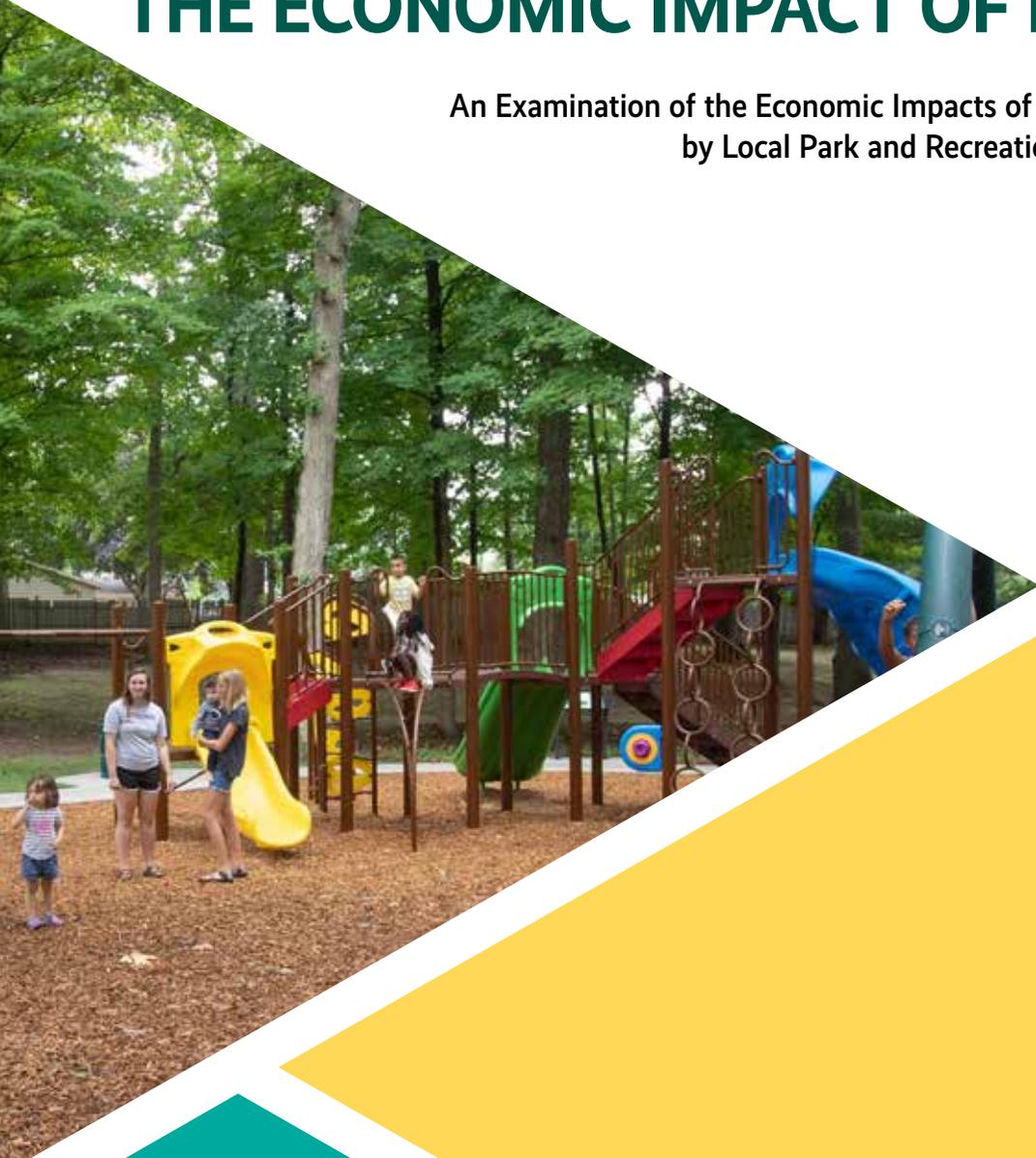


# THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF LOCAL PARKS

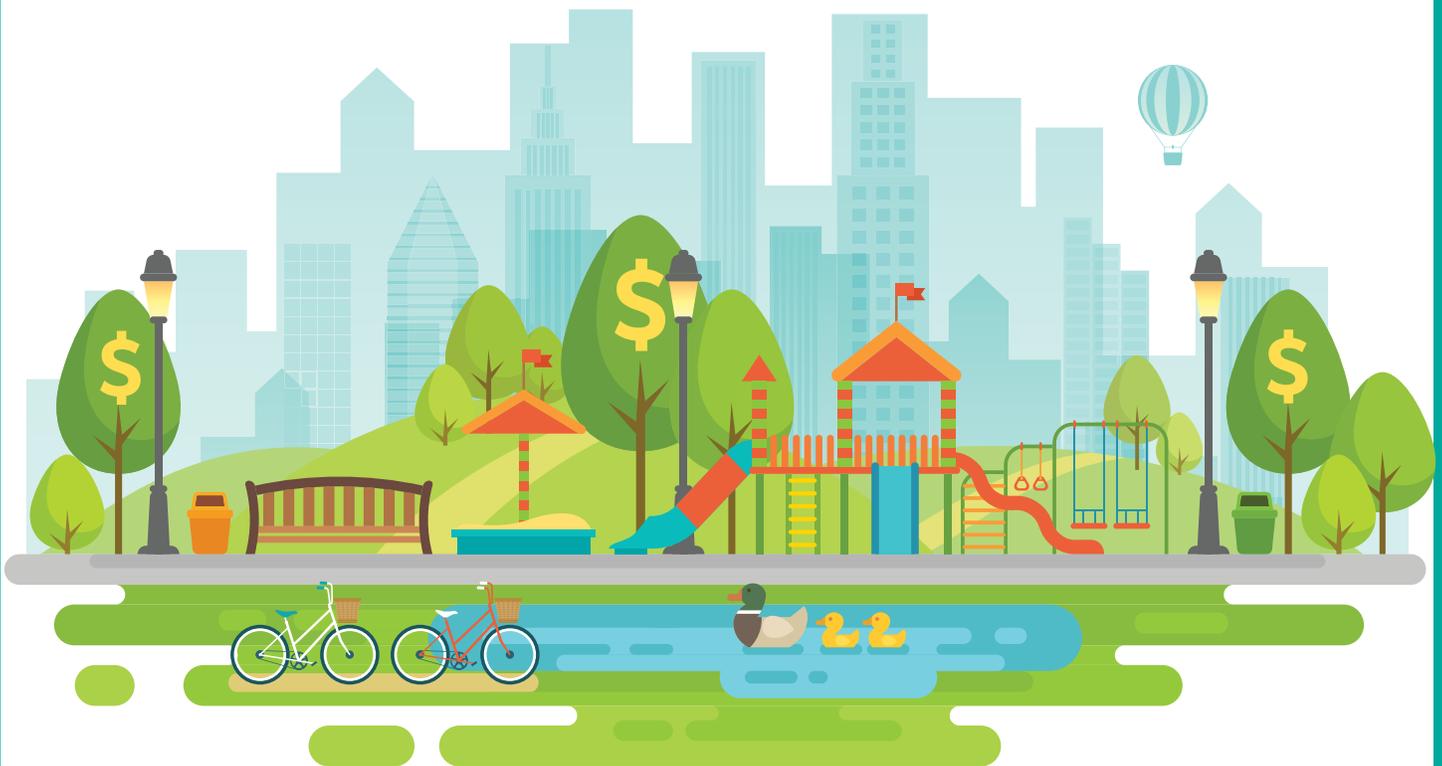
An Examination of the Economic Impacts of Operations and Capital Spending  
by Local Park and Recreation Agencies on the U.S. Economy



NATIONAL RECREATION  
AND PARK ASSOCIATION

## KEY FINDINGS

Local public park and recreation agencies in the United States generated nearly \$218 billion in economic activity and supported almost 1.3 million jobs that boosted labor income by more than \$68 billion from their operations and capital spending in 2019.



### Impact of Local Park and Recreation Agencies on the U.S. Economy – 2019

	Economic Activity	Employment
Total Impact	\$217.8 billion	1,280,724 jobs
Operations Spending	\$112.9 billion	686,254 jobs
Capital Spending	\$104.8 billion	594,470 jobs

Sources: IMPLAN and Center for Regional Analysis – George Mason University for NRPA, U.S. Census Bureau

Parks and recreation is essential infrastructure in healthy, vibrant and resilient communities. Through the tireless efforts of hundreds of thousands of full-time, part-time and seasonal workers — and supported by countless volunteers and advocates — local park and recreation agencies have a positive impact on the lives of millions of people. Park and recreation facilities, amenities and programming are diverse; they range from no- or low-cost fitness opportunities (such as a walking trail or a fitness class at a community center) and access to nutritious meals at out-of-school time programs for youth to providing our cities, towns and counties with cleaner air and water thanks to preserved open space.

Park and recreation professionals and their agencies make critical contributions to their communities as highlighted by the National Recreation and Park Association's (NRPA) Three Pillars:

- **Health and Wellness** – Local park and recreation agencies provide spaces, programs and services that are essential to a community's vitality. They also serve as key factors in advancing health equity, improving individual and community-level health outcomes, and enhancing quality of life. Park and recreation professionals are uniquely positioned to create — in partnership with the community, public health leaders and other local organizations — upstream solutions that catalyze and transform park and recreation agencies into holistic and people-centered Community Wellness Hubs.
- **Equity** – Every person in every community deserves to benefit from the power of parks and recreation. The very philosophy behind public parks and recreation is the idea that all people — regardless of race, ethnicity, age, income level, identity or ability — have access to programs, facilities, places and spaces that improve quality of life and build healthy communities. Parks and recreation truly builds communities — communities for all.
- **Conservation** – Creating resilient and climate-ready communities depends on parks and recreation. Park and recreation professionals are champions in addressing our most pressing environmental challenges; the parks and open spaces they manage maximize the benefits of nature to achieve positive and equitable health and economic impacts at the community level.

Park and recreation professionals and their agencies make another valuable contribution: promoting economic activity that makes our cities, towns and counties more prosperous. Just how significant is the impact of local park and recreation agencies on the U.S. economy?

To answer this question, NRPA joined forces with the Center for Regional Analysis at George Mason University in 2015, to conduct the first nationwide study on the economic impact of local park and recreation agencies' operations and capital spending. Since then, NRPA and the Center for Regional Analysis have partnered thrice more to update that landmark 2015 research: in 2018, 2020 and 2022. Each of the studies focuses exclusively on the direct, indirect and induced effects local park and recreation agencies' spending have on economic activity using U.S. Census Bureau data compiled for the analysis. This report summarizes the key findings of the 2022 research. A more detailed description, including a discussion of the methodology and implications, is available at [nrapa.org/ParkEconReport](https://nrapa.org/ParkEconReport).

## U.S. ECONOMIC IMPACT

Local park and recreation agencies employed more than 385,000 full-time and part-time employees in 2019, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That translates to almost \$49 billion of operations spending by the nation's more than 10,000 local park and recreation agencies. This spending — combined with capital expenditures — ripples through the national, regional and local economies as park and recreation employees spend their paychecks, park and recreation agency vendors hire workers, and both agencies and their vendors purchase products and services to serve their clients.

The result of park and recreation expenditures on the nation's economy is immense. The shared impact of operations and capital spending by U.S. local park and recreation agencies in 2019 resulted in nearly \$218 billion in economic activity and \$107 billion in added gross domestic product (GDP) and supported nearly 1.3 million jobs that paid salaries, wages and benefits totaling \$68.4 billion.



Local park and recreation agencies generated nearly \$218 billion in economic activity and supported almost 1.3 million jobs in 2019.

People attend the 32nd Annual Independence Day Parade in Farragut, Tennessee. Photo by Carisa Ownby.

### Impacts of Local Park and Recreation Agency Spending on the U.S. Economy – 2019

	Total Impact of Local Park and Recreation Agencies' Spending
Economic activity (transactions)	\$217.76 billion
Value added (gross domestic product)	\$106.98 billion
Labor income (salaries, wages, benefits)	\$68.44 billion
Employment (jobs)	1,280,724 jobs

Sources: IMPLAN, Center for Regional Analysis – George Mason University for NRPA, U.S. Census Bureau



Attendees of the North Chagrin Summer Camp walk the Willow Branch Nature Trail. Photo by Kyle Lanzer, courtesy of Cleveland Metroparks.

## Preliminary Results for 2020

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic affected nearly every facet of life, parks and recreation included. In many cities, towns and counties across the United States, however, parks, trails and other public spaces remained open, and provided valued respites for physical activity and recreation during a very challenging time. Park and recreation agencies and their staff pivoted to deliver emergency services to their communities, such as serving as COVID-19 testing and vaccination sites and distributing meals.

The economic impact of these agencies remained resilient, too. Preliminary estimates show that operations and capital spending in 2020 led to \$225.0 billion in economic activity and supported 1.25 million jobs.

### Preliminary Estimate of the Economic Impact of Local Park and Recreation Agencies on the U.S. Economy – 2020

	Total Impact of Local Park and Recreation Agencies' Spending
Economic activity (transactions)	\$225.02 billion
Value added (gross domestic product)	\$108.65 billion
Labor income (salaries, wages, benefits)	\$68.97 billion
Employment (jobs)	1,247,017 jobs

Sources: IMPLAN, Center for Regional Analysis – George Mason University for NRPA, U.S. Census Bureau

## STATE-LEVEL ANALYSIS

This study also examined the economic impact of local park and recreation agencies' spending in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The methodology used in the state-level analysis mirrored that for the national study. The estimates of total economic impacts include the direct, indirect and induced effects of operations and capital spending by local park and recreation agencies in each state and the District of Columbia.

### Impact of Local Park and Recreation Agency Spending on State Economies – 2019

State	Employment	Labor Income	Value Added	Economic Activity
Alabama	15,348	\$651,815,076	\$968,962,257	\$2,074,811,929
Alaska	2,436	\$128,750,088	\$197,457,958	\$397,859,417
Arizona	20,360	\$969,578,370	\$1,566,748,260	\$3,304,989,339
Arkansas	8,854	\$347,365,396	\$540,930,446	\$1,149,932,788
California	127,600	\$7,454,796,148	\$11,312,230,491	\$23,623,079,078
Colorado	41,976	\$2,196,664,230	\$3,404,420,455	\$6,982,346,026
Connecticut	7,120	\$386,895,021	\$566,370,006	\$1,114,018,171
Delaware	2,731	\$139,428,435	\$216,578,852	\$445,470,653
District of Columbia	6,384	\$442,135,815	\$657,659,039	\$1,442,361,444
Florida	97,501	\$4,426,656,602	\$7,345,851,964	\$15,947,448,166
Georgia	34,238	\$1,504,933,141	\$2,379,731,449	\$4,979,693,655
Hawaii	8,572	\$462,964,112	\$711,367,441	\$1,382,382,611
Idaho	6,241	\$280,892,101	\$442,260,249	\$987,795,641
Illinois	60,000	\$3,056,226,499	\$4,989,057,917	\$9,893,097,615
Indiana	13,838	\$628,826,865	\$1,059,988,503	\$2,198,298,077
Iowa	8,385	\$388,234,552	\$29,549,008	\$1,365,669,998
Kansas	12,067	\$553,104,369	\$845,507,759	\$1,794,310,796
Kentucky	8,827	\$363,947,712	\$567,243,390	\$1,320,817,940
Louisiana	19,009	\$875,335,408	\$1,451,541,312	\$3,081,187,441
Maine	2,464	\$92,567,722	\$143,939,202	\$303,230,532
Maryland	27,974	\$1,480,134,422	\$2,318,025,964	\$4,590,263,035
Massachusetts	13,643	\$818,839,621	\$1,200,032,621	\$2,254,340,648
Michigan	22,548	\$1,129,923,090	\$1,844,711,303	\$4,107,024,794
Minnesota	27,463	\$1,562,414,815	\$2,438,097,363	\$5,167,013,455
Mississippi	7,322	\$301,297,647	\$478,189,020	\$1,085,028,752
Missouri	23,064	\$1,128,825,692	\$1,783,974,762	\$3,636,518,937

### Impact of Local Park and Recreation Agency Spending on State Economies – 2019 (cont.)

Montana	3,916	\$191,132,441	\$284,311,510	\$634,228,445
Nebraska	9,631	\$479,853,688	\$714,960,686	\$1,602,027,016
Nevada	58,392	\$3,517,896,935	\$5,615,230,371	\$11,134,637,681
New Hampshire	2,158	\$96,634,741	\$148,324,927	\$314,455,946
New Jersey	17,940	\$946,221,766	\$1,413,831,635	\$2,552,120,029
New Mexico	9,857	\$416,058,523	\$654,024,854	\$1,374,984,731
New York	77,105	\$4,828,806,143	\$7,352,532,632	\$14,089,125,737
North Carolina	37,511	\$2,093,336,805	\$3,064,471,638	\$6,037,512,440
North Dakota	6,859	\$352,781,735	\$537,316,152	\$1,220,630,384
Ohio	43,306	\$2,160,222,072	\$3,419,555,293	\$7,047,862,139
Oklahoma	19,718	\$987,940,351	\$1,497,955,439	\$3,387,540,973
Oregon	18,064	\$937,839,394	\$1,457,710,363	\$2,995,234,595
Pennsylvania	20,878	\$1,168,754,188	\$1,897,412,064	\$3,829,272,383
Rhode Island	1,459	\$67,676,611	\$109,808,005	\$223,583,142
South Carolina	18,205	\$794,811,379	\$1,240,098,551	\$2,714,181,055
South Dakota	3,720	\$176,411,461	\$269,485,936	\$613,030,056
Tennessee	17,995	\$852,569,033	\$1,292,161,403	\$2,643,931,995
Texas	77,149	\$3,877,977,407	\$5,872,912,123	\$12,094,925,549
Utah	18,700	\$882,890,731	\$1,389,792,312	\$2,960,427,055
Vermont	1,519	\$74,707,109	\$113,592,830	\$245,764,108
Virginia	30,162	\$1,420,190,988	\$2,256,407,901	\$4,600,320,899
Washington	34,718	\$2,229,735,609	\$3,471,351,248	\$6,462,337,579
West Virginia	6,407	\$296,241,584	\$494,399,206	\$1,033,634,110
Wisconsin	18,619	\$992,375,176	\$1,577,173,051	\$3,342,438,343
Wyoming	3,705	\$165,161,863	\$253,205,824	\$543,010,454

Sources: IMPLAN, Center for Regional Analysis – George Mason University for NRPA, U.S. Census Bureau

NOTE: The sum of the state-level impacts presented in this table does not equal the national level economic impact estimates presented in the previous section. The difference reflects how the full economic impact of local park and recreation agency spending is not confined within state borders. For example, if the playground equipment installed at park in Maryland, came from a manufacturer located in Idaho, the value of that product production would not count as an impact on the Maryland economy, nor does the study include such an impact in the estimates for Idaho.

## WHAT THE RESULTS MEAN



Children play in the water in front of a fire truck in the park. Photo courtesy of Ginger Clark, Centreville-Washington Park District.

These estimates of the economic impact generated from park and recreation agency spending come from an input-output model that estimates direct, indirect and induced effects of those expenditures.

- **Direct effects** reflect the spending by local park and recreation agencies — whether for operations or capital programs — and include wages and benefits for agency employees and spending on equipment, utilities, goods and services.
- **Indirect effects** capture the spending associated with local park and recreation agencies' vendors. An example is an agency contracting with a local landscaping company to mow ballfields. The landscaping company hires employees, purchases mowers and contracts with a bookkeeping service; in turn, the bookkeeping service leases office space, employs workers, purchases office supplies and so forth.
- **Induced effects** track the impact of consumer spending (from wages) by park and recreation agency employees and employees working for the agency's vendors.

The model estimates the total effects on economic activity (output), employment, labor income and value added resulting from park and recreation agencies' operations and capital spending:

- **Economic activity (output)** measures the value of the resulting transactions
- **Employment** is the number of headcount jobs, both full- and part-time
- **Labor income** includes salaries, wages and fringe benefits
- **Value added** is the measure most equivalent to GDP and includes property income, dividends, corporate profits and other measures

## Your Local Park and Recreation Agency Generates Additional Economic Benefits

While the figures presented in this report are significant, they represent only one aspect of the economic benefits of public parks. Indeed, the conclusions of this report are conservative estimates of parks and recreation's full economic benefits.

Beyond the impact of local park and recreation agency spending, other critical economic impacts from public parks include:

- **Health and wellness:** Parks and recreation promotes improved physical and mental health. This not only helps people feel better, but also can help lower medical and insurance costs for those people taking advantage of those facilities and activities. An [NRPA-commissioned literature review](#) demonstrates how parks and recreation supports healthy, productive lives and resilient, cohesive communities. Ninety-three percent of U.S. adults responding to the [June 2021 NRPA Park Pulse](#) poll indicated that their mental health was improved by services offered by local park and recreation professionals and agencies. Further, an [Oregon State University](#) study found that Oregon residents' engagement in one of 30 outdoor recreation activities in 2018, resulted in a savings of \$735 million to \$1.416 billion accrued to health insurers, providers and participants.
- **Conservation and resiliency:** Park and recreation agencies' protection of land, water, trees, open spaces and wildlife improves air and water quality in communities. Through effective land management methods and green infrastructure investments, parks and recreation makes communities more resilient to natural disasters, reducing disaster recovery and insurance costs. Ninety-three percent of respondents to NRPA's [2019 Engagement with Parks](#) survey indicated it is essential that their local government acquire, construct and maintain local parks, trails and green spaces near bodies of water to protect natural resources in their community. Six in seven U.S. adults responding to an [April 2021 NRPA Park Pulse](#) poll expressed support for their local park and recreation agency's environmental initiatives.
- **Property values:** Economic research has demonstrated consistently that homes and properties located near parklands have higher values than those located farther away. Higher home values not only benefit the owners of these properties, but also add to the tax base of local governments. Four in five respondents to the [2021 Engagement with Parks](#) survey indicated that they seek high-quality parks and recreation amenities when choosing a place to live.
- **Economic development:** Parks and recreation improves the quality of life in communities and benefits the local economic development of a region. Eighty-two percent of corporate executives responding to a 2022 [Area Development](#) survey rated quality-of-life features as an important factor when choosing a location for a headquarters, factory or other company facility. Further, 94 percent of adults responding to the [March 2020 NRPA Park Pulse](#) poll expressed support for their local government investing in infrastructure improvements that promote economic activity in their community
- **Visitor spending:** Many local park and recreation agency amenities spur tourism to their respective locales, generating significant economic activity, including (but not limited to) increased sales at local restaurants/bars and hotels. An [August 2017 NRPA Park Pulse](#) poll found that people seek out park and recreation amenities — such as beaches, parks, trails and secluded and relaxing places — when choosing a vacation destination. An [August 2021 NRPA Park Pulse](#) poll noted that more than nine in 10 U.S. adults find park and recreation summer activities create fond memories.

## KEY CONCLUSIONS



Ashland Park along the Ohio River in Clarksville, Indiana, overlooking the Louisville, Kentucky Skyline. *Photo courtesy of Ken Conklin.*

Park and recreation professionals at the more than 10,000 agencies across the United States positively contribute to their communities in many different ways. Not only are parks leading the way in terms of health and wellness, equity, and conservation, but they also drive significant economic activity.

Local park and recreation agencies generated nearly \$218 billion in U.S. economic activity and supported almost 1.3 million jobs from their operations and capital spending alone in 2019. Preliminary estimates for 2020 show that parks and recreation remained resilient in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, with \$225 billion in economic activity and 1.25 million jobs supported. These results, combined with studies on the state and [national](#) park systems, are proof that public parks are robust engines of economic activity.

Parks and recreation is a part of a broader outdoor recreation economy. The [Bureau of Economic Analysis](#) estimates that the outdoor recreation economy represents \$374.3 billion of gross domestic product (GDP) — or 1.8 percent of the U.S. economy.

Beyond the impact of their expenditures, park and recreation agencies generate even more economic value through their promotion of health and wellness, as well as conservation and resiliency that foster higher property values and increase tourism. Critically, park and recreation amenities are the cornerstones to improving a locality's or region's quality of life — a significant factor in attracting employers and workers to an area.

When combined with the ability to deliver healthier and happier communities, the powerful impact parks and recreation has on economic activity highlights the fact that park and recreation agency offerings are not merely a “nice-to-have” luxury government service. Instead, parks and recreation transforms our cities, towns and counties into vibrant and prosperous communities for all.

Policymakers and elected officials at all levels of government should take notice and support greater and more stable taxpayer funding of parks and recreation. Local park and recreation agencies not only help raise the standard of living in our neighborhoods, towns and cities, but they also spark economic activity that can have ripple effects well beyond any initial expenditure in creating jobs and prosperity throughout our nation.

This study uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau to estimate operational spending by local park systems. The [Survey of Public Employment & Payroll](#) offers estimates of agency employment and payrolls in 2019, while the [Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances](#) provides agency operations spending data. Researchers at the Center for Regional Analysis at George Mason University (GMU) derived its capital spending estimates from reports available from the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and a review of budget records for dozens of park systems selected to reflect a diverse range of localities and park operating characteristics.

The GMU researchers used the IMPLAN economic input-output model to estimate the total economic impacts, often called “economic contributions,” generated by park system operating and capital spending. Consistent with previous studies prepared for NRPA, the researchers categorized park agency spending as if it were private-sector businesses operating parks, recreation and similar entertainment venues. In their judgment, this is more accurate than treating the expenditure as general local government spending (i.e., park and recreation agency spending patterns are much more like a privately-run entertainment venue than a local tax office).

The researchers adjusted the model inputs to reflect actual compensation paid to park system employees, which is often different than what private-sector firms pay its employees. The IMPLAN model is the most widely used tool for estimating economic impacts. This model is updated frequently to reflect shifts in the structure of the economy; therefore, the results reported here are not directly comparable to the findings of previous analyses.



More than 100 people (kids and adults) came together to create the largest community painted mural in Minnesota. The mural is 30'x30' and represents elements that the children found beautiful in the city. The majority of the mural was painted with one-inch brushes or smaller. *Photo courtesy of Jennifer Fink, City of New Brighton, Minnesota.*



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