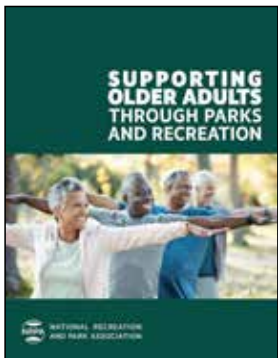


# SUPPORTING OLDER ADULTS THROUGH PARKS AND RECREATION



NATIONAL RECREATION  
AND PARK ASSOCIATION



A group of people stretch in a park.

Photo courtesy of Adobe Stock

Men take a break from playing basketball in an indoor gym.

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# INTRODUCTION

A woman volunteers at a local community center.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE STOCK

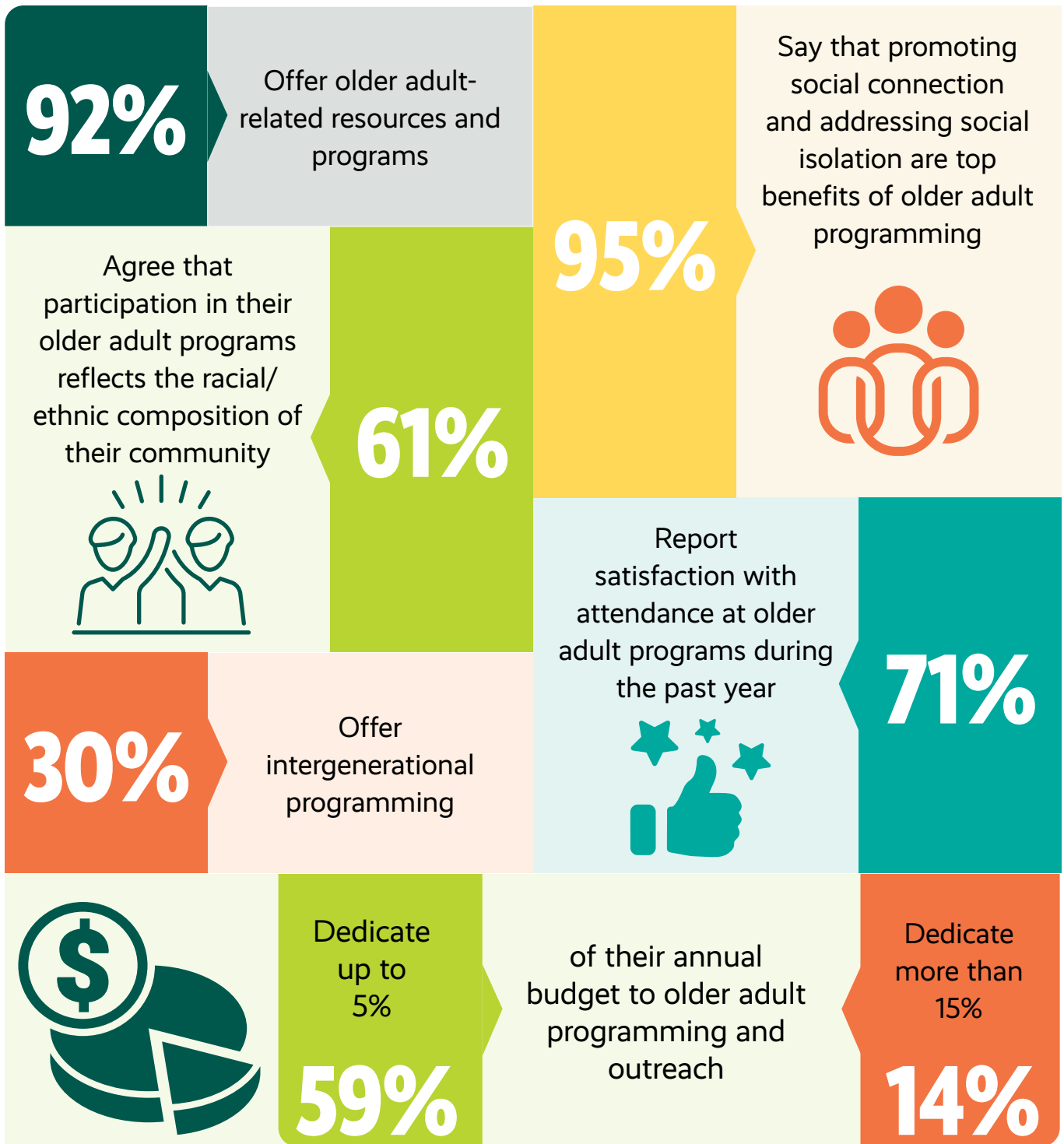
**P**ark and recreation agencies across the United States provide essential services and programs to all members of their community. Because every community is unique, each agency must consider the various backgrounds, interests and needs found in their diverse population to better serve their entire community.

One of the largest groups in nearly every community is comprised of adults older than 55, often termed “older adults.” The older adult population increases every year. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that baby boomers — adults born between 1946 and 1964 — account for nearly 17 percent of the U.S. population and number 55.8 million people. In the past decade alone, the older adult population in the United States has experienced its fastest growth in more than 100 years, and it will continue to increase as baby boomers and Generation Xers (those born between 1965 and 1980) age. To better serve this growing population, park and recreation agencies must provide facilities, programming and other critical resources that support the lifestyles and diverse needs of this steadily increasing group. This includes, but is not limited to, providing accessible and affordable evidence-based programs, safe and inclusive environments for assembling and an adequate number of activities.

To gain greater insight into how park and recreation agencies and their staff serve older adults, in December 2023 the Research team of the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) surveyed park and recreation professionals. The survey asked participants to describe the facilities, services, outreach and programming that their agencies offer to older adults, as well as the challenges agencies face in serving this ever-growing population. The survey generated responses from nearly 300 park and recreation professionals; this report summarizes the data from those responses.

# SUPPORTING OLDER ADULTS THROUGH PARKS AND RECREATION: KEY FINDINGS BY THE NUMBERS

Of the park and recreation agencies responding to this survey:



People practice yoga in a park.

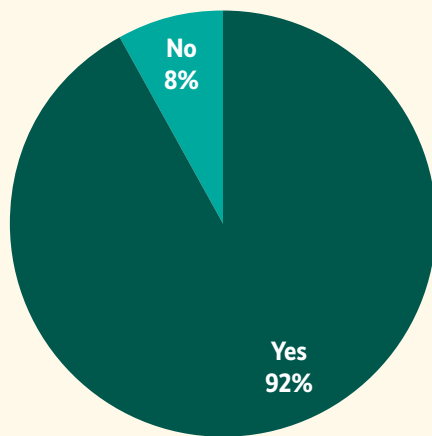
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# OLDER ADULT PROGRAMMING AT PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES

**M**ost local park and recreation agencies across the United States offer facilities, activities and programming dedicated to older adults in their communities. Specifically, 92 percent of agencies surveyed offer resources and programs related to older adults. More than half of the agencies (56 percent) that have older adult offerings are located in suburban jurisdictions, followed by urban jurisdiction settings (29 percent) and rural agencies (15 percent).

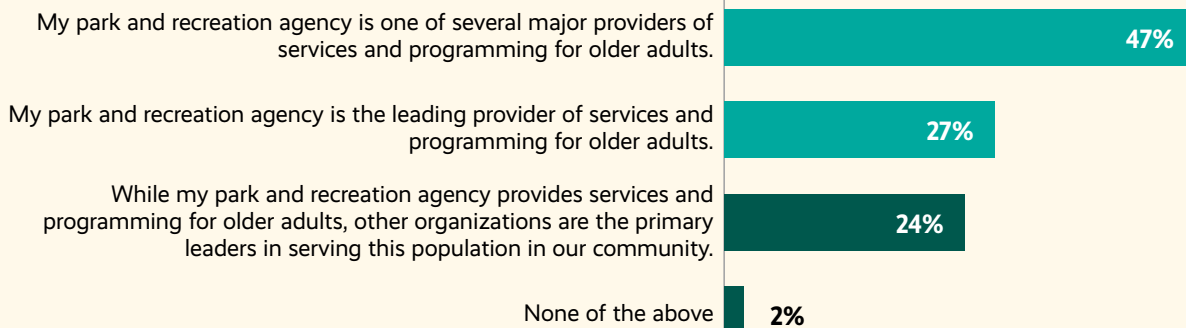
## Ninety-Two Percent of Park and Recreation Agencies Offer Facilities, Activities and Programming for Older Adults



Percentage Distribution of Respondents

Older adult programs and facilities offered by park and recreation agencies are not only common in communities across the nation. In many communities, park and recreation agencies are recognized as leading providers of older adult services and programming. While 27 percent of respondents indicated their agencies are the leading providers of older adult services and programming in their community, nearly half (47 percent) of the park and recreation agencies that offer some programming or facility designed for older adults reported they are one of several major providers of services and programs for this population. Twenty-four percent of respondents indicated that other organizations are the community leaders for these offerings.

## Seventy-Four Percent of Park and Recreation Agencies Are Major Providers of Services and Programming for Older Adults



Percentage Distribution of Respondents

The numerous activities and programs offered to older adults provide many benefits to participants. Among the agencies offering an older adult program or activity of some kind, nearly all (95 percent) specified the promotion of social connection and addressing social isolation as top benefits of older adult programs and facilities. The full list of benefits selected included:

- Promoting social connection/Addressing social isolation (95 percent of survey respondents)
- Promoting physical activity (89 percent)
- Providing a safe space for older adults to gather (86 percent)
- Providing affordable and accessible opportunities (76 percent)
- Promoting mental health (75 percent)
- Connecting older adults to enrichment and learning opportunities (73 percent)
- Maintaining overall health and well-being (62 percent)
- Engaging with/Being active in the community (56 percent)
- Connecting older adults to healthcare resources (45 percent)
- Connecting older adults to healthy meals (44 percent)

The 92 percent of park and recreation agencies offering older adult programs and facilities extend a breadth of activities and other offerings to their communities. These diverse activities reflect the unique interests and needs of the older adult population and are

## Adventures Await for Older Adults in Howard County, Maryland

“Adventure is exactly what Howard County Department of Recreation & Parks is infusing into its active aging programs through its newest programs, Encore Adventures. In this series of programs, adults ages 55 and up can participate in a variety of outdoor adventures. These programs are facilitated by the department’s Adventure & Outdoors group. Through the Encore Adventure series, participants can engage in kayaking, archery, fishing, bike walks, history hikes and our indoor rock wall. There is something for every level of engagement. Once individuals try five different adventure programs, they become a certified Encore Adventurer, complete with a patch and certificate!”

[Read more](#)

designed to encourage socialization, promote mental and physical health, and provide safe and affordable space for older adults to try something new.

The activities offered by at least 50 percent of surveyed agencies include:

- Exercise classes (89 percent)
- Sports and games (86 percent)
- Arts and crafts classes (73 percent)
- Volunteer opportunities (73 percent)
- Special events and festivals (68 percent)
- Field trips, tours and vacations (65 percent)
- Activity-related job opportunities within their agency (60 percent)
- Cultural enrichment opportunities (59 percent)
- Social clubs (57 percent)
- Organized group outdoor recreation (52 percent)

Intergenerational programming creates opportunities for older adults and younger members of the community to connect. These programs promote healthy intergenerational relationships between children and older adults and increase awareness, understanding and positive attitudes across generations. Almost one-third (30 percent) of agencies offer intergenerational programming. The most common activities mentioned included reading groups, arts and crafts, gardening, food and cooking classes, and mentoring opportunities.

Park and recreation agencies offer older adult programming in a variety of venues. At least half of agencies deliver programming in recreation centers (57 percent); parks, trails and greenways (53 percent); senior centers (51 percent); and/or community centers (50 percent).

## At Least Half of Park and Recreation Agencies Deliver Older Adult Programming at Recreation Centers, Outdoor Spaces, Senior Centers and/or Community Centers

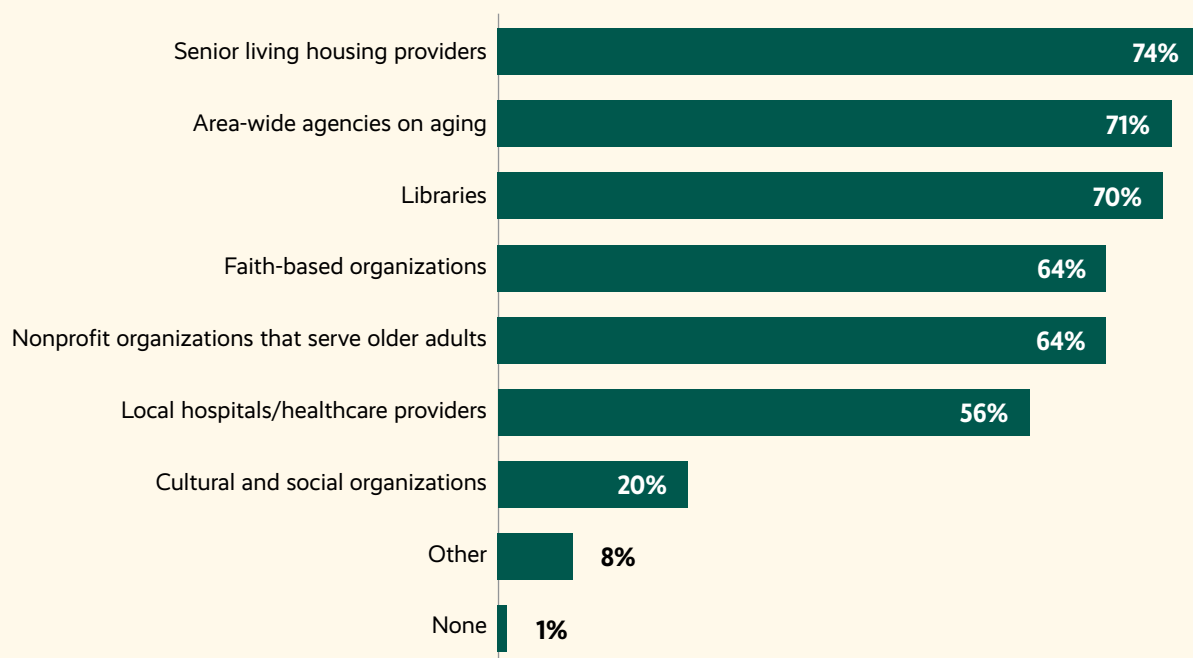




# PARTNERS AND EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMS

Park and recreation agencies often partner with other community organizations to meet the increased demand for older adult activities and programs. The three most commonly cited types of partner organizations were senior living housing providers (74 percent), area-wide agencies on aging (71 percent) and libraries (70 percent). Partnering with other community organizations allows park and recreation agencies to better serve their older adult community and provide more programming and activities than would otherwise be possible.

## Agencies Indicated a Variety of Other Significant Providers of Older Adult Programming and Activities in Their Communities



Percent of Respondents

## Combating Social Isolation Through Harmony

“The Harmelodian Club, with members in their 70s and 80s, meets every Monday morning for 90 minutes to practice and play together while also enjoying each other’s company. ‘They are a close-knit group that really cares about each other,’ said Lynne Yuill, [St. Charles (Illinois) Park District Adult Activity Center] supervisor. ‘They welcome each other with open arms.’ That sentiment is genuine as members describe their club of harmonica players as welcoming, stress free and like a second family. That goes a long way for new members, since the majority of newcomers have never played before. Most began playing the harmonica when they joined the club, at the suggestion of a friend, to socialize or to learn a new skill. But no matter what the reason, one thing’s for certain — once they started, they were hooked and haven’t looked back.” [Read more](#)



A teacher helps an art class participant with her drawing.

Examples of the types of cultural and social organizations that provide older adult programming include:

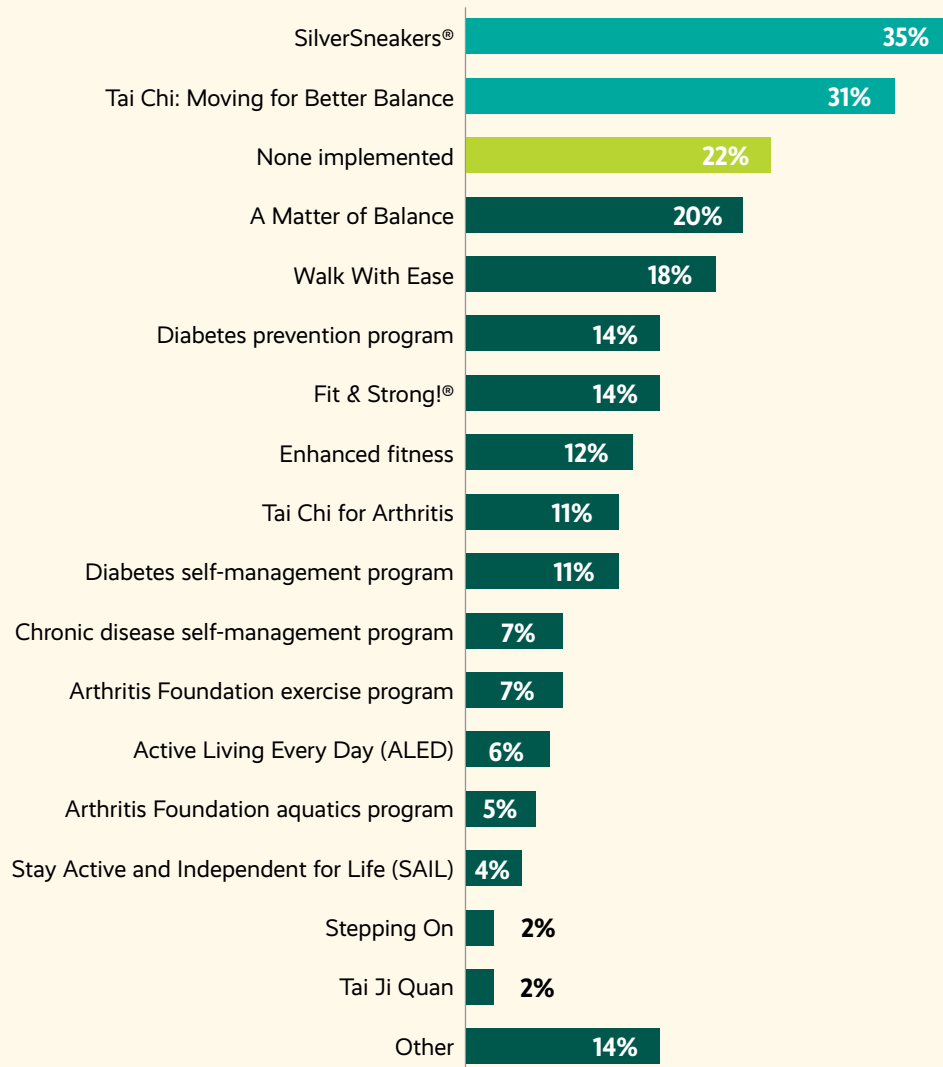
- Animal/Wildlife groups (e.g., wildlife centers, therapy dogs)
- Arts clubs/centers/councils
- Farms/Garden clubs
- Health and safety organizations
- Historical societies
- Music clubs
- Nationality/Cultural centers
- Professional organizations
- Retirement and seniors groups/clubs (e.g., AARP, senior interest groups)
- Senior centers
- Social/Service clubs (e.g., women's clubs, Kiwanis, Lions, Rotary, VFWs, Red Hatters)
- Tribal councils

Finally, eight percent of respondents mentioned other significant providers of older adult programming, including:

- City/Town/County offices (e.g., county transportation services)
- Commissions on aging
- Community centers
- Community foundations
- Homeowners associations
- Military groups
- Mobile home parks
- Nutrition services (e.g., Meals on Wheels)
- Senior living communities
- Social media groups

Among the numerous options for older adult engagement, respondents also indicated implementing a variety of evidence-based programs, led by SilverSneakers® (35 percent) and Tai Chi: Moving for Better Balance (31 percent). Based on sound research findings, many of these evidence-based programs support the physical and cognitive well-being of older adults, encouraging everything from daily movement to improving balance, preventing diabetes and learning how to implement an arthritis exercise plan.

## Respondents Were Most Likely to Have Implemented SilverSneakers® and Tai Chi: Moving for Better Balance Out of a Wide Array of Evidence-Based Programming Options Within the Past Two Years



*Percent of Respondents*

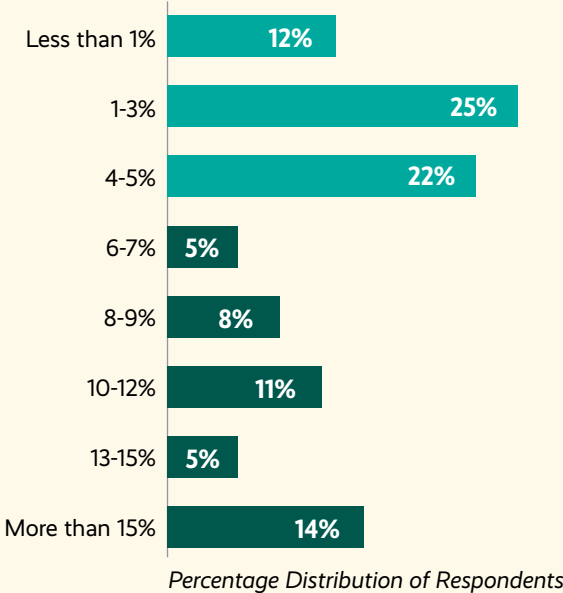
A group of people do Nordic walking exercises.



# BUDGETING FOR OLDER ADULT PROGRAMMING

While agencies strive to provide their older adult community members with high-quality, relevant programs, many do so with a tight budget. More than half (59 percent) of park and recreation agencies reported that they dedicate up to five percent of their annual operating budget to older adult programming and outreach. At the other end of the spectrum, a small share (14 percent) of agencies indicated that they allocate more than 15 percent of their annual budget to serving older adult populations.

## More Than Half (59%) of Agencies Devote Up To 5% of Their Annual Operating Budget to Older Adult Programming and Outreach



Total may not add to 100% due to rounding.

A group of women do water aerobics in a pool.

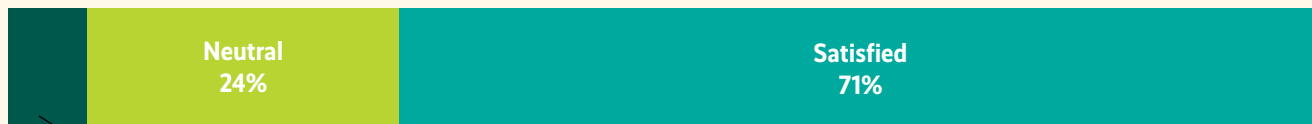
PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE STOCK

# ENGAGEMENT AND POST-PANDEMIC IMPACT

The older adult population has been increasing throughout the nation as baby boomers age. Likely correlated, park and recreation agencies have experienced a growing number of participants and greater involvement in their older adult programming. Other factors that contribute to increased participation in older adult programming include an increased desire to socialize and improve one’s health since the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, as well as agencies’ efforts to be more inclusive and reach underrepresented groups in their communities.

Most agencies (71 percent) that provide older adult programming and other activities in their communities are satisfied with current program attendance.

## Most Agencies (71%) Are Satisfied With Attendance at Older Adult Programs During the Past Year



Not satisfied  
6%

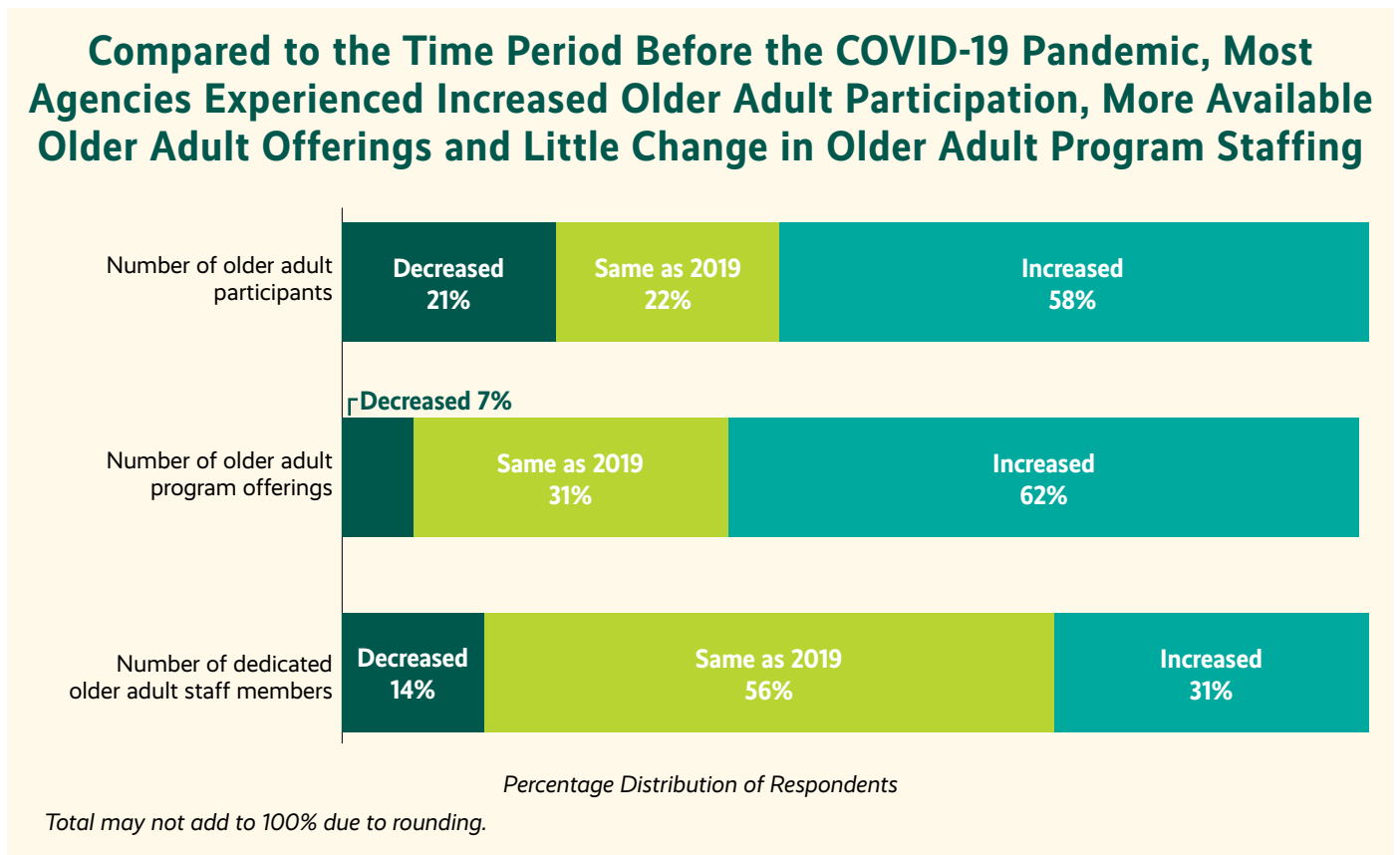
Percentage Distribution of Respondents

Total may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Many restrictions — like physical distancing, limiting group size and self-isolation — were enforced during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the health and safety of the general population. Older adults were among those considered at higher risk, and in turn, were encouraged to take extra precautions. To explore how the COVID-19 pandemic affected — and continues to affect — older adult programs, the survey asked respondents about the extent to which attendance, program offerings and staff have been impacted from December 2019 — before the COVID-19 pandemic — to December 2023.

Compared to the time period before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than half (58 percent) of agencies reported an increase in the number of older adult participants in related programs and facilities in 2023. Smaller percentages of respondents reported no change (22 percent) or a decrease (21 percent) in older adult participation from December 2019 to December 2023. Many agencies (62 percent) indicated an increase in the number of older adult program offerings since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic appears to have had little impact on the number of dedicated staff members who administer older adult programs, evidenced by the 56 percent of agencies that reported staff capacity remained the same post-pandemic. In fact, 31 percent of respondents indicated that their staffing for these offerings increased. The relatively small remaining share of agencies (14 percent) experienced reduced staffing.

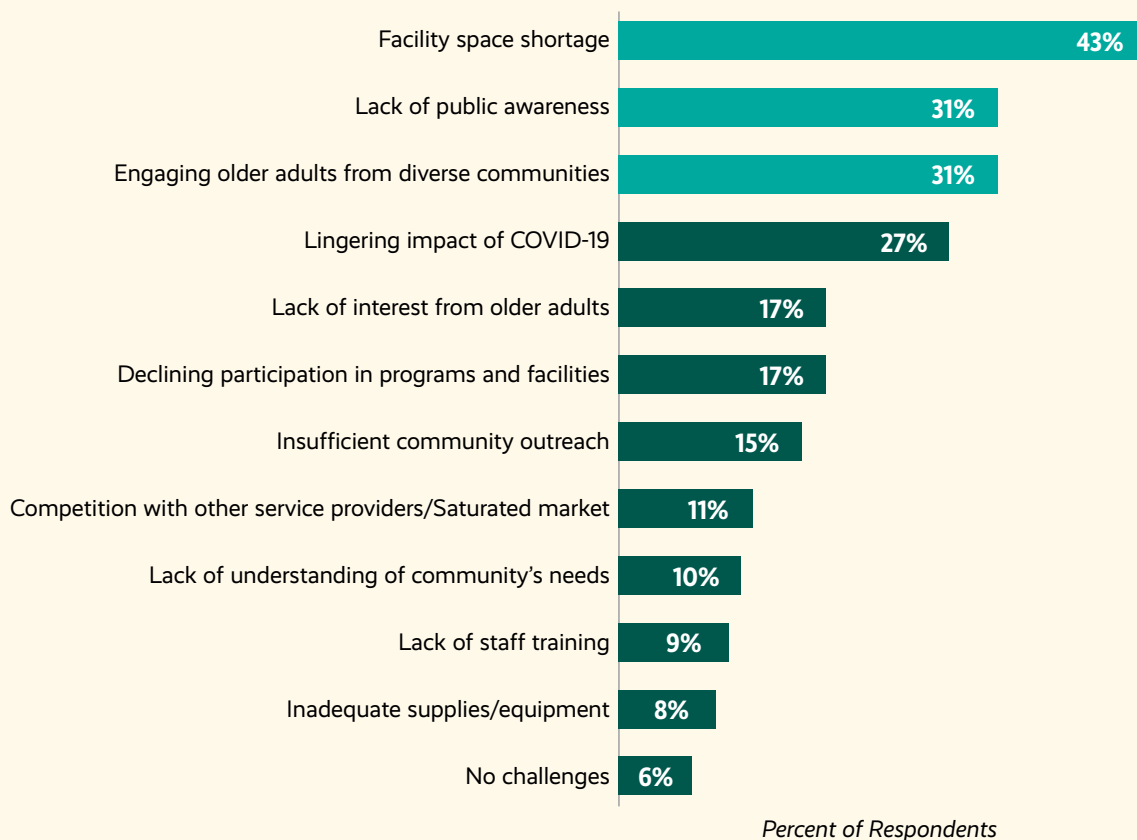


Agencies commonly indicated little to no sustaining impact from the COVID-19 pandemic on older adult program participation. Positive impacts included a higher standard of cleaning and hygiene in facilities and an increased awareness of the benefits of staying fit and active for health. At least one agency has continued to support community health by offering vaccine clinics because of the pandemic.

Survey respondents did not commonly highlight continued pandemic-related challenges. The few pandemic-related challenges they did share were generally related to participation. For example, a few respondents reported that they are approaching recovery to pre-pandemic participation levels, but it is a slow process. Some older adult community members continue to be hesitant about participating in activities outside of the home for safety. At least one agency mentioned that many of the oldest community members who previously participated in such programs have not yet returned, while other agencies reported that older adults have begun to take part in larger numbers.

Despite the increase in attendance and program offerings post-pandemic at many locations, agencies continue to face challenges when providing older adult programming. Aside from funding and staffing challenges, the three most often cited challenges faced by respondents were facility space storage (43 percent), lack of public awareness (31 percent) and engaging older adults from diverse communities (31 percent). It was somewhat puzzling that the next most frequently selected challenge was the lingering impact of COVID-19 (27 percent). As discussed previously, few survey participants offered negative lingering impacts of the pandemic.

### Aside From Funding and Staffing, the Three Most Often Cited Challenges Faced by Agencies Included Inadequate Facility Space, Insufficient Public Awareness and Engagement of Diverse Older Adults in the Community

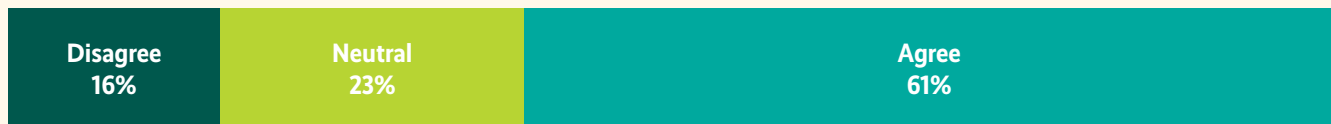




# DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION IN OLDER ADULT PROGRAMMING

The goal of older adult programming is to support all adults over the age of 55, regardless of race, identity, ability or other characteristics. A majority of agencies (61 percent) indicated that participants in their older adult programs mirror the racial and ethnic profile of their communities, while 16 percent of these agencies suggested that some additional effort could be extended in this area.

## Sixty-One Percent of Agencies Agreed That Participation in Their Older Adult Programs Reflects the Race and Ethnicity Profile of Their Communities



Percentage Distribution of Respondents

Park and recreation agencies aim to provide resources and programming to all residents of their communities. While 36 percent of respondents indicated that they actively design programming and outreach to attract underrepresented groups, 51 percent reported their agencies did not have any such programs or outreach, and 13 percent were unsure. This finding suggests that additional training and resources may be beneficial to park and recreation agencies, particularly for those that do not believe their participants fully reflect the demographic tapestry of their community.

The agencies that implemented specific efforts to reach underrepresented groups in the older adult community reported the following types of activities:

- Working with leaders from local underrepresented groups
- Offering low-cost programs for low-income residents
- Hosting English as a Second Language classes
- Providing luncheons and other activities for the LGBTQIA+ community
- Providing a site for nutrition programs, like Meals on Wheels
- Sending newsletters and hanging fliers in well-traveled locations where residents live
- Offering free meeting space
- Offering transportation and other accommodations for people with disabilities

Park and recreation agencies continue to take steps to ensure that more activities and programming are centered around diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) to best meet the needs of the entire older adult population in their communities. The



PHOTO COURTESY OF ADOBE STOCK

highest percentage of responding agencies reported they ensure facility and recreational programming policies are inclusive of income, race, ethnicity, gender identity, ability and neurodivergence (61 percent) and they survey community members about interests and gather feedback (54 percent).

## Agencies Were Most Likely to Indicate That They Implemented Inclusive Policies and Gathered Feedback From Participants to Ensure Activities for Older Adults Center Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI)



Percent of Respondents

# CONCLUSION

**P**ark and recreation agencies provide essential activities, resources and programming to older adults across the United States. Many of these agencies lead or are among the leading providers of older adult programming in their communities, and they continually are adapting to serve the diverse older adult population.

Despite the challenges of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, most agencies reported that attendance at older adult programs has either stayed the same or increased since December 2019. Many agencies attributed socialization as the main reason older adults participate in relevant programming. Older adult offerings and activities, such as evidence-based programs, also work to promote better physical and mental health in older adults.

Park and recreation agencies face additional challenges when it comes to providing older adults in their communities with adequate programming and activities, including facility shortage issues, raising public awareness and engaging older adults from other diverse communities. To encourage inclusivity and increase participation in a way that accurately represents the older adult population in each community, additional training, partnerships and other resources would be beneficial. Yet, this may be an issue for some agencies because of tight budgets; nearly 60 percent of agencies dedicate five percent or less of their annual operating budget toward older adult programming. In addition, about half of agencies indicated they require additional access to evidence-based training programs to better serve their older adult population.

As baby boomers and Gen Xers continue to age, the interests and needs of the older adult population keep expanding. As a leading provider of older adult activities and programming in communities across the United States, park and recreation agencies are primed to continue to serve the needs of this ever-increasing older adult population.

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**See also:** Caplan, Z., & Rabe, M. (2023, May 25). *The Older Population: 2020*. U.S. Census Bureau, [tinyurl.com/2wnxusk6](https://tinyurl.com/2wnxusk6); Giraudeau, C., & Bailly, N. (2019). *Intergenerational programs: What can school-age children and older people expect from them? A systematic review*. *European journal of ageing*, 16(3), 363–376, [tinyurl.com/yc66bwuh](https://tinyurl.com/yc66bwuh).

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ABOUT NRPA

**T**he National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) is the leading not-for-profit organization dedicated to building strong, vibrant and resilient communities through the power of parks and recreation. With more than 60,000 members, NRPA advances this vision by investing in and championing the work of park and recreation professionals and advocates — the catalysts for positive change in service of equity, climate-readiness, and overall health and well-being.

NRPA brings strength to our message by partnering with like-minded organizations, including those in the federal government, nonprofits and commercial enterprises. Funded through dues, grants, registrations and charitable contributions, NRPA produces research, education and policy initiatives for our members that ultimately enrich the communities they serve.

NRPA places immense importance on research and data to raise the status of parks and recreation and conducts research with two goals. First, NRPA creates and analyzes data to help park and recreation agencies make optimal decisions on operations, programming and spending. Second, NRPA develops data and insights that support park and recreation professionals making the case for greater and more stable funding to policymakers, key stakeholders, the media and the general public. The NRPA Research team works closely with internal subject matter experts, respected industry consultants and the academic community to develop its reports and data resources. Learn more at [nrpa.org/Research](https://nrpa.org/Research).



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