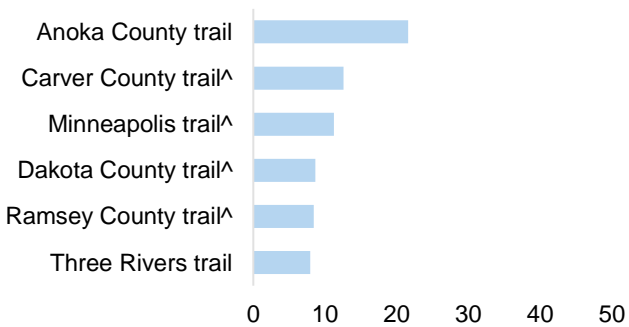


Figure 4: Percent of park visitor groups with youth, by park agency

Figure 5: Percent of trail visitor groups with youth, by park agency

Units with ^ (caret) symbol: Interpret with caution because margin of error is greater than ten percent of total. Park system proportions of groups with youth range from 15-47%. Trail systems range from 8-22%. Oversampled units range from 9-61%. Sample sizes are too small to reliably report trail systems within Bloomington, Saint Paul, Scott County and Washington County.



Como Zoo and Conservatory most visited by groups with children, followed by Lake Minnewashta and Lake Elmo

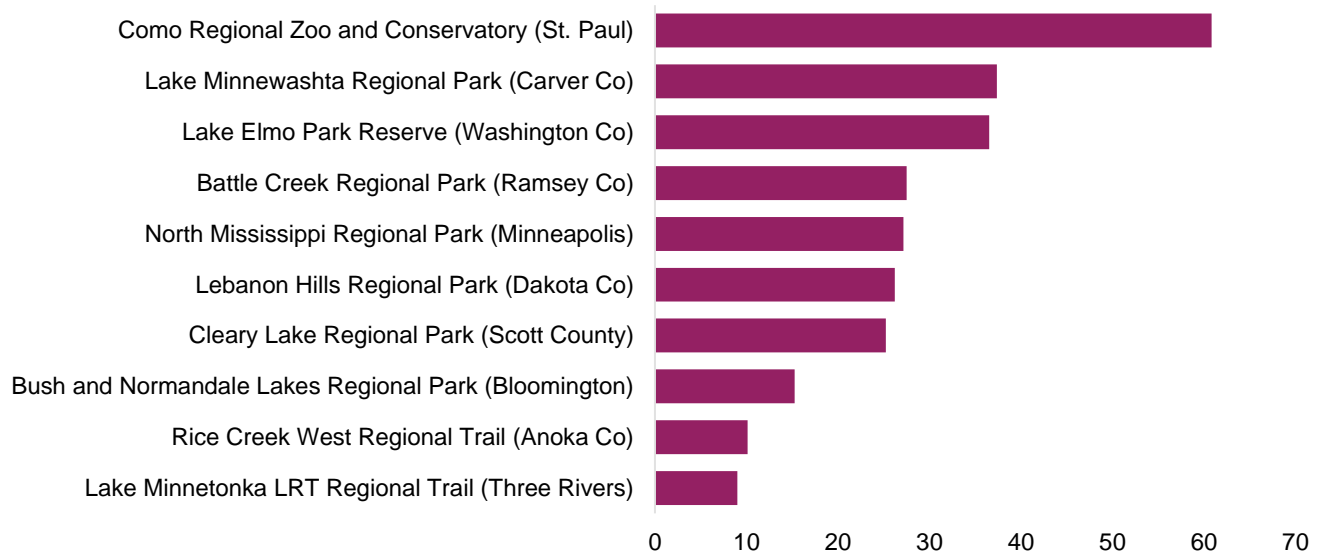


Figure 6: Visitor groups with youth at oversampled parks and trails (percent).



Race/ethnicity

BIPOC visitors continue to be underrepresented in regional park system visitation¹

Together, American Indian, Asian, Black, Latino, Middle Eastern/North African (ME/NA), multiple races, and Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander were less than 15% of total visitor study respondents (Figures 11, 12). Asian, Black, and Latino visitors represented almost identical proportions, slightly over 3%. White visitors were over 85% of the total. Multiracial/ethnic, American Indian, ME/NA and Native Hawaiian were the remainder of visitors. Racial/ethnic disparities exist regardless of geographic comparison, including comparing visitation to the regional population (systemwide), county, city, or suburban county (park agency), or 1.5 miles from the park or trail (oversampled unit).

Disaggregated survey data (broken down by detailed categories) by race and ethnicity can be reported at the system level because of the larger sample size. Data at the system level overall are reported with more detailed racial/ethnic demographics than for park agencies and oversampled parks. Communities of color are underrepresented among park and trail visitors relative to the population (Figure 13).

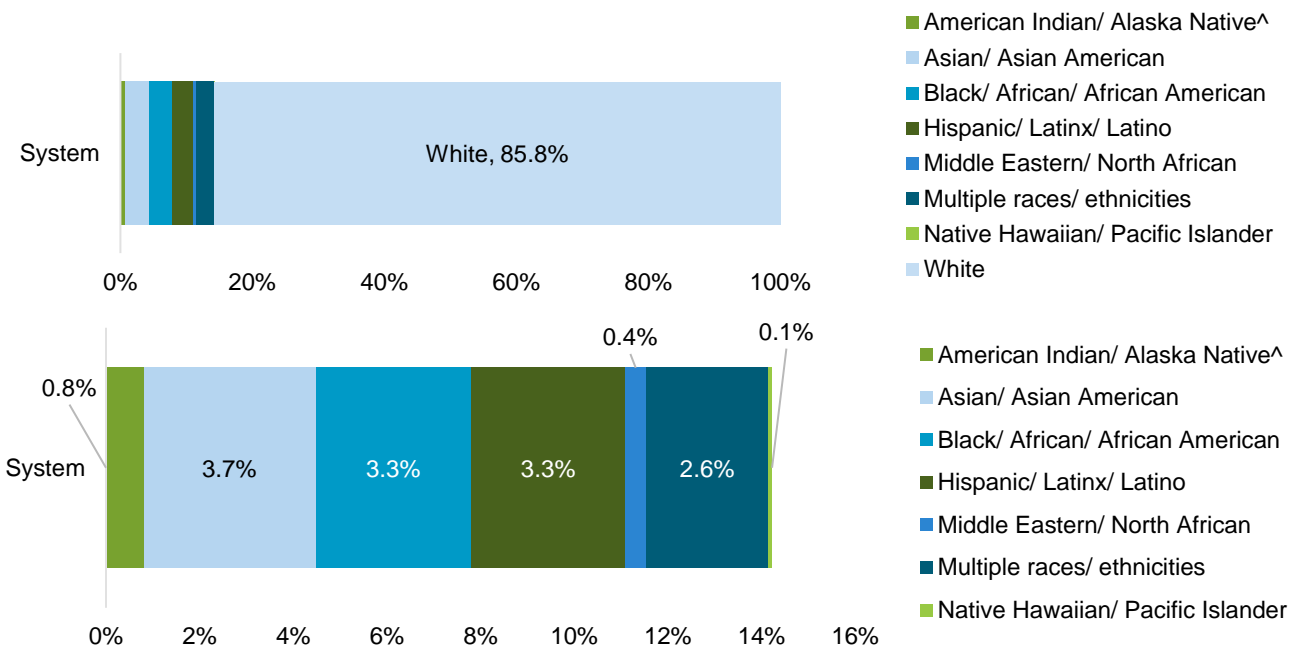


Figure 7: Visitation by race/ethnicity across the entire regional park and trail system.

¹ The terms *race* and *ethnicity* are used together in this report to reflect that respondents were asked to self-identify into social groups using census classifications including ethnicity (Latino, Middle Eastern/North African) and race (all other categories here). Over 97% of respondents who did not select “multiple race/ethnicity” chose only one race/ethnicity in their responses.



Figure 8: Visitation by race/ethnicity, excluding white, across the entire regional park and trail system.

Communities of color are underrepresented among park, trail visitors relative to the population.

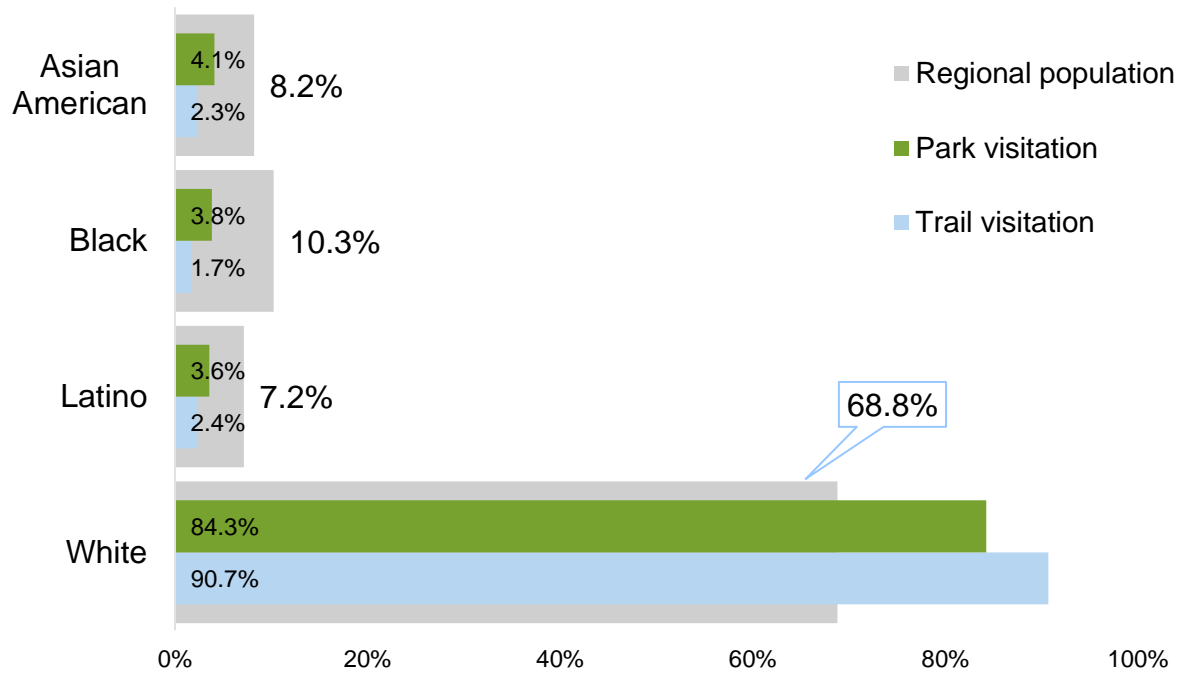


Figure 9: Surveyed visitors by race/ethnicity for parks, trails compared with the seven-county regional population (percent)



BIPOC visitation gap biggest in for park agencies with more racially diverse populations

The share of visitors who were people of color was compared with 2020 regional population within the boundaries of each park agency. Parks agencies with larger populations of color had greater gaps between the visitors and population of color (Figure 14). Parks had an average 17-point gap between park agency BIPOC population and visitation. This is slightly smaller than for trails, which had a 21-point gap. However, these differences are not statistically different.

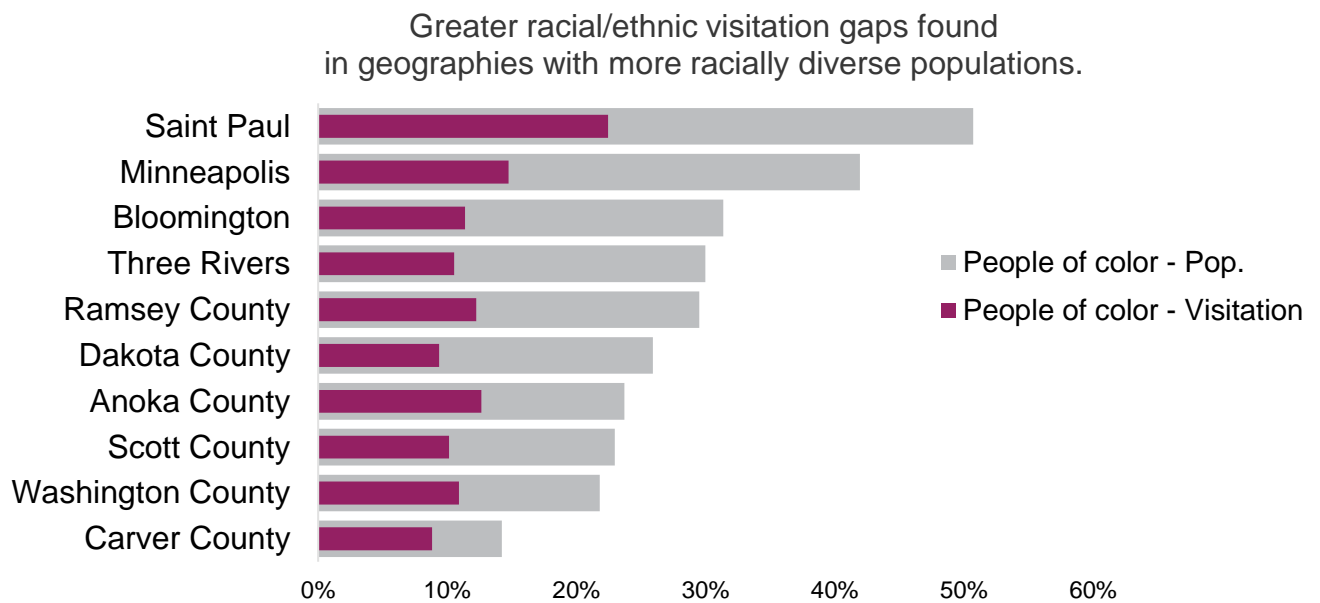


Figure 10: Comparison of system visitation by visitors of color to park agency population (percent)



Age and race/ethnicity demographics combined

Age and race visitation demographics are connected

Yes. Ages 12-24 is the most underrepresented of age groups. Visitors under 24 were 35.8% people of color, compared with less than 15% in the sample overall (Figure 15). Efforts to make the regional system more welcoming to communities of color would almost certainly result in increases in younger visitors. Programs that prioritize BIPOC youth would reach an important segment of underserved users.

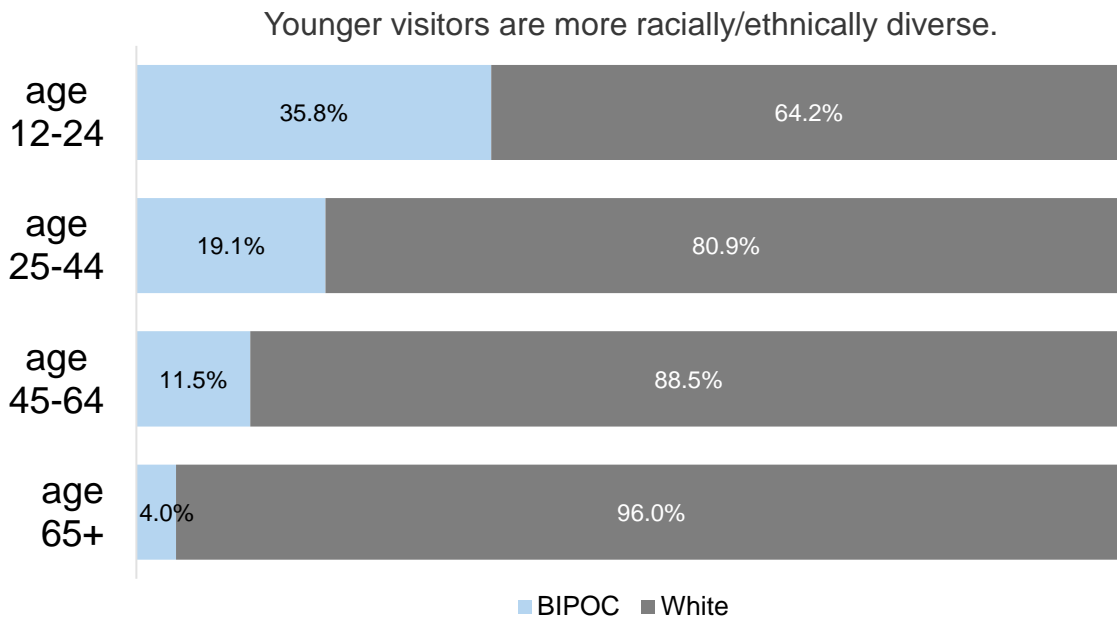


Figure 11: Percent of BIPOC and white visitors, by age

Disability

About 1 in 10 groups to the regional park system include someone with a disability

11% of visitor groups reported that someone in their group had a physical, mental, or sensory disability or condition, ranging from 7% to 14% across park agencies (Figure 16). The census does not report disability by household or group, so the visitor study findings on disability cannot be compared to the regional population. The rates were not statistically significant between parks and trails. However, analysis of oversampled units shows that parks had a higher percent of visitors with a disability compared with trail units (Figure 17).

The youngest and oldest visitors more often visit in groups including someone with a disability (Figure 18).



Groups including someone with a disability were 7-15% of visitation.

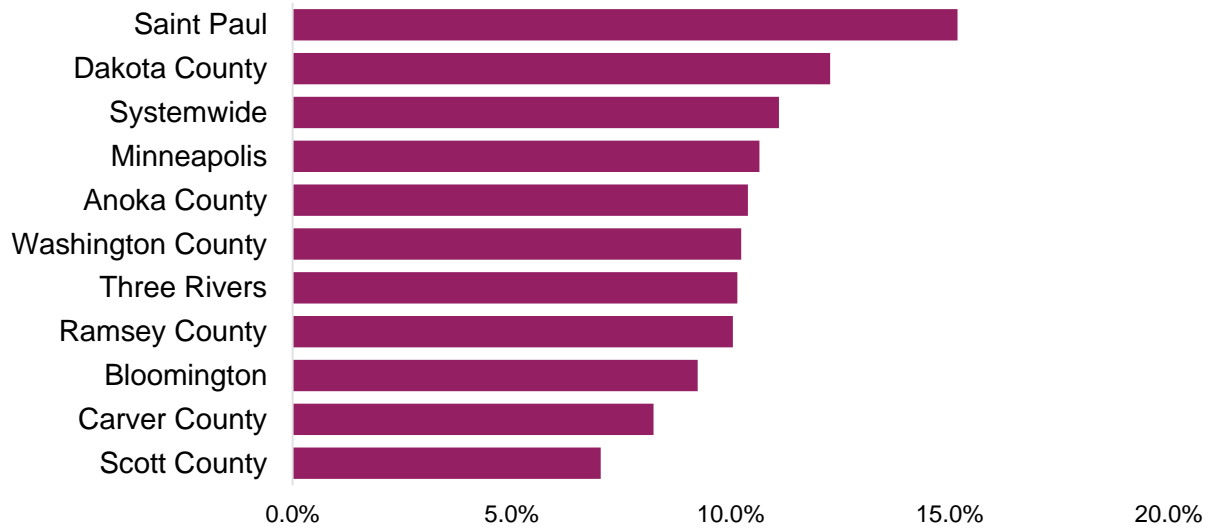


Figure 12: Percent of groups including someone with a disability, by park agency



Analyzing at the unit level, trails generally have fewer visitors with a disability compared to parks.

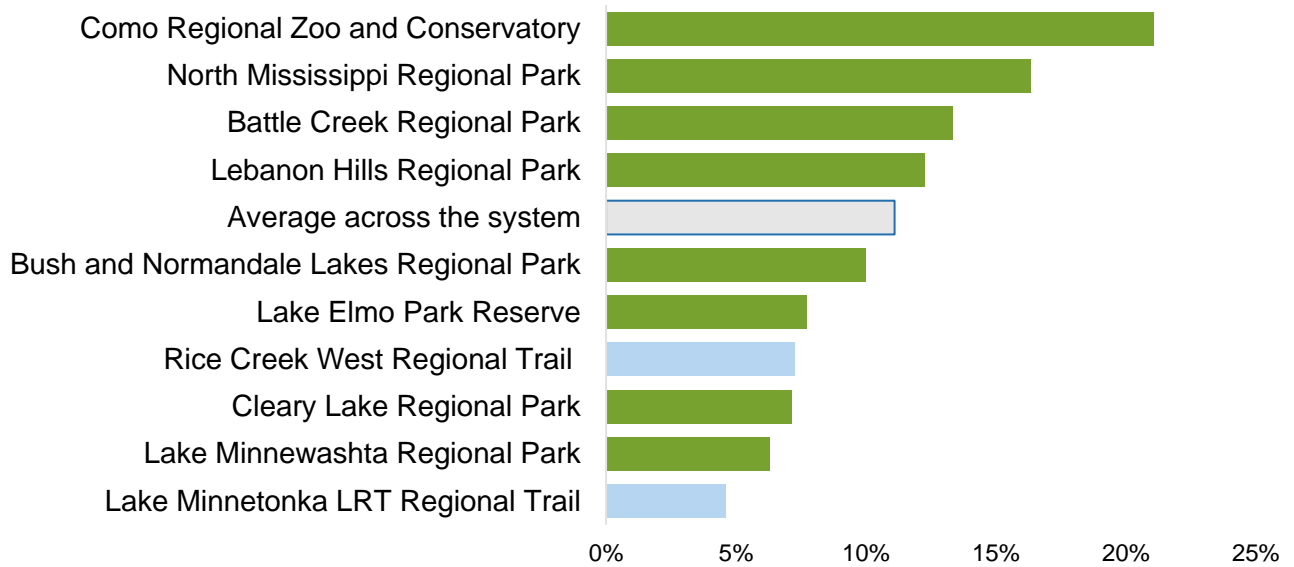


Figure 13: Percent of groups with a disability, by units oversampled in the visitor study

Oldest, youngest visitors more often have a person with a disability in the group.

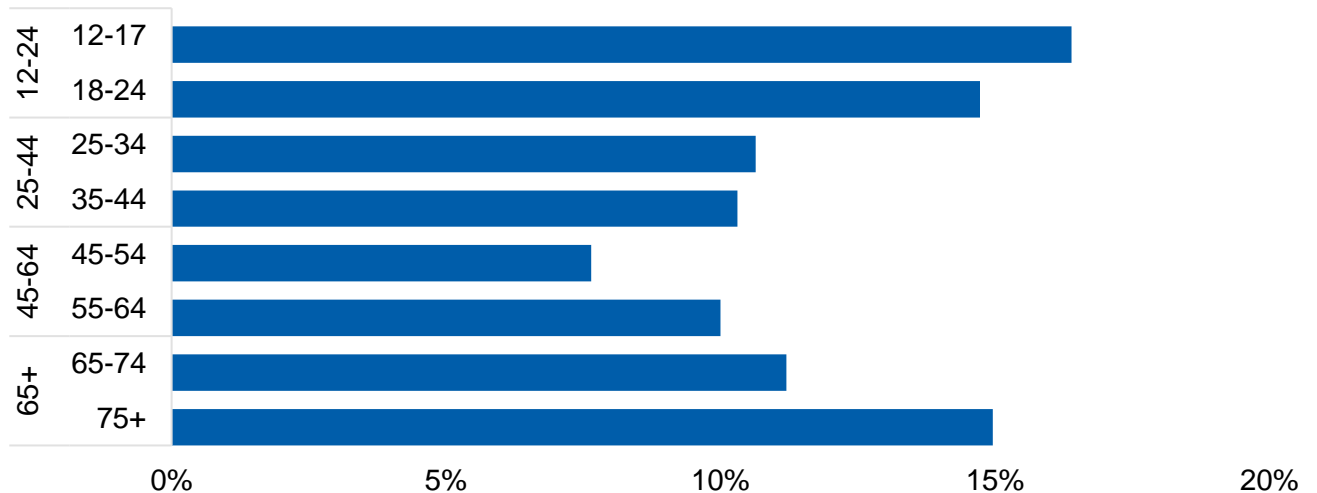


Figure 14: Percent of groups including person with a disability, by age of visitor responding to the survey



Gender

First time data on transgender, nonbinary visitors offer early learnings

For the first time, the visitor survey provided the opportunity to identify as nonbinary or transgender (Figure 19). Slightly more than 1% of the sample identified in this way. In addition to gender-nonbinary responses, other response choices for gender were “male” and “female,” which are described as “men” and “women” this report. Some respondents who answered “male” or “female” were transgender. Others were cisgender (people whose gender identity corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth). Due to the large margin of error and lack of comparable data in the census, transgender representation in visitation cannot be further explored in this report except for activity patterns data (Figure 27, below).

All 10 park agencies serve gender-nonbinary visitors.

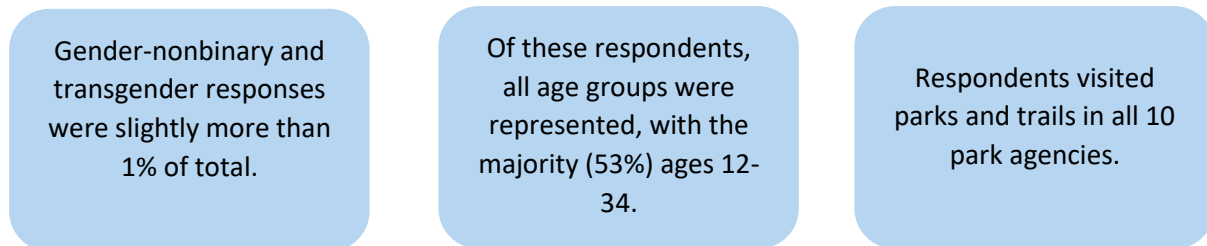


Figure 15: Summary of gender nonbinary and transgender visitation findings in the 2021 Visitor Survey

Men and women visit parks equally, but women are underrepresented on trails

For parks, the answer is yes (Figure 19). Park visitors were 49% men and 50% women, about the same as the population. For trails, the answer is no (Figure 20, 21). Women are 43% of trail visitors; men are 57%. Statistically significant underrepresentation of women was found for trails within park agencies and in one of two oversampled trails (Figure 21). Gender trail parity was observed in two park agencies (Minneapolis and Anoka County) and one oversampled trail (Rice Creek West Regional Trail).



**Men and women equally visit parks,
but trail visitation shows a gender gap.**

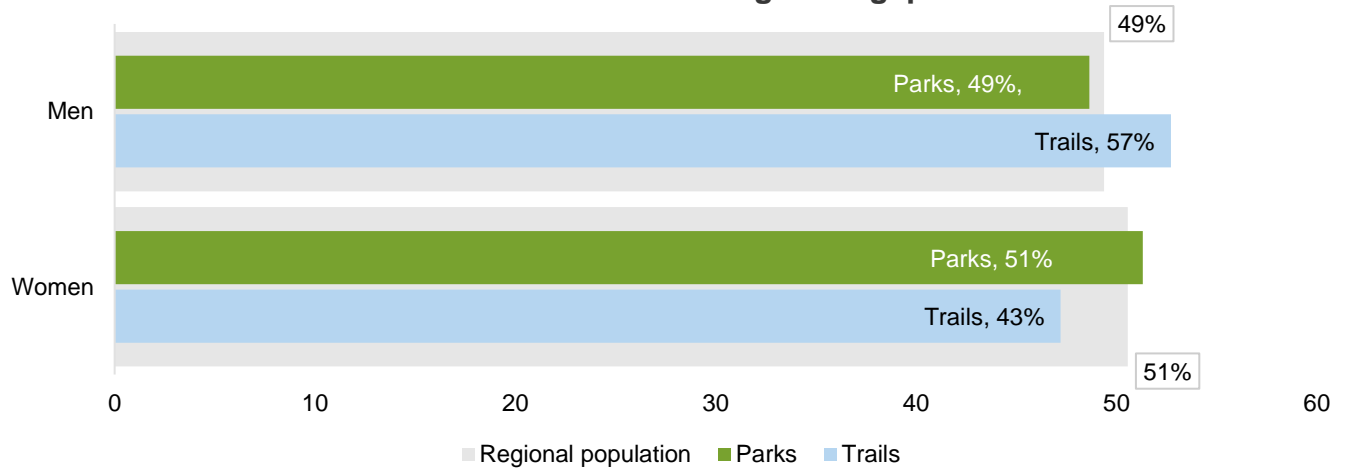


Figure 16: Gender of surveyed visitors for parks and trails compared with the seven-county regional population (percent)

**Women are underrepresented on trails
across most of the region.**

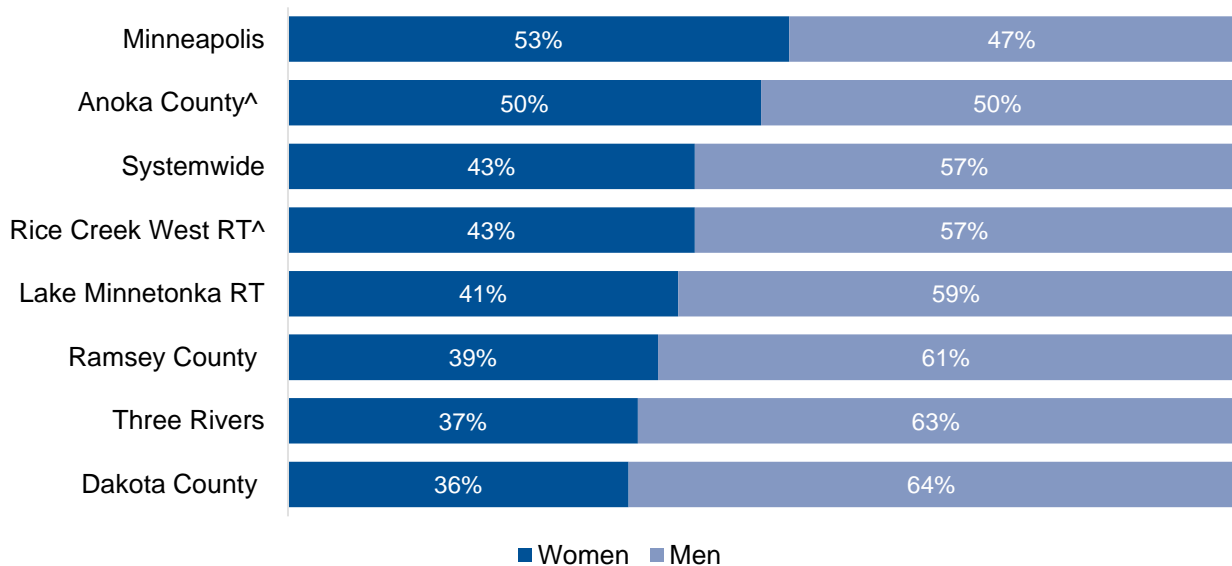


Figure 17: Gender proportion in trail visitation, by oversampled trail or park agency (percent, statistically valid only)

^Minneapolis and Anoka County visitation indicates gender parity. Rice Creek West Regional Trail disparities not conclusive due to margin of error.





Income

Almost half of park visitors report annual income over 100K

48% of park and trail visitors reported household incomes over \$100,000 per year, and 25% reported incomes under \$60,000 (Table 5). Trail visitors had higher income than parks visitors. Most agencies had similar findings, with Dakota County having the greatest proportion earning over \$100,000 (55%) and Saint Paul having the highest of under \$60,000 (34%). By comparison, 41% of the metro area earns over \$100,000, while 27% earn under \$50,000 ([2020 American Community Survey estimates](#)). The data cannot be perfectly compared to regional income due to differences in how the survey and the American Community Survey analyze household income.

Geography analyzed	More than \$100K (%)	Between \$60-100K (%)	Under \$60K (%)	Total visitation (%)
Systemwide	48.2	26.9	24.9	100
Parks systemwide	46.3	27.4	26.3	100
Trails systemwide	54.5	25.2	20.3	100
Anoka County	46.9	31.8	21.3	100
Bloomington	45.4	32.3	22.3	100
Carver County	48.6	28.2	23.2	100
Dakota County	54.6	27.2	18.2	100
Minneapolis	48.8	25.8	25.4	100
Ramsey County	49.3	25.5	25.1	100
Saint Paul	41.8	24.1	34.1	100
Scott County	58.1	23.4	18.6	100
Three Rivers	50.7	29.3	20.0	100
Washington County	49.5	29.3	21.2	100

Table 1: Visitation by income level across park agencies and for parks and trails systemwide.



Other visitor characteristics

Park and trail visitors speak a total of 47 languages at home

Visitors reported a total number of 47 different languages spoken at home (Table 6). All park agencies had some surveys completed in a language other than English, with Spanish the most frequently requested.

47 Languages spoken			
Afrikaans	Ethiopian	Lisu	Spanish
American Sign Language	Finnish	Loma	"Spanglish"
Amharic	French	Nepali	Swahili
Arabic	Gallic	Norwegian	Swedish
Bosnian	Greek	Odia	Telugu
Burmese	Hebrew	Ojibwe	Tibetan
Cambodian	Hindi	Oromo	Tigrigna
Cantonese	Hmong	Persian	Ukrainian
Chinese	"Hmonglish"	Polish	Urdu
Czech	Japanese	Portuguese	Vietnamese
Dutch	Karen	Romanian	
English	Khmer	Russian	

Table 2: Complete list of answers to the question "What language do you speak most at home?"

Listed alphabetically, respondents could choose more than one language.



Park agencies reflect on visitor demographics.

Park agency staff analyzed demographic data about race/ethnicity, age, gender, and disability. They named the deepening and expanding of efforts to build an equitable park and trail system as one of their highest priorities. They saw opportunities to tailor programming, awareness efforts, and partnership investments. Their efforts included both creating access to existing activities and reimagining park activities to meet the needs of all visitors. Gender, race, and age equity on trails requires attention to safety, trail “culture”, bathroom access, and amenities to support family use. Key examples of comments are presented in Figure 22.



Figure 22: Analysis of visitor demographic data by park agencies in summer workshops.