

Park and Recreation Directors' Retrospective on the COVID-19 Pandemic: Results From a Post-Pandemic Survey



NATIONAL RECREATION
AND PARK ASSOCIATION



Cover image: A park and recreation professional poses with two kids in Elk Grove, California.

Photo by Craig Pattenaude

CONTENTS

- Introduction 2
- Infographic 4
- Key Findings. 5
 - Budget and Funding Impacts 12
 - Funding Advocacy and Community Vocalness
During the COVID-19 Pandemic 14
 - Partnerships and New Roles/Responsibilities
During the COVID-19 Pandemic 16
- Conclusion. 19
- Acknowledgements 20
- About NRPA 20



PHOTO COURTESY OF EL PASO PARKS AND RECREATION

Community members participate in a yoga class held by El Paso Parks and Recreation, El Paso, Texas.



Young adults practice skateboarding in Ridgewood, New Jersey.

PHOTO COURTESY OF VILLAGE OF RIDGEWOOD PARKS AND RECREATION

Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic. What followed during the next several years was a severe disruption to the normal way of life. Schools and many workplaces switched to virtual platforms; business and community providers changed the ways they delivered services; and healthcare providers and other frontline personnel cared for the public even as they, too, tried to protect themselves from the virus. The pandemic had a tremendously detrimental impact on people's physical and mental health, led to significant economic instability, and highlighted challenges that faced our most vulnerable community members. Even after society largely reopened, the pandemic continued to alter the way in which people and society operated.

At the same time, the pandemic also served as a reminder that parks and recreation is essential. In most cities, towns and counties across the nation, parks, trails and other outdoor amenities were the only recreational opportunities open to the public during the early days of the pandemic, providing critical respites during a very stressful time. Further, park and recreation professionals and their agencies played a vital role in how their communities responded to the emergency. These agencies provided childcare programs to essential workers, served as distribution points for nutrition assistance, and made their facilities available for COVID-19 testing and vaccinations. Indeed, parks and recreation solidified its role as a health and wellness pillar in communities.

We are now several years removed from the start of the pandemic, and so it may be a good time to look at how parks and recreation responded to the challenges of the COVID-19. The NRPA Research team collaborated with four academic researchers to better understand the lessons learned and the broader legacy of the pandemic on parks and recreation.

Andrew J. Mowen, Ph.D.
The Pennsylvania State University
Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management

Sammie Powers, Ph.D.
George Mason University
School of Sport, Recreation, and Tourism Management

Nick Pitas, Ph.D.
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign
Department of Recreation, Sport, and Tourism

Alex Caraynoff, M.S.
The Pennsylvania State University
Department of Recreation, Park, and Tourism Management

The researchers conducted a survey of park and recreation directors and other senior park and recreation leaders to elicit their opinions on their agencies' resiliency and innovation in the face of the pandemic, budgetary and staffing impacts, how these professionals communicated the impacts on their communities to political leaders, and how agencies took on new responsibilities and formed partnerships in recent years. The survey generated 303 responses. Those responses serve as the basis for *Park and Recreation Directors' Retrospective on the COVID-19 Pandemic: Results From a Post-Pandemic Survey*. The NRPA Research team produced this summary version of the survey findings.

Key Findings From a Post-Pandemic Survey

76% of park and recreation leaders indicate their profession was innovative in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

82% of park and recreation leaders report that their profession was resilient in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

More than 3 in 4

park and recreation agencies have the same or greater capacity to address critical community needs and fulfill their mission compared to their capacity before the pandemic.

80% of park and recreation agencies' financial health currently matches or exceeds that before the pandemic.

9 in 10 park and recreation leaders held one-on-one conversations with public officials to garner support for greater funding for and investment in their agencies.

More than 2 in 5

park and recreation leaders indicate that their agencies established new partnerships as part of their COVID-19 pandemic response.

Key Findings

A large majority of park and recreation leaders agree they and their peers across the nation were innovative in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic; 76 percent rank their profession a 4 or 5 on a five-point scale. Twenty percent of survey respondents indicate the profession was somewhat innovative, assigning a 3 on the five-point scale. The remaining four percent of park and recreation leaders do not see the profession as having been innovative during the pandemic.

A smaller majority of park and recreation leaders describe their **own** agencies as having been innovative in response to the pandemic. Sixty-two percent of park and recreation leaders assigned a 4 or 5 on a five-point scale when rating how innovative their agencies' response was to the COVID-19 pandemic. Another 28 percent of survey respondents gave their agencies a 3 on the five-point scale, while fewer than one in 10 indicate their agencies were not innovative in the face of the pandemic.

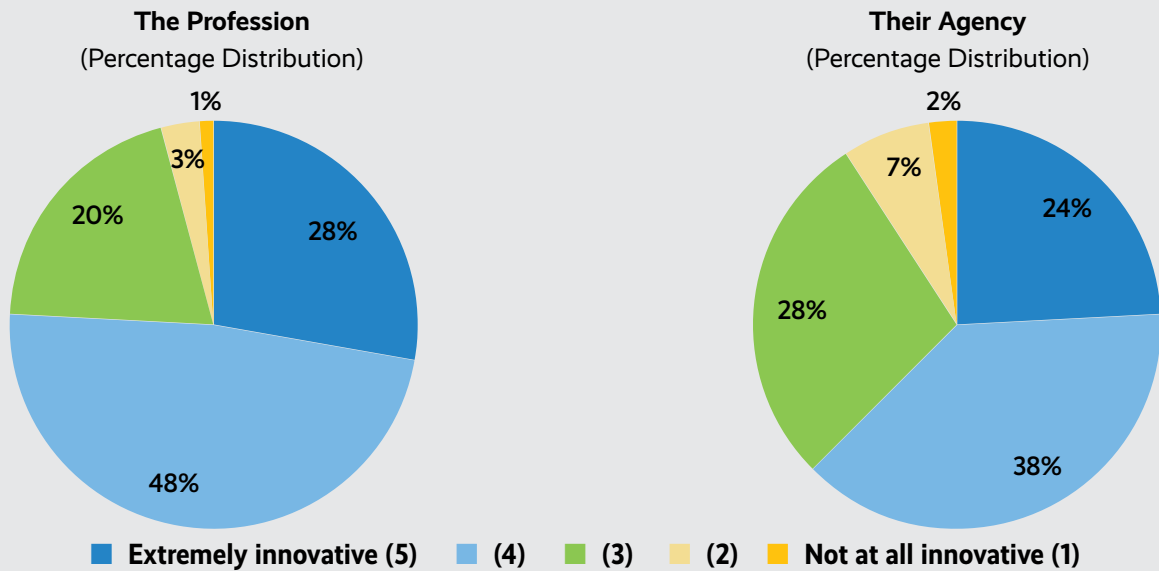


PHOTO COURTESY OF JAN WIRTZ

Twin brothers, wearing hats and sunglasses, pose and smile while in kayaks on the Willamette River in Lake Oswego, Oregon, surrounded by other kayakers.

76 Percent of Park and Recreation Professionals Agree the Profession Was Innovative in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic; 3 in 5 Indicate Their Agencies Were Innovative

(Percentage Distribution)*



*Data may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Beyond being innovative, many organizations — including park and recreation agencies — needed to be resilient in the face of the many challenges they confronted during the public health emergency. This resiliency included the ability of agencies to anticipate, prepare for, respond to and adapt to incremental changes and sudden disruptions in order to survive and prosper. Simple examples of this were adjusting to ever-changing public health recommendations and local and state government edicts, adapting to dramatic cuts in agency funding (at least during the early days of the pandemic), and supporting the mental health of agency staff.

A large majority of park and recreation leaders describe the profession as having been resilient during the COVID-19 pandemic. Eighty-two percent of park and recreation leaders gave

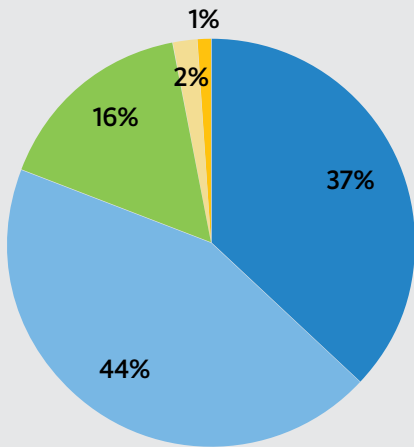
the profession a 4 or 5 on a five-point scale regarding its resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. One in six survey respondents indicate the profession was somewhat resilient (a ranking of 3 on the five-point scale), while a mere three percent characterize the industry as not having been resilient at all during the pandemic.

Similarly, more than three in four park and recreation leaders indicate their organizations were resilient in delivering on their core mission during the COVID-19 pandemic, assigning a 4 or 5 on a five-point scale. Seventeen percent of survey respondents rate their agencies' resilience a 3 on the five-point scale, while only five percent see their agencies as not having been resilient at all during the COVID-19 pandemic.

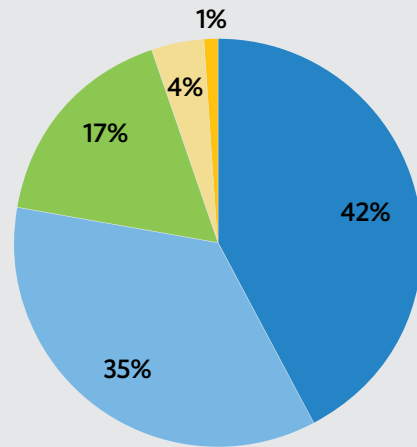
Park and Recreation Professionals Indicate the Profession and Their Agencies Were Resilient in Delivering on Their Core Mission During the COVID-19 Pandemic

(Percentage Distribution)*

The Profession
(Percentage Distribution)



Their Agency
(Percentage Distribution)



■ Exceptionally resilient (5) ■ (4) ■ (3) ■ (2) ■ Not at all resilient (1)

*Data may not add to 100% due to rounding.



Community members skate through Bienville Square in Mobile, Alabama.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE DUMAS

Operational Status Currently Compared to Prior to the COVID-19 Pandemic

Most park and recreation agencies currently have the same or greater capacity to address critical community needs and fulfill their mission as they did prior to the pandemic. Forty-four percent of park and recreation leaders indicate their agencies' current capacity to address critical community needs is at the same level as before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, while 39 percent indicate that their agencies' current capacity is greater. Eighteen percent of respondents report that their agencies have less capacity to address critical community needs.

Similarly, 43 percent of survey respondents report that their agencies' capacity to fulfill their mission currently matches that of pre-pandemic levels, while 35 percent indicate their agencies' capacity has expanded relative to that before the pandemic. Twenty-three percent of respondents report that their agencies have less capacity to fulfill their mission.

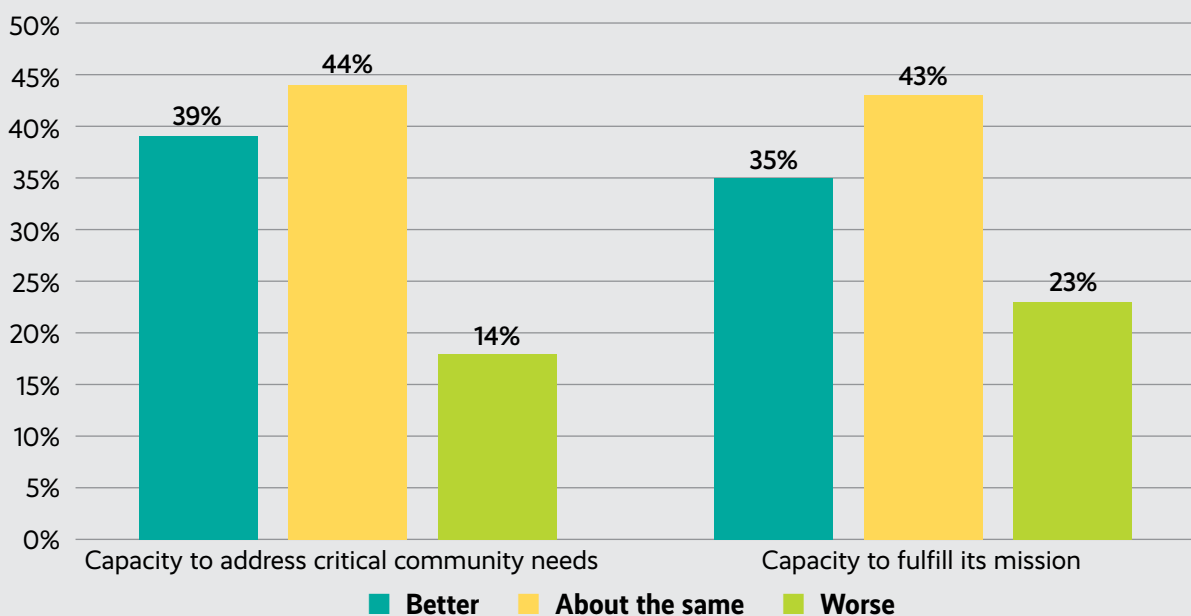


PHOTO COURTESY OF SAINT LOUIS TORCHBEARERS

A young man works with a mentor on a computer in St. Louis, Missouri.

Most Agencies Have the Same or Greater Capacity to Address Critical Community Needs and Fulfill Their Mission Compared to Pre-Pandemic Levels

(Percentage Distribution)



History is full of examples of the financial and resource strain suffered by park and recreation agencies during recessions and other times of budgetary stress. A [2017 NRPA survey](#) presented mayors, county executives and city managers with a hypothetical situation in which they needed to “pull back” on spending in their jurisdictions. They indicated their park and recreation agencies would bear the greatest share of spending cuts among 10 local government agencies to help balance their jurisdictions’ budgets. More recently, [The Pennsylvania State University researchers](#) found that no local government service suffered a larger percentage operating budget decline than had parks and recreation as a result of the Great Recession. That funding did not fully recover — after inflation adjustments — until 2019, only to decline again during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The economic turmoil resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic also, at first, had a severe impact on local park and recreation agency budgets. A [late-June 2020 NRPA survey](#) found that two-thirds of agencies suffered operating budget cuts in response to the pandemic that had started just a few months earlier. But thanks to pandemic restrictions loosening and an unexpected

robust housing market (which boosted local tax revenue collections), many agencies saw their financial fortunes reverse.

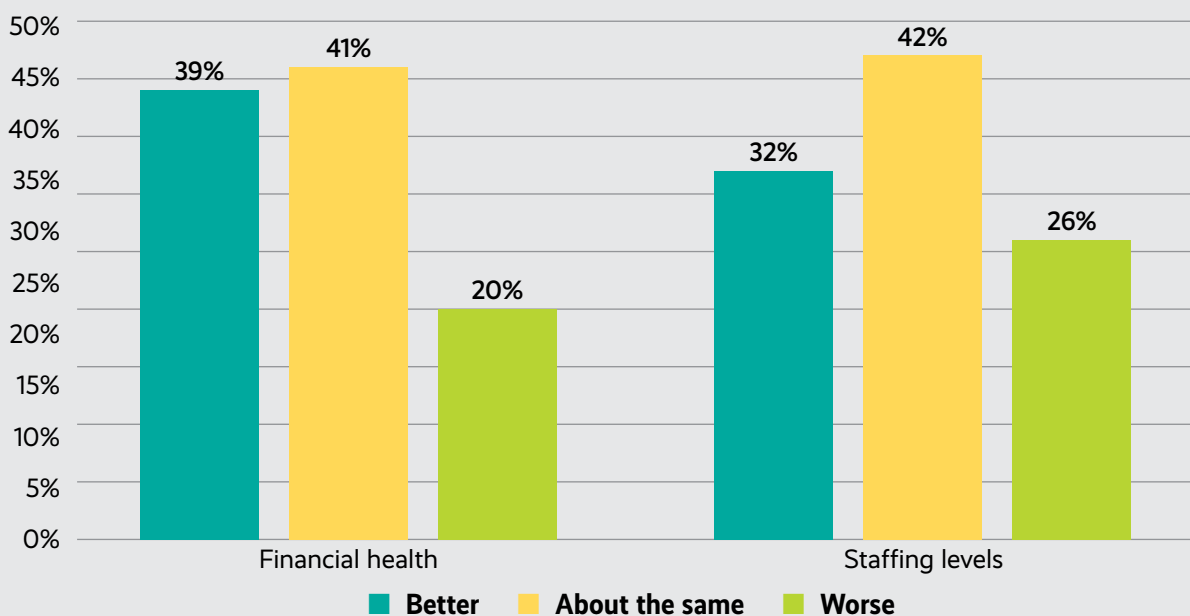
In fact, most agencies’ financial standing and staffing levels currently match or exceed those before the COVID-19 pandemic. Two in five park and recreation leaders report that their agencies’ financial health is better today than before the pandemic, while 41 percent of survey respondents indicate their agencies’ financial health matches pre-pandemic levels. One in five agencies is in a worse financial standing compared with that at the start of the pandemic.

Park and recreation agency staffing levels mirror those of their financial standing, with three in four agencies’ employment levels matching or exceeding pre-pandemic levels. Specifically:

- 32 percent of agencies’ staffing levels are better than pre-pandemic levels
- 42 percent of agencies’ staffing levels match that of pre-pandemic levels
- 26 percent of agencies’ staffing levels are below pre-pandemic levels

Most Agencies’ Financial Health and Staffing Levels Match or Exceed Pre-Pandemic Levels

(Percentage Distribution)



Park Visitation and Program Participation During the COVID-19 Era

Parks, trails and other public open spaces were among the remaining respites available to people during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic. In [April 2020](#), when virtually every other form of recreation and physical activity was off limits, seven in eight park and recreation agencies had most/all of their parks open, and more than nine in 10 kept their trail networks available to the public. By late spring, many agencies were able to safely reopen their playgrounds, dog parks, basketball courts, playing fields, golf courses and beaches. In response, the public flocked to these outdoor amenities. The [2021 Engagement With Parks Report](#) found that from June 2020 to May 2021, more than 260 million people enjoyed the amenities and programming provided by their local park and recreation agencies.

Four in five park and recreation leaders report that park visitation levels at the peak of the pandemic were higher than before the pandemic. Sixty percent of survey respondents characterize park visitation levels as having “increased significantly” compared to pre-pandemic levels; another 20 percent

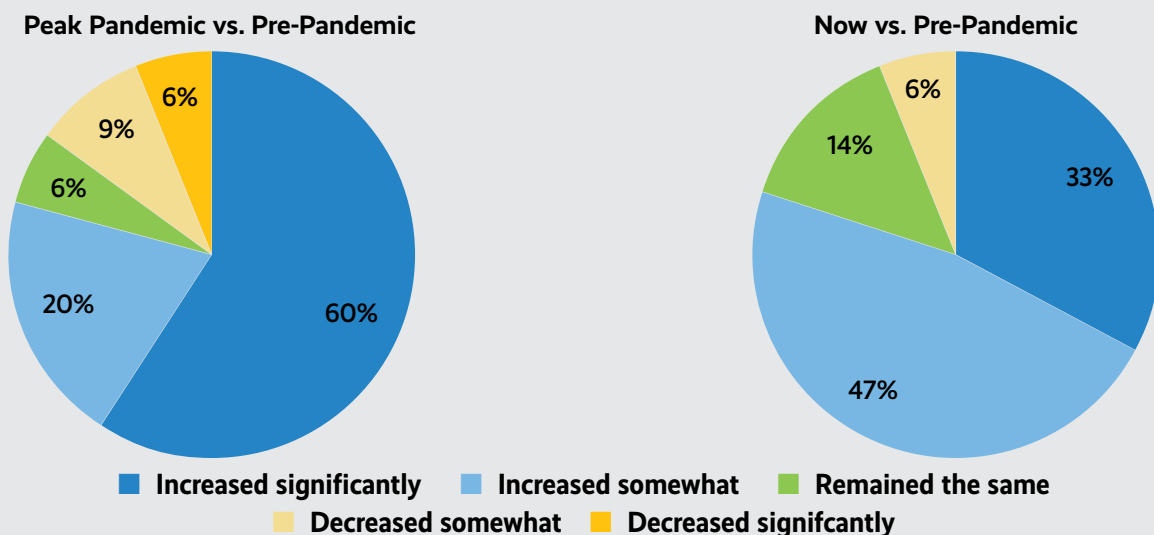
indicate that visitation increased “somewhat.” Six percent of agencies report peak pandemic park visitation frequency mirrored that of pre-pandemic levels, while 15 percent indicate their parks experienced fewer visits during the height of the pandemic.

The growth in park usage has demonstrated itself to be durable; 80 percent of park and recreation professionals report that park visitation levels currently are higher than pre-pandemic levels. A third of park and recreation leaders indicate current park visitation levels have “increased significantly” above those prior to the pandemic, while 47 percent report that usage has increased “somewhat.” (The [2022 Engagement With Parks Report](#) found that park and recreation usage had risen to 275 million people during the prior 12 months).

While much of parks and recreation’s outdoor infrastructure remained open, or quickly reopened, agencies did have to alter their programming significantly in order to offer safe, distance-spaced recreation opportunities. Agencies moved some in-person events to online platforms (e.g., classes shifted from community centers to YouTube), canceled offerings or launched new pandemic-specific programming.

The Rise in Park Visitation During the COVID-19 Pandemic Was Resilient

(Percentage Distribution of Park and Recreation Agencies)*



*Data may not add to 100% due to rounding.

PHOTO COURTESY OF CITY OF PERRIS



City of Perris, California, hosts a community engagement event at Cooper Creek Park.

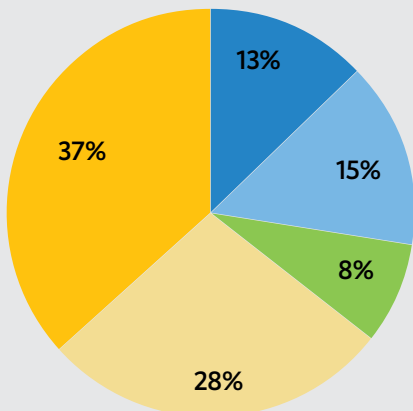
The result of these adjustments at many agencies was a significant drop in park and recreation programming participation. Two-thirds of park and recreation leaders report that participation in their agencies' programming fell during the height of the pandemic. Thirty-seven percent of leaders characterize the decline in programming participation as "signif-

icant," while 28 percent indicate program participation had fallen "somewhat." Program participation increased at 28 percent of agencies, including at 13 percent of agencies where the number of participants increased "significantly." Currently, program participation meets or exceeds pre-pandemic levels at 70 percent of agencies.

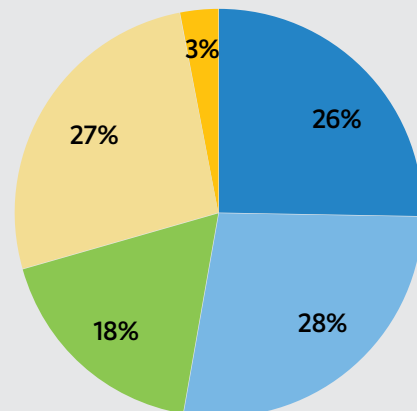
Park and Recreation Program Participation Plummeted During the Pandemic in Many Areas, but Has Since Recovered at Most Agencies

(Percentage Distribution of Park and Recreation Agencies)*

Peak Pandemic vs. Pre-Pandemic



Now vs. Pre-Pandemic



■ Increased significantly
 ■ Increased somewhat
 ■ Remained the same
■ Decreased somewhat
 ■ Decreased significantly

*Data may not add to 100% due to rounding.

Budget and Funding Impacts

As noted above, park and recreation agency budgets typically are among the first cut during times of recession. The first months of the pandemic were no exception: two-thirds of agencies experienced operating budget cuts. But budgets at many agencies rebounded quickly as local government budgets recovered thanks to real estate and sales tax receipts holding firm (or even growing in some localities). Also supporting agency budgets were federal government economic stimuli that included financial support for local and state governments.

Currently, just more than half of park and recreation agencies have larger operating budgets than before the pandemic. On average, park and recreation agency budgets are 4.35 percent larger than they were prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Slightly more than half of park and recreation leaders report that their agencies' operating budgets are larger today than they were before the pandemic. This includes:

- At least a 20 percent increase in operating budgets (cited by six percent of respondents)

- 10 to 19 percent increase (12 percent)
- Five to nine percent increase (20 percent)
- One to four percent increase (14 percent)

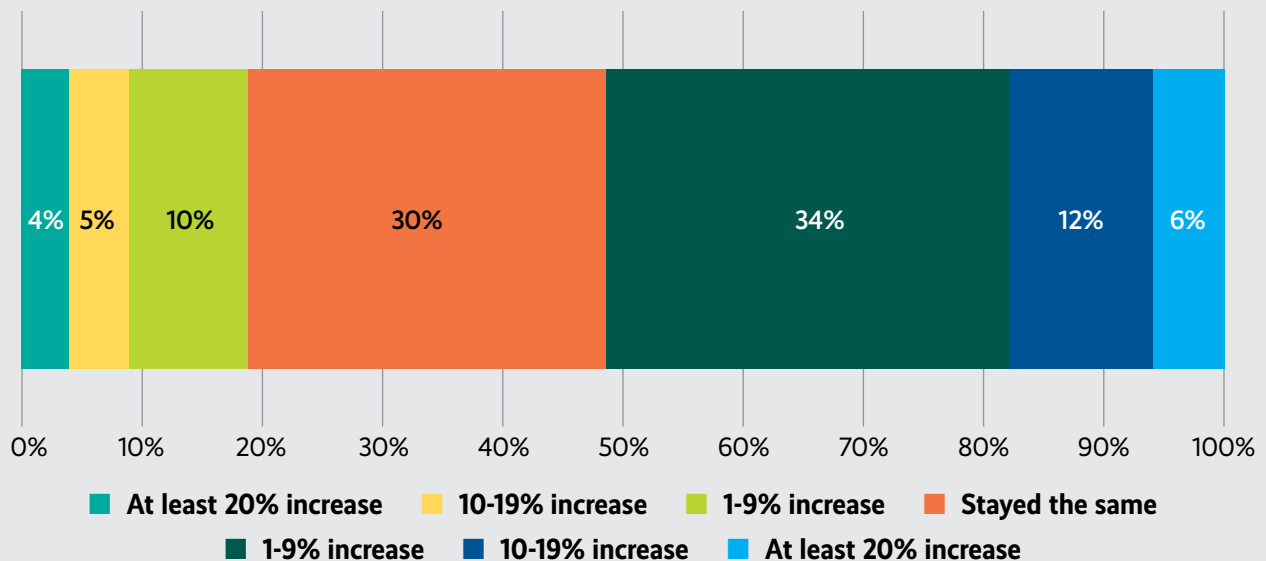
Thirty percent of park and recreation agency operating budgets match those before the pandemic, while one in five agencies currently operates with smaller budgets compared to before the pandemic. This includes:

- At least a 20 percent decrease in operating budgets (cited by four percent of respondents)
- 10 to 19 percent decrease (five percent)
- Five to nine percent decrease (six percent)
- One to four percent decrease (four percent)

In response to the public health emergency and economic fallout resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, Congress and the White House enacted several economic stimulus bills. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) provided for \$2.2 trillion in economic stimulus in 2020. Following the CARES Act was the American Rescue Plan

Park and Recreation Agency Funding Is, on Average, 4.35 Percent Higher Than Pre-Pandemic Levels

(Percentage Distribution)





Dancers from Ballet Folklórico de Austin wear traditional, colorful attire and dance for a crowd of onlookers at Moody Amphitheater at Waterloo Park in Austin, Texas.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SUZANNE CORDEIRO

Act of 2021 (APRA) with \$1.9 trillion of additional economic stimulus, including funds targeted to state, local and Tribal governments to support their response to and recovery from the COVID-19 public health emergency. Sixty-eight percent of park and recreation leaders indicate their agencies received or planned to receive CARES and/or ARPA relief funds.

Funding Advocacy and Community Vocalness During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Park and recreation funding relies on vibrant support from public officials. [NRPA Park Metrics](#) data reveal that approximately 60 percent of park and recreation agency operating budgets come from general fund tax support with dedicated levies and taxes making up another 10 percent of agency funding. Park and recreation agencies frequently compete for operating budget funding with other government services, such as public safety, schools and public works. Advocacy and

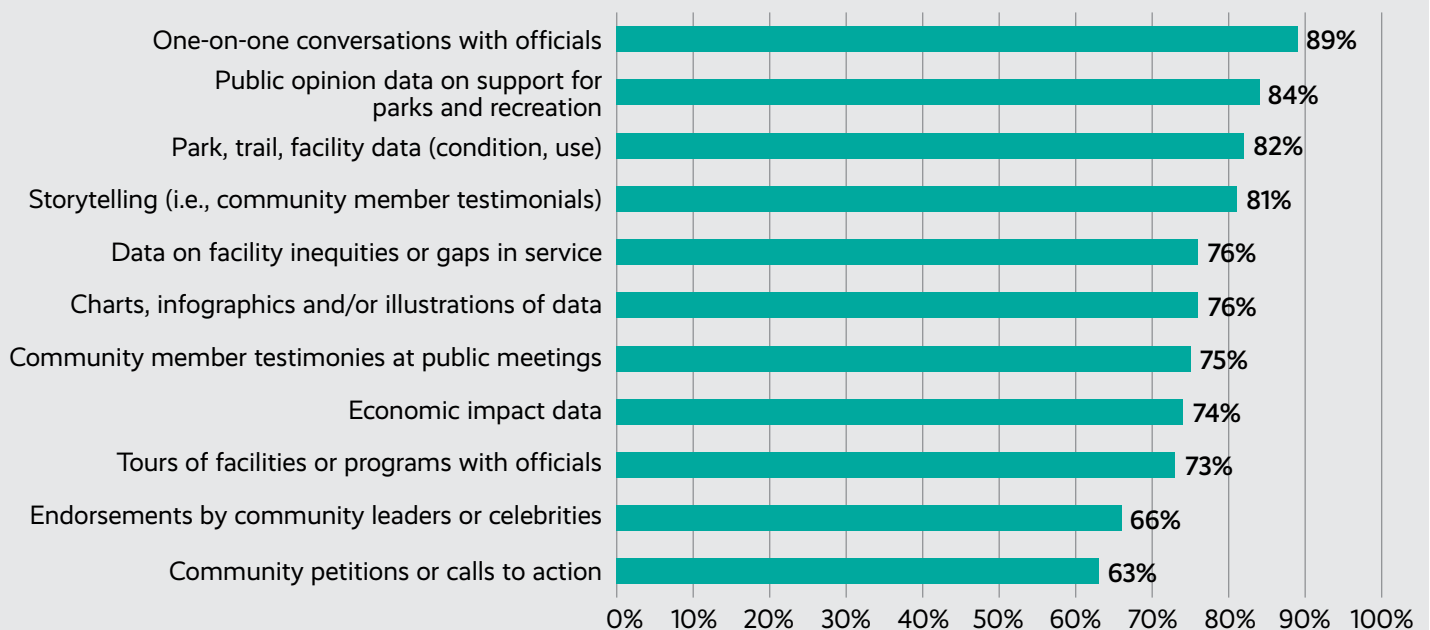
communication strategies are critical parts of park and recreation leaders' efforts in securing sufficient funding.

Park and recreation leaders utilized many strategies when advocating to local officials for greater funding and investment in their agencies during the COVID-19 pandemic. The most common strategy, utilized by 89 percent of survey respondents, focused on the personal touch — one-on-one conversations with public officials. Beyond these types of discussions, agency leaders invited local officials to tour their agencies' facilities to see the impact of COVID-19 up close (73 percent). Agency leaders also drew upon the experiences of residents through storytelling (81 percent) and community member testimonies at public meetings (75 percent).

Data was a critical storytelling tool on which park and recreation leaders relied to protect and build agency funding during the pandemic. The data focused on public opinions (84 percent), condition and use data of parks, trails and facilities (82 percent), facility inequities/gaps in services (76 percent), and economic impact (74 percent).

Park and Recreation Leaders Relied on Many Strategies to Support Agency Funding During the COVID-19 Pandemic

(Percentage Distribution)



Park and recreation leaders report that one-on-one conversations with local officials and having park/trail/facility condition and usage data were the most effective advocacy strategies during the COVID-19 pandemic. Seventy-eight percent of survey respondents indicate one-on-one conversations with officials were effective, including 37 percent who describe them as being “very effective.” Seventy-five percent of park and recreation leaders report that condition and usage data of parks, trails and facilities was an effective advocacy tool, including 40 percent who describe it as being “very effective.”

Personal endorsements and stories also proved to be valuable advocacy strategies. Seventy-two percent of park and recreation leaders report that storytelling (including testimony from community members) was effective. Following closely were endorsements from community leaders and celebrities (68 percent) and community member testimony at public meetings (67 percent).

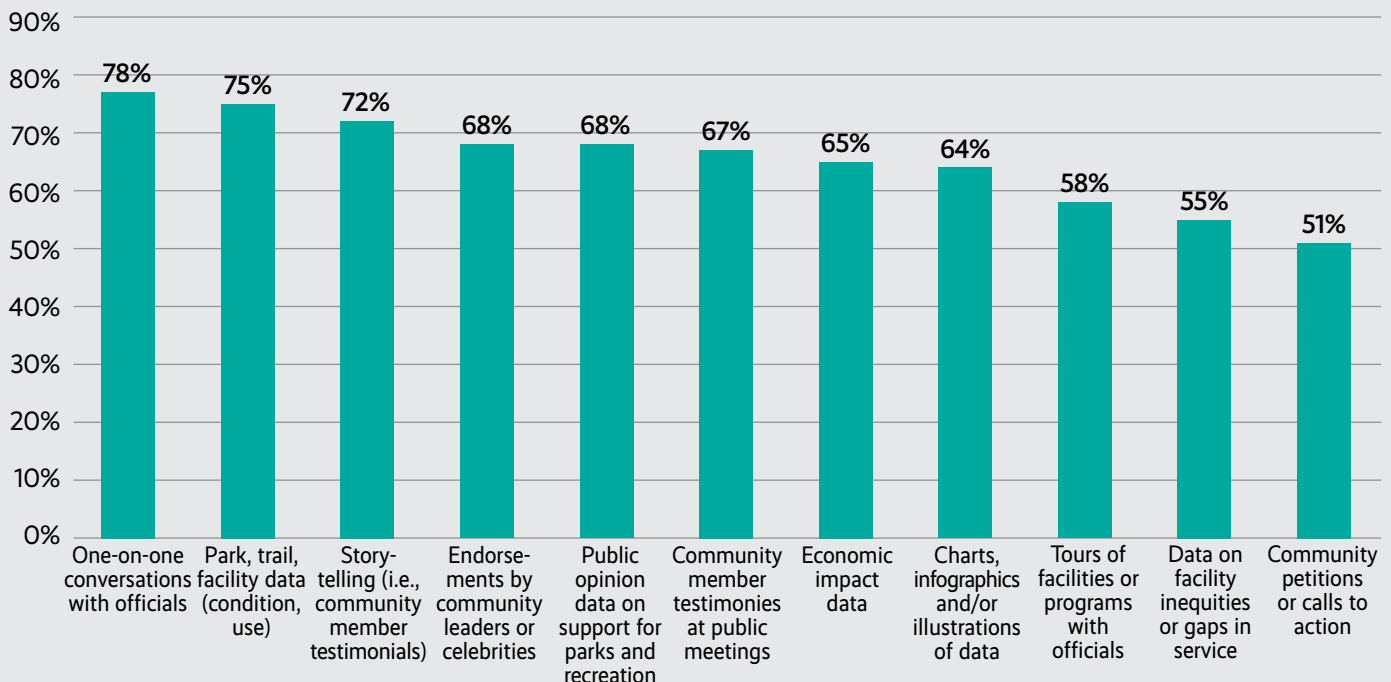
Also effective was the use of data regarding:

- Public opinion surveys (cited by 68 percent of respondents)
- Economic impact (65 percent)
- Charts/infographics/illustrations of data (64 percent)

Political support for parks and recreation starts with robust community support, particularly when the public advocates for parks and recreation to their city’s mayor, county executive, council members and other political leaders. Four in 10 park and recreation leaders describe the public as being vocal in their support for agency funding. Another 25 percent of survey respondents indicate their constituents are “somewhat” vocal, while the remaining 36 percent perceive the public as vocal in support for agency funding.

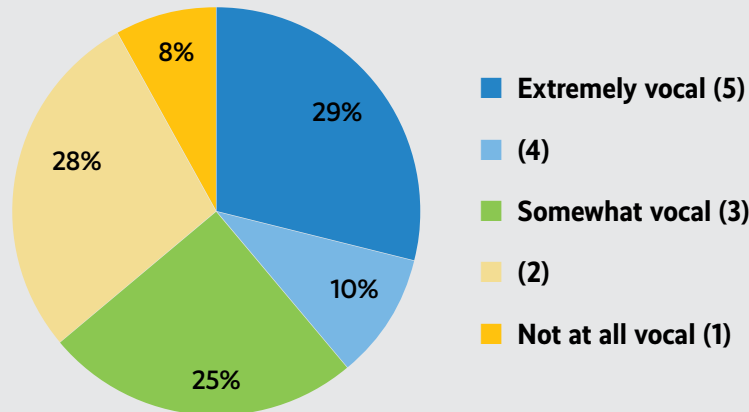
One-on-One Conversations With Public Officials and Sharing Condition and Use Data Were the Most Effective Advocacy Strategies During the COVID-19 Pandemic

(Percent of Respondents Rating the Tactic’s Effectiveness as Either a “4” or “5” on a Five-Point Scale)



4 in 10 Park and Recreation Leaders Indicate Their Communities Are Vocal in the Support for Agency Funding

(Percentage Distribution of Park and Recreation Agencies)



Children participate in a sack race across a field in Natchez, Mississippi.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NATCHEZ PARKS AND RECREATION

Partnerships and New Roles/ Responsibilities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Forty-five percent of park and recreation leaders report that their agencies assumed new roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. These new responsibilities included:

- COVID-19 healthcare (at 32 percent of agencies), such as providing space for personal protective equipment distribution, testing and vaccination clinics
- Community support and well-being (30 percent), including opening up recreation and community centers to serve as emergency shelters and coordinating the distribution of food
- Childcare services (14 percent), such as providing childcare for essential workers and space for hybrid learning childcare
- COVID-19 logistics (nine percent), including helping monitor compliance for public building entrances and offering the use of agency registration software for COVID-19 shot scheduling
- School district support (eight percent), such as using agency facilities for remote learning centers and delivering school lunches
- Intra-organizational responsibilities (eight percent), including providing additional facility maintenance and clean-up

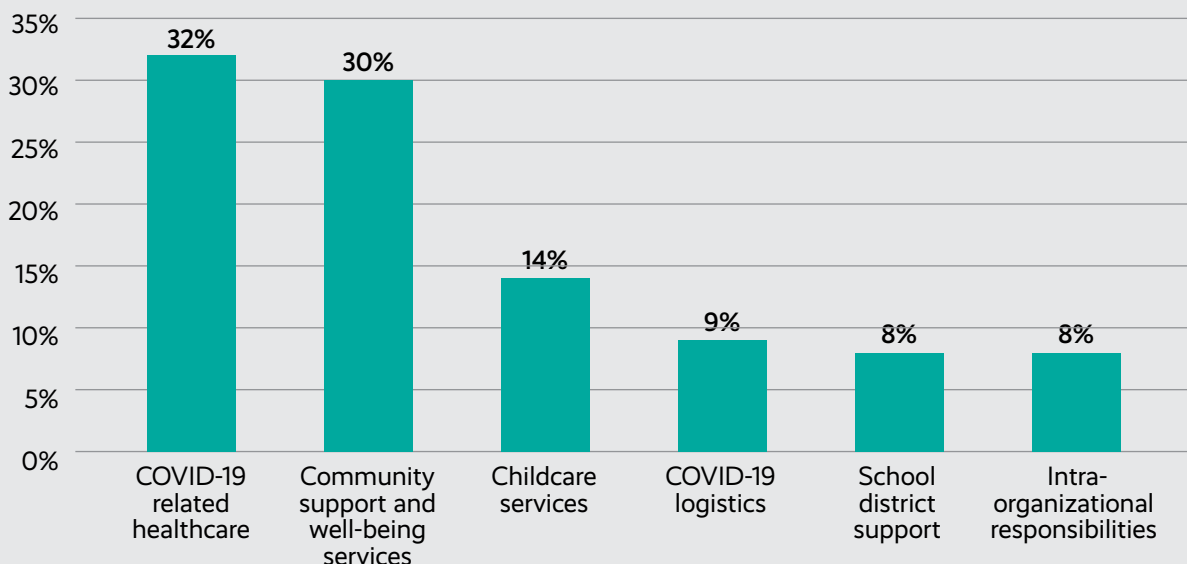


Smiling children enjoy a playground in Miami-Dade County, Florida.

PHOTO COURTESY OF MIAMI-DADE PARKS

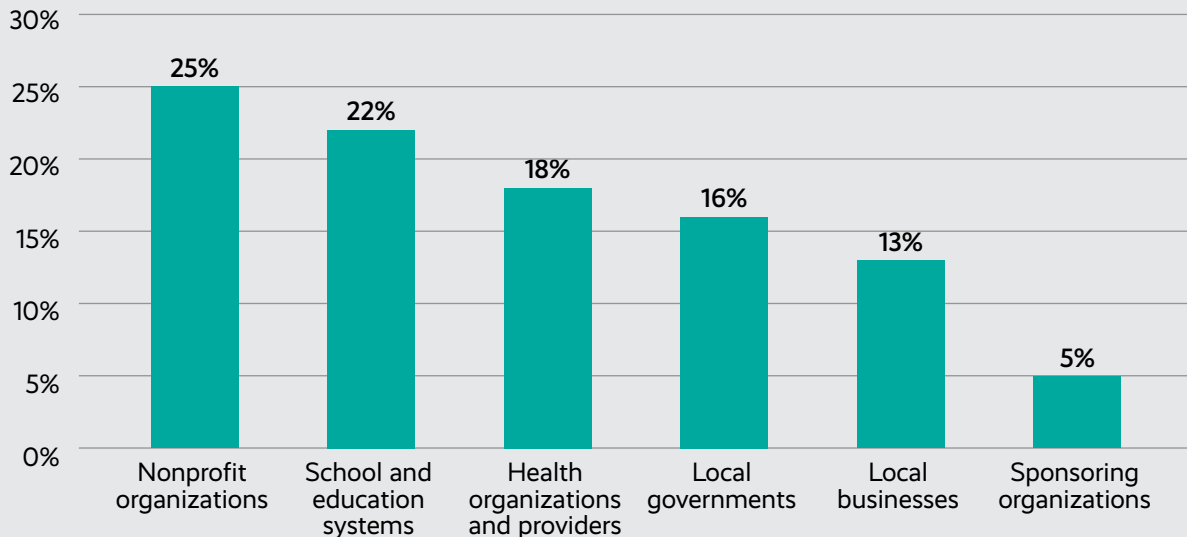
Nearly Half of Park and Recreation Agencies Assumed New Roles and Responsibilities During the COVID-19 Pandemic

(Percentage Distribution)



42 Percent of Park and Recreation Agencies Developed New Partnerships During the COVID-19 Pandemic

(Percent of Agencies)



Supporting healthy, resilient communities does not stop at the local park and recreation agency level. Developing and nurturing partnerships are critical in achieving this important goal. During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, park and recreation agencies collaborated with other government departments, local nonprofits and community-based organizations to leverage resources throughout the public health crisis. In many cases, these partnerships continue today — a positive legacy of the pandemic.

More than two in five park and recreation leaders indicate that their agencies established new partnerships as a part of their COVID-19 pandemic response. The most common new partners were:

- Nonprofit organizations (cited by 25 percent of respondents), such as food-share programs, churches and YMCAs
- School districts and other education systems (22 percent)
- Hospitals and other healthcare providers (18 percent)
- Other local government departments (16 percent), such as public health departments
- Local businesses (13 percent)

Conclusion

The response by park and recreation professionals and their agencies during the pandemic highlighted how their work is essential to vibrant, healthy and equitable communities. Thanks to the hard work of the more than 160,000 full-time park and recreation professionals, along with hundreds of thousands of part-time and volunteer workers, agencies across the nation quickly pivoted resources and programming to support the public health emergency response. This flexibility enabled park and recreation professionals to keep their outdoor infrastructure open and safe, so that millions of people had opportunities for physical activity.

The pandemic's legacy on parks and recreation includes new responsibilities assumed by and partnerships nurtured by agencies across the nation. Even though staffing and funding did not suffer lasting cuts typically experienced during previous recessions, most agencies continue to operate without the financial support needed to fully deliver on their mission.

This report highlights parks and recreation's contributions to a community's public health emergency response and its lasting impact. In addition to this report, NRPA has produced several resources that take a closer look at how parks and recreation has changed in recent years. These include:

- *Parks and Recreation: Advancing Community Health and Well-Being*, which focuses on how park and recreation professionals are tackling the ever-expanding health and wellness needs of their communities, including programming, education, innovations and health equity.
- The *2020, 2021 and 2022 Engagement With Parks Reports*, which track how people across the United States interact with parks and recreation every day.
- *COVID-19 and Parks and Recreation: Response and Recovery*, which showcases the role parks and recreation played and continues to play throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrates its impact on local agencies, and highlights policy changes to support investment in parks and recreation.



PHOTO COURTESY OF HOWARD COUNTY RECREATION AND PARKS

A young child and two adults follow a nature story walk in Howard County, Maryland.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the park and recreation professionals and their agencies that completed the survey, providing the data that served as the basis of this report. Thank you to Kevin Roth, Melissa May, Andrew J. Mowen, Sammie Powers, Nick Pitas, Alex Caraynoff, Danielle Doll, Lindsay Collins, Vitisia Paynich, Kim Mabon and Kate Anderson for making this report possible. Thank you also to the many park and recreation agencies that contributed the images featured throughout this report.

About NRPA

The 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. We conduct 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 sustainable 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.

Teammates pose after a basketball game in Henderson, Nevada.





NATIONAL RECREATION
AND PARK ASSOCIATION

22377 Belmont Ridge Road, Ashburn, VA 20148
800.626.NRPA (6772) | nrpa.org