Public Parks

C-

GRADE COMPARISON

2025: C-

2021: D+

Photo: Acadia National Park; Forest Putnam

PUBLIC PARKS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Parks, forests, and other public spaces in America improve the mental and physical health of those who visit, create jobs, and support the overall well-being of communities. Parks promote higher property values, sometimes increasing real estate prices by 8%–10% for nearby homes,[1] help improve drinking water sources, moderate heat islands, and make significant contributions to stormwater management. Although park systems have recently received significant investment from the federal government, deferred maintenance has continued to rise. Meanwhile, parks continue to face challenges posed by workforce shortages as they simultaneously experience record visitation numbers.

Recently, the federal government has prioritized investments in public lands through the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA), the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), and the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA). These investments are expanding access, updating aged systems, and growing park inventory. Advances in technology have improved asset management and allowed park authorities to better consider overall life-cycle cost estimates for park assets.

BACKGROUND

Our nation's parks are owned and operated by a variety of government entities ranging from federal agencies like the National Park Service (NPS) and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), to states, regional authorities, counties, cities, and townships. These parks are vital for the economic prosperity of communities across the country. As national park tourism continues to grow, so do the economic outputs. In 2023, 325 million visitors to national parks spent an estimated $26.4 billion in local gateway regions, supporting 415,000 jobs, and generating $55.6 billion in gross output to the economy.[2] In the prior year, visitors spent an estimated $23.9 billion in gateway regions, supporting 378,000 jobs and generating $50.3 billion in total economic output.[3]

National Park Service Yearly Visitation

Year	Amount Spent	Jobs Supported	Gross Economic Output
2023	$26.4 B	415,000	$55.6 B
2022	$23.9 B	378,000	$50.3 B

Recreational sites in the USACE portfolio continue to grow, with visitors spending $13.6 billion in regions near USACE-managed lands/waterways in 2023, an increase from $11 billion in 2019.[4] The most significant economic impact comes from local public parks and recreation

agencies, which generated more than $201 billion in economic activity and supported almost 1.1 million jobs in 2021, compared to $166 billion in economic activity in 2017.[5] Outdoor recreation accounts for 2.2% of the overall U.S. gross domestic product (GDP), more significant than vehicle manufacturing or air transportation. In comparison, only 0.2% of the federal budget is allocated to outdoor recreation; to match outdoor recreation's contribution to GDP, federal spending would have to increase 13.5 times.[6]

CAPACITY AND CONDITION

Since more state and national parks have been established to accommodate increased visitation, overall capacity has remained relatively level. However, increased visitation has added additional stress to park infrastructure such as roads, bridges, and buildings. On average, park and recreation agencies across the country provide one park for every 2,386 residents, with 10.6 acres of parkland per 1,000 residents.[7] Park acreage per resident varies tremendously. For instance, among the 15 cities with the most parkland per 1,000 residents (including federal, state, county, metro, and city parks), Anchorage, AK, leads with more than 3,000 acres, followed by Chesapeake, VA, with 230 acres, and Nashville, TN, in 15th place with 35 acres.[8]

The NPS currently manages 429 recreation areas, including parks, national forests, national monuments, and national wildlife preservation areas, as well as over 75,000 constructed assets ranging from visitor centers and utility systems to roads, bridges, and trails. Altogether, these recreation areas cover over 85 million acres, about the area of California,[9] and welcomed 325 million visitors in 2023.[10] In 2020, visitation declined dramatically to 237 million due to the COVID-19 pandemic but has steadily increased since then. While visitation to national parks declined during 2020, local parks saw large increases in visitation. A recent Federal Lands Transportation Program report lists 57% of paved roads in national parks in good condition, 30% in fair condition, and 13% as poor. The same report listed 66% of bridges in fair condition, 31% in good condition, and 3% in poor condition.[11] In comparison, 39% of major roads in the U.S. are listed as in poor condition, and 49% of bridges are in fair condition.[12]

Federally operated parks range from the 13-million-acre Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve in Alaska to the 0.02-acre Thaddeus Kosciuszko National Memorial in Pennsylvania. Altogether, facilities maintained by the NPS include over 5,500 miles of paved roads, 17,000 miles of trails, and 25,000 buildings. Despite the vast total national parkland acreage, the most popular national parks have had to limit visitation due to visitor demand outpacing resources.[13] Prominent and famous national parks are seeing record numbers of visitors, while lesser-known parks have experienced decreased visitation. This discrepancy leads to increased stress on resources that could be mitigated by encouraging exploration of lesser-known destinations.

Top 15 cities with most parkland per 1,000 residents

CITY	ACRES PER 1,000
Anchorage, AK	3,022
Chesapeake, VA	229
Scottsdale, AZ	128
Fremont, CA	93
Jacksonville, FL	85.6
Honolulu, HI	65
New Orleans, LA	64
North Las Vegas, NV	59
Virginia Beach, VA	56
Santa Clarita, CA	48
El Paso, TX	43
Albuquerque, NM	38
Kansas City, MO	36
Oklahoma City, OK	36
Nashville, TN	35

Source: Trust for Public Lands, 2024 Acreage and Park System Highlights

The USACE trails the NPS in total annual visitors, receiving 268 million visits in 2023.[14] The 4,746 USACE-operated recreational areas cover 4 million acres of land and an additional 5 million acres of water, with 41,000 miles of shoreline and almost 8,000 miles of trails. Over 90% of USACE recreation areas are within 50 miles of a major metropolitan center.[15]

State parks received 867 million visitors in 2023, an increase of approximately 60 million from 2017.[16] The number of state parks has increased by 15%, or just over 1,300 parks, since 2021; totaling 9,817 state-operated parks in 2023 covering over 20 million acres of land.[17] A survey conducted by the National Association of State Park Directors (NASPD) reported the condition of state park roads as 4.8 out of 10 and water infrastructure as 5 out of 10.[18] The rating has been consistent since the last survey in 2021. The same survey found that over half of state park directors believe park facilities are unable to accommodate the significant increase in visitation in recent years. With increased park visitation, park facilities have experienced additional use, which has led to a faster decline in quality. State parks also struggle to contend with challenges introduced by extreme weather, which require workers to spend more time responding to these events than keeping up with routine maintenance.

At the local level, park accessibility varies significantly. Data from the Trust for Public Land (TPL) indicates that 100 million people, including 28 million children, do not have easy walking access to parks.[19, 20] Local parks serving primarily low-income households are, on average, four times smaller than parks that serve higher-income households.[21] Among the 100 most populated cities in the U.S., the percentage of the population able to access a park within a 10-minute walk ranges from almost 100% to just 25%, with the median rate for all cities and towns in the U.S. being 55%.[22]

Photo: Yellowstone National Park; Gina Beim

FUNDING AND FUTURE NEED

Federal programs targeted toward public parks in addition to the standard NPS budget have attempted to keep pace with overall needs, yet deferred maintenance continues to increase and funding from certain government programs will expire in the coming years. The NPS was funded at $3.32 billion in Fiscal Year 2024, a 4% cut compared to FY23 appropriations. In addition to this discretionary budget, the NPS mandatory appropriations for FY24 is estimated to be $1.2 billion, a 2% decrease from FY23.[23]

Road and bridge improvements within the NPS are partially supported through funding from the U.S. Department of Transportation and fees from sources such as fossil fuel mining rights. Annual appropriations, combined with grant funding, form the majority of funds for repair, rehabilitation, operations, and maintenance.

The 2021 IIJA increased funding for the NPS under the Federal Lands Transportation Program by 22% to over $1.73 billion over 5 years, expiring in 2026. These funds are used to repair and upgrade transportation infrastructure. The IIJA also made billions of dollars in discretionary and formula grant programs available to be used for resiliency projects, bridge replacements, and wildlife crossings, in addition to other projects.

The 2020 GAOA significantly changed how funding is handled for conservation and provides complete and permanent funding to the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) of $900 million annually.[24] Established by Congress in 1964 to protect natural areas, water, and cultural heritage, the LWCF is fully funded by earnings from offshore oil and gas leasing. These funds supply grants for states and local communities and assist the federal government in acquiring lands and waters to extend and provide access to national parks.[25] In 2023 the NPS received $461 million from the LWCF for land acquisition.[26] LWCF state grants are now being used to extend public access to parks and establish parks in underserved communities.

To address deferred maintenance in national parks, the GAOA created a National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund to direct up to $9.5 billion over the 5-year lifespan of the law. This funding comes from unobligated federal mineral revenues, such as royalties from onshore and offshore oil, gas, and renewable energy development on public lands. Owing to the size of the NPS network, the cost of deferred maintenance in national parks has steadily increased in recent years to $23.3 billion at the end of FY23,[27] up from $15.3 billion in 2020 (adjusted to 2023 dollars). The increase is primarily because the NPS incorporated the cost associated with best practices design and construction management into their estimation to provide a more accurate sense of the total backlog.[28] This update will better track total life-cycle costs, leading to a more efficient use of resources.

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States have implemented innovative funding mechanisms for their parks. Some states have dedicated funding sources for recreation by using a portion of lottery proceeds, redirecting sales taxes on sporting goods, or dipping into real estate tax revenues. These funding tools have had varying levels of success. Revenues from federal excise taxes on shooting, hunting, fishing, and boating equipment provided almost $1.4 billion dollars to state parks in 2024.[29,30] Despite these funding mechanisms, state park deferred maintenance has increased since 2021 when state park directors reported a nationwide total deferred maintenance amount of $6.5 billion (in 2024 dollars), which increased to a total of $15.9 billion in 2024, or an average of $354 million per state.[31]

City parks have seen increased levels of investment over the past three years. In 2022, the 100 most populous cities directed $9.7 billion to their parks. In 2023, the same cities invested $11.2 billion after adjusting for inflation.[32] The Trust for Public Land notes that about 90% of spending on city parks comes from local governments. These funding increases help to meet a deferred maintenance backlog for municipal parks estimated in 2022 to total $65 billion nationwide.[33] It should be noted that data regarding city park maintenance backlogs are extremely limited, and the figure above only represents the top 100 most populous cities.

ARPA has been a critical funding source for city and county parks. States, cities, and counties across the country have used funding from ARPA to improve access to local parks. The largest disbursement of funds for public space improvements went to the City of Los Angeles, which received $59 million in funding to renovate and improve parks, green spaces, and recreational facilities servicing low-income neighborhoods.[34] Funds from the U.S. Department of Transportation's Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) program, have also improved state and local parks. Cleveland Metroparks was recently awarded $19.5 million from the RAISE program to extend trail systems, creating connectivity and access for residents.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

National, state, regional, and municipal parks currently deal with significant workforce challenges that affect the ability of parks to maintain and improve conditions. Many states have increased staffing over the last 5–10 years, but staffing has been unable to keep pace with increased visitation rates and compensation remains relatively low, leading to high attrition rates.[35] National parks are facing a similar challenge, with the park service having to cut 16% of their full-time staff due to budget constraints.[36] The 2022 Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) allocated $500 million to the NPS in an effort to alleviate some of those budget constraints, yet hiring remains slow. As of May 2024, the NPS has dedicated about $21 million toward hiring, meaning the majority of the available funding, which is set to expire in 2030, might not get used at the current pace. To assist with attrition concerns, the NPS has created the Facilities Workforce Career Academy (FWCA) to provide skills-based training to current and prospective NPS employees. This program helps the NPS meet a need for skilled workers and provides career growth opportunities to current NPS employees.

The two accounts within the NPS budget that address regular and deferred maintenance have seen a 17% increase in inflation-adjusted dollars between 2013 and 2023.[37] About 84% of 2023 NPS spending went to the Operation of National Park Systems (ONPS) account to support day-to-day activities, programs, and services.[38] The next largest account, construction, received 7% of available funding for repair, replacement, and improvement of existing facilities, as well as new construction.

The NPS also engages in partnerships with outside organizations, who assume some asset maintenance responsibilities. The NPS also leases assets to other parties, and in exchange, the lessee rehabilitates or maintains the asset. Many NPS units engage volunteer groups to perform maintenance duties; if the NPS could increase its volunteers to 600,000 by 2028, it would result in 40 million hours of volunteer labor valued at $802.6 million over 10 years.

Photo: Grand Teton National Park; Gina Beim

Like national parks, state and local parks also rely on volunteers ("friends of," "conservancy for") organizations to supplement maintenance tasks such as the removal of invasive species. Regional park agencies ("Metroparks") and municipalities tend to maintain the state department of transportation-rated roads and bridges within their properties, in addition to smaller nonrated bridges. They do not inspect buildings, pavement, dams, storm sewers, and other infrastructure assets. On average, state park and recreation agencies dedicate 46% of their operating budget to park management and maintenance.[39]

Photo: Zion National Park; Karen Donohue

PUBLIC SAFETY AND RESILIENCE

In addition to being beneficial for public mental and physical health, parks are a vital tool for a community's resilience. Parks are being used to manage stormwater overflow during extreme weather events and are protecting communities from dangerous flooding. Efforts are being made in some flood-prone areas to return the landscape to its original state and thereby act as a buffer between bodies of water and communities. Parks in this way contribute to the sustainability of communities and mitigate the effects of climate change.

State park directors continue to note concerns over the impact of xtreme weather on park systems. Increased coastal flooding, algae blooms, and invasive species are affecting park access and conditions.

Eighty-four percent of U.S. adults support their local parks and recreation agencies undertaking or continuing projects on environmental provisions or natural disaster prevention.[42] Green and open spaces, including floodplains, floodways, and estuaries, are now embraced as part of a total parks program.

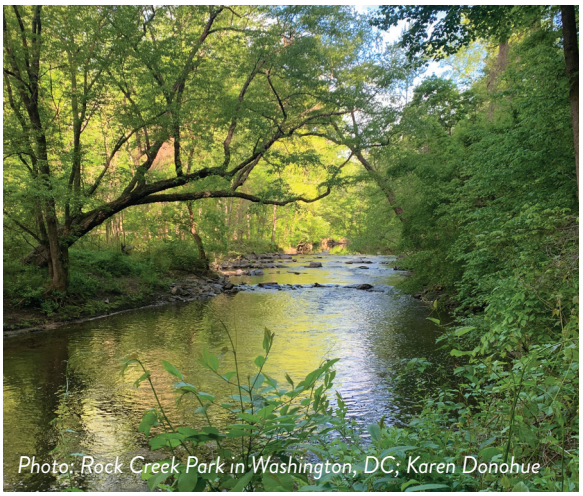


Photo: Rock Creek Park in Washington, DC; Karen Donohue

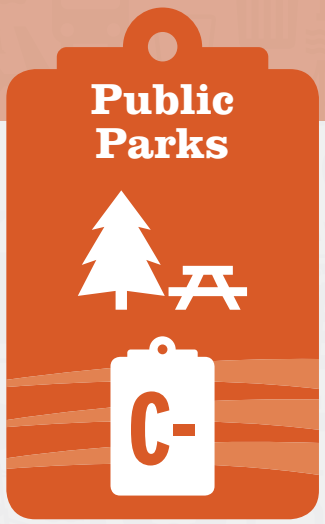
The East Side Coastal Resiliency Project in New York City aims to enhance parks while creating a 2.4-mile-long flexible flood barrier. This $1.5 billion project will provide flood protection and improve open spaces for more than 120,000 New Yorkers.[40] The ResilienCity Park Project in Hoboken, NJ, which was partially funded by the IIJA, is another project designed to serve its community, by transforming a former industrial site into a public park. The park will include a multipurpose athletic field, a basketball court, and other public spaces that double as a stormwater detention basin. Below ground stormwater infrastructure will also be added to allow the park to detain up to 2 million gallons of stormwater that would otherwise flood city streets.[41]

Photo: New York City; Carl Newton

When considering safety in public parks, adequate lighting is routinely cited by community members as critical. However, park services must weigh the impacts of increased illumination on local ecosystems with community needs. Los Angeles has instituted a program called Summer Night Lights (SNL), which adds lighting, keeps parks open later, and brings in community social workers to prevent gang-related violence. At the eight parks where SNL was introduced in 2008, gang violence had reportedly dropped to its lowest level since 1967.[44] In addition to increased lighting, parks are using more security cameras to enhance safety. Security cameras are increasingly viable as manufacturing costs have dropped and many are now solar powered.

INNOVATION

Parks are increasingly used for multiple functions. State and local parks are partnering with other agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private entities to find innovative ways to make green spaces accessible and desirable to every community member. The National Recreation and Parks Association has identified five state park systems in Colorado, Michigan, Minnesota, South Dakota, and Georgia, and one national park, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore in Michigan, that have programs to loan off-road, tracked, powered wheelchairs to persons with disabilities.Some state parks are working with geographic information system (GIS) mapping technology to efficiently track all projects underway within the park system, including park, facility, and infrastructure needs. The GIS databases assist with asset management, task and revenue tracking, and provide information for data-driven decision-making on future development and infrastructure repairs based on metrics like return on investment and infrastructure condition. GIS also allows park management agencies to map park trails quickly and efficiently. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources highlighted this using GIS to accurately map its 5,000 miles of hiking trails across 75 state parks.[45] The National Recreation and Parks Association has noted increased use of GIS in combination with the creation of digital twin maps, three-dimensional models, used to accurately represent the physical environment.



RECOMMENDATIONS TO RAISE THE GRADE

- Maintain recent federal funding included in the GAOA and IIJA and enhance federal programs in the National Park Service to better match increasing visitation, growing number of parks and park land, and increasing deferred maintenance costs.
- Identify and secure new avenues of funding available to state parks and local governments, allowing agencies to be more competitive for skilled/experienced employees in the job market.
- Enact federal legislation to permit federal agencies, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, to retain user fees in the park system for use at parks and recreation facilities.
- Encourage the use of GIS and other technologies to assist with asset management and enhance park user experience.
- Increase funding at all levels of government for park projects that enhance resilience, reduce stormwater pollution, and protect drinking water sources.
- Encourage local, state, and federal parks to partner with other government agencies and outside entities to assist with asset maintenance and maximize park uses and benefits for local communities.
- Increase park accessibility for all ages, abilities, and income levels, including a focus on walkability and transit access to parks.
- Promote public awareness of lesser visited national parks to alleviate stress on the most popular parks, while also encouraging visits to state and local facilities.

Photo: Yosemite National Park, Karen Donohue

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