



2022

The Canadian City Parks Report: Nurturing Relationships & Reciprocity

How collaboration, mindfulness, and power-sharing in parks can help nurture and repair relationships between ourselves, our communities, and the wider natural world.

park people
amis des parcs

Park People is a Canadian charity that supports and mobilizes people to help them activate the power of parks to improve the quality of life in cities across Canada.

We support a national network of park group volunteers and community organizers, non-profits, park professionals, and funders across Canada, through networking events, grants, toolkits, research, resources, and professional services.

Founded in 2011, Park People has since helped community park groups undertake more than 3,000 events supported by 23,000 volunteers. Thanks to our generous donors, we have directed investments of more than \$6 million in parks and park programming.

Through support from the Weston Family Foundation, we're able to bring you the fourth edition of our annual Canadian City Parks Report. The report tracks challenges, trends, and opportunities in Canadian city parks both through numbers and the stories that inspire action, progress, and shared learning.

Could you use Park People's support in activating the power of parks in your community?

Whether you're a park professional, a non-profit organization, or city staff, check out our [professional services](#) to learn more.

Or you can [email us](#) to chat.

Are you a park person? There are lots of ways to get involved:

[Sign up for our Newsletter](#)

[Join the Park People Network](#)

Use our [Research and Resources](#) to help you make awesome things happen in your park.

As pandemic restrictions are eased across Canada, city dwellers continue to flock to green spaces: now more than ever, equitable and inclusive access to urban parks is essential to the quality of life in Canadian cities.

Our foundation is honoured to support Park People as they work to foster the type of programming and community engagement that aligns with our mission, by supporting healthy ecosystems, and the collective well-being of all Canadians.

This fourth annual Canadian City Parks report synthesizes some of the lessons learned from the global pandemic, along with data collected from over 3,000 Canadians who participated in an online survey. The results shed light on current trends, opportunities, and challenges, and the report recommends adopting human-centred design to bring people together. The value of nature stewardship is a key takeaway—with so much time spent in green spaces, Canadians are eager to give back. There is also a more pronounced strategic focus on protecting and restoring biodiversity, and initiatives around reciprocity and new directions for Indigenous representation.

Investing in relationships is especially significant after so much time spent apart. Parks are wonderful communal spaces, and a vital connective thread for relationships between friends, family, community, and nature. As you will read, Park People are taking a proactive approach to prioritizing and reimagining our urban green spaces to ensure they are inclusive and accessible to all—but there is still much to learn.

My overall sentiment as we emerge from the pandemic is one of cautious optimism. This report left me with a sense of excitement at the possibility of positive systems change as we navigate ongoing challenges. Investing in innovation and learning will lead to transformation and deliver measurable impacts to the well-being of all Canadians. Thank you to the team at Park People for creating this annual snapshot of the state of Canada’s city park system, we all benefit from your incredible planning and dedication. We would also like to thank the constellation of contributors, volunteers, and staff from coast to coast to coast who shared stories, experiences, and data. The report itself is an incubator for momentum and growth, and we are thrilled to be a part of the network of relationships that evolve from this collaborative process.



Weston Family Foundation

EMMA ADAMO - CHAIR
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Start Here

Executive Summary	5
.....
Acknowledgements	13
.....

Next Steps

Use this data	34
.....

Sections

Nature	19
.....
Inclusion	22
.....
Growth	24
.....
Collaboration	28
.....
Activation	31
.....

Two years of social distancing during a pandemic has highlighted how important relationships are in our lives—relationships to our friends and family, but also to the natural world and our wider community.

And yet all around us are examples of relationships that need repairing and nurturing, evidenced by persistent systemic inequities, social division, climate change, and mental health challenges.

As the common spaces in our cities, parks play an important role in relationship-building. They are where we go to take time for ourselves, but also to meet people we know, and to bask in a shared moment with those we don't. Sometimes this is uncomfortable, but from discomfort often comes growth. City parks are an exercise in learning to share—and sometimes give up—space.

This year's report starts to move beyond the impacts of the pandemic to understand how the lessons we've learned over the last two years can point a way forward to more equitable and creative ways of planning, designing, and programming parks.

In researching the stories in this year's Canadian City Parks Report, we saw countless examples of how this is being done across Canada. We heard stories from community members, non-profits, and cities who are leading innovative park programs that bring people together across difference, recognize and repair wrongs, and highlight the joy that comes from feeling truly connected to nature and each other.

This year you'll find stories on nature connection, decolonization, community collaborations, creative funding, and parks as sites of community care.

Strong relationships are built on reciprocity. As Carolynne Crawley, interviewed in this year's report for our story on nature connectedness, pointed out: "as people we have an individual and collective responsibility to be in a good relationship with the Earth, just as well as being in a good relationship with ourselves and each other." This notion of reciprocity, grounded in Indigenous teachings, is built on a practice of gratitude, on being aware of and responsive to the gifts that our environment and others provide for us.

We think parks are the perfect place to model reciprocity and gratitude. We hope that through the stories in this year's report you find both the inspiration and the challenge to do so in your own communities. After two years apart, it's time to come together again.

*Below we provide a brief overview of what we learned this year through our research, interviews, and surveys of both participating cities and the Canadian public. We encourage you to **read the stories** found in each section to learn more and **visit the City Data** page to find relevant statistics and specific data from each participating city.*

The popularity of parks

Canadian cities continued to see an increase in the amount of time people spend in parks

—and new statistics from our survey of over 3,000 Canadian city residents show this heightened use may just be the beginning.

While 55% of city residents said they spent more time in parks in the last year than the year before, 58% also said that they would like to spend even more time in parks. The benefit that city dwellers get from parks is also rising. This year, survey respondents who said parks benefited their mental health increased from 85% last year to 94% this year, and from 81% to 91% for physical health.

This desire to spend more time in parks and increased self-reported benefits may stem from the new activities that people discovered they liked doing during the pandemic. From more frequent walks along trails, to eating outdoors, to spending more time in naturalized areas, city residents are using their parks more than ever for things they were not doing before the pandemic.



Giving back to nature

It's no surprise that people continued to seek out urban nature as a place to decompress during the pandemic.

But all of that extra time spent outdoors has translated into interest in giving back, including participating in nature stewardship. This isn't surprising since research shows that people who feel more connected to nature tend to exhibit greater interest in environmentally sustainable behaviours.

Overall, 87% of city residents said they felt connected to nature, while only 4% said they felt disconnected—a finding that was fairly stable across race and income. However, nature connectedness levels grew with age, starting with 83% for 18-29 year olds and rising to 94% for those 65 and older. Many sought this connection close to home, with 71% of respondents saying that naturalized spaces within a 10-minute walk were most helpful.

Cities are also responding to this heightened interest in natural areas with 57% saying they have, or are planning to, expand nature stewardship programming to meet demand.

We heard it's important to recognize and honour the role of Indigenous Peoples as the inherent caretakers of the lands at the core of nature education and stewardship activities. This includes centring the work of Indigenous organizations by supporting their programming and building meaningful relationships.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ★ **Address barriers to accessing urban nature** such as lack of time, inadequate access to nearby natural areas, and accessibility challenges. Prioritize investment in naturalized spaces in neighbourhood parks as well as providing tips for experiencing nature from home, free transit passes to larger parks, and the ability to call in to an audio-guided outdoor nature walk.
- ★ **Promote reciprocity in nature programming and education** by relaying both the benefits of nature connection for personal wellness and the ways in which we can give back through participating in stewardship activities, being mindful of our personal impact, or simply picking up trash along our favourite trail.



Read the stories in the **Nature** section to learn more.

Centring Indigenous leadership

Decolonization and Indigenous representation and leadership in city parks continues to grow as a priority for cities with some recent initiatives pointing to a new way.

However, as our stories in this year's report point out, there is still a long way to go and much to learn as we move forward by addressing past and current wrongs, including examining how city parks could take part in the Land Back movement.

This year's report features stories that look at new park projects planned with Indigenous communities, such as **kihciy askiy park** in Edmonton, renaming projects that were sparked and driven by sustained Indigenous-led advocacy, and the cultural and natural importance of Indigenous plants.

Indeed, 76% of cities said that embedding a reconciliation/decolonization lens in park planning and policy became a greater priority in the last year, with 57% indicating they had started or completed a process to rename parks to honour Indigenous histories and continued presence.

City residents are also supportive of these measures. 59% said they supported the renaming of parks, while 87% wanted to see more Indigenous plants in parks and 68% were in favour of more representation of Indigenous culture in park designs.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ★ **Ensure Indigenous consultation is at the forefront of park improvement initiatives.** Indigenous Peoples must be engaged as rights-holders, whose territories city parks are built on. This means learning Indigenous processes and cultures in the territory your city is in.
- ★ **Returning to and conserving native plant species must be a priority** and this work must be done in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples who hold knowledge about these plants and how they fit into a larger kinship network of species.



Read the stories in the **Inclusion section** to learn more.

Paying for it

Even before the pandemic, park budgets were perennially strained. In fact, if you've read the past three years of the Canadian City Parks Report, this point may start to sound like a broken record.

86% of cities reported insufficient operating budgets and 97% said aging infrastructure was a challenge.

While budgets remained stable, cities were asked to do more—sometimes much more—as parks departments took on the sanitizing and monitoring of parks for public health.

Two-thirds of city residents consider their parks well cared for, although 87% said they wanted more public funding to be invested in them, particularly for maintenance and higher quality designs.

Planning for the future is both a challenge and an opportunity coming out of the pandemic.

93% of cities said the pandemic delayed or raised the cost of park development projects, making park renewals more expensive—a challenge that will have longer term ramifications.

However, many are now ramping up equity-focused planning efforts that will direct investments to the communities that need them most and that have been historically underserved. And new investments from the federal government, such as funding for a network of urban national parks through Parks Canada, will bring additional resources.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ★ **Embed equity within park investment** by layering data such as demographics, historical investment patterns, and environmental measures like tree canopy coverage into park planning. This allows cities to prioritize investment in parks beyond just measures of development growth, which may leave communities that don't see as much development behind over time.
- ★ **Consider more participatory funding options for public spaces**, allowing community members to actively collaborate through participatory budgeting or flexible grants. Plan adequate staff time, however, for community engagement and internal discussions in order to move ahead projects that may not fit within the city's typical approach.



Read the stories in the **Growth** section to learn more.

Making engagement meaningful

The pandemic changed the landscape of park engagement, disrupting traditional in-person methods like town halls and challenging cities to find creative approaches to involving community members.

Cities rose to the challenge, with 92% reporting the pandemic had changed how they engaged communities.

However, many city residents still don't feel like they have a say. Just 22% said they felt they have a voice or the ability to influence what goes on in their local parks, listing as the main barriers: not being sure how to get involved, unsure whether their participation would make a difference, and a lack of time to participate. These barriers were more prominent among respondents who identified as BIPOC, highlighting the need for deeper relationship-building with equity-deserving groups.

This is a need that some cities are beginning to address through ongoing engagement with communities, outside of project-based consultation processes. 44% of community park groups said they have a strong relationship with their municipality, and 83% said they'd be interested in deepening that relationship, highlighting that communities are eager to collaborate on shaping their parks.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ★ **Take a proactive and neighbourhood-based approach** to ongoing relationship-building with local groups to stay on the pulse of emerging needs and ensure there is a strong foundation of trust when formal engagement processes happen.
- ★ **Evaluate internal policies and practices** to ensure there are protocols to meaningfully address barriers to participation, provide appropriate compensation to community partners, sustain relationships in the event of staff turnover, and formalize sharing back outcomes with engagement participants.



Read the stories in the **Collaboration** section to learn more.

Resetting the approach to houselessness

The visibility and rising challenge of houselessness in parks is top of mind for both cities and urban residents, but there is also a lot of empathy in the public and creative initiatives from community organizations and cities that model new approaches.

After a wave of violent and widely critiqued encampment evictions during the summer of 2021, there has been a move driven by community advocacy toward rethinking the role of parks departments in responding to houselessness. This has resulted in some cities beginning to embrace a human rights-based approach to encampments by providing amenities and services in parks and deepening engagement with unhoused residents.

However, there is still much work to be done. 90% of cities listed houselessness in parks as a challenge this year, the same percentage as in 2021. Park staff often feel they are not well equipped to deal with this challenge, with 56% of cities listing a lack of knowledge about houselessness and 48% noting a lack of overall strategic direction beyond managing day-to-day realities as obstacles in this work. The top strategies cities reported using were bylaw enforcement (76%) and designing parks with a crime prevention lens (66%) with approaches involving direct engagement with unhoused communities being far less common (10%).

While narratives on encampments often focus on conflict, we found that 62% of city residents who reported noticing encampment(s) in their local parks did not feel that it impacted their use of parks negatively. This shows there is an opportunity to reset this conversation towards more just and inclusive approaches that centre building relationships, sharing space, and supporting the well-being of unhoused residents in parks.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- ★ **Invest in both the material and social well-being of unhoused communities** by ensuring basic amenities and services are in place in parks, but also designing park programming that taps into people's skills, interests, and creativity. Co-design programs with unhoused neighbours to ensure the activities will not result in displacement or discomfort.
- ★ **Approach encampments through a human-centred rather than operational lens**, leaning into the strengths of park professionals as connectors and convenors. Build relationships with unhoused residents and community partners, while fostering an organizational culture of openness, reflection and learning throughout the process.



Read the stories in the **Activation** section to learn more.

Ready to dive into this year's Canadian City Parks Report?



**Read all the stories or head straight to the data from our
national surveys of municipalities and city residents.**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A report this size is a team effort.

First, huge thanks to the dozens of city staff that worked with us to compile city data, answer our questions, and respond to interview requests. We know this takes a tremendous amount of work and this report is not possible without you.

We'd also like to thank the park professionals, community members, non-profit staff, and academic researchers who provided their time and expertise, including Dr. Alexandra Flynn, Anna Huard, Azkaa Rahman, Carolynne Crawley, Elder Cecelia Brooks, Chelsea Burden, Daniel Fusca, Daniela Mergarten, Diana Chan McNally, Donnie Rosa, Dr. Elizabeth Nisbet, Eva Riccius, Hannah Leyland, Isabelle Gaudette, Jennifer Chan, Jill MacLachlan, Joely BigEagle-Kequahtoway, Julie Sénéchal, Kari Krogh, Koa Thornhill, Lori Ellis, Miriam Padolsky, Niall Lobley, Pablo Muñoz, Paul Gauthier, Robbie Epp, Sara Udow, Sarah Ehmke, Shannon Riley, Tammy Harkey, Trevor Klein, Zahra Ebrahim, and Zamani Ra.

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Insurance



Lastly, but not least, thank you to the entire Park People team for their support and input.



Canada-wide Data

A round-up of data from our national surveys of 30 municipalities and over 3,000 residents of Canadian cities. To learn more about our process, check out the [Methodology section](#).

Trends

In looking at top trends this year, we're noticing a continued interest in park features that support daily life, including dog walking; growing, cooking or eating food; and getting some exercise on a multi-use trail.

In addition, there is increasing attention on the need for parks to support inclusion, through elements like universally accessible design and Indigenous programming.

We're also seeing a renewed interest in digital infrastructure, like free wi-fi in parks or park-based apps, which seemed to have waned during the pandemic. In 2020, 44% of cities mentioned that interest in digital infrastructure was increasing. This fell to just 26% in 2021, but has jumped back up to 48% this year.

We asked cities whether interest in the following park elements has increased, stayed about the same, or decreased over the past year.

.....

% OF CITIES SAID INTEREST IN X HAS:

.....

Increased

93%

off-leash dog areas

86%

food growing, cooking & selling opportunities (e.g., community gardens, edible orchards, farmers markets, bake ovens)

86%

multi-use trails (e.g., walking, cycling)

83%

Indigenous engagement/programming

79%

universally accessible designs

71%

naturalized areas in parks

59%

alcohol and substance use in parks

59%

adventure play (e.g., nature playgrounds, loose parts play)

55%

green infrastructure developments in parks (e.g., rain gardens and bioswales)

52%

unstructured spaces to just hang out (i.e., rather than participate in organized activities)

48%

volunteer-based natural stewardship and education opportunities (i.e., tree planting, invasive pulling, etc.)

45% said not changed
7% said decreased

48%

outdoor fitness equipment

45% said not changed
7% said decreased

.....

Stayed about the same

79%

privately-owned public space development (i.e., publicly accessible spaces secured by the municipality on privately owned land)

77%

non-profit partnerships to co-manage park operations, programming, or engagement

75%

private investments in parks (e.g., philanthropy, corporate sponsorships/donations)

69%

park friends groups (i.e., friends of X park)

52%

outdoor spaces for organized sports

52%

digital infrastructure (e.g., wi-fi, park-based apps)

Challenges

This year, many cities are experiencing challenges around maintaining parks to a high standard, with concerns around aging infrastructure and revitalizing parks to meet changing needs at the forefront. Cities are struggling to protect and enhance biodiversity and naturalized areas in parks, while those spaces are being threatened by climate change and extreme weather events.

While acquiring and expanding parkland to meet growth needs is an increasing challenge for cities (58% in 2021, 69% in 2022), this challenge isn't experienced evenly across the country. This year, 62% of cities indicated that this was a major challenge, 7% said it was a minor challenge, and 28% said it was not a significant challenge. In general, more urban and densely populated cities are seriously grappling with providing more green space to a growing population, while smaller cities in suburban or rural areas either still have room to grow or are already meeting their residents' green space needs.

.....
% OF CITIES SAID X WAS A CHALLENGE:

97%

Said aging infrastructure and asset management.

93%

revitalizing/redesigning parks to meet changing needs.

93%

addressing impacts from climate change and extreme weather damage (e.g., flooding, fires and droughts).

90%

houselessness in parks.

90%

protecting/enhancing biodiversity and natural environments.

86%

insufficient operating budget.

79%

engaging hard to reach groups.

76%

collecting data on park use.

69%

acquiring/expanding parkland to meet growth needs.

55%

addressing systemic inequities and discrimination in parks.

Covid-19 Impacts

As municipalities move into pandemic recovery, Covid-19's impacts on park planning, amenities, programs, operations and budgets remain at the fore. However, we're seeing cities shift from a focus on meeting immediate public safety needs like physical distancing, toward longer term planning based on new trends and demands emerging from the pandemic.

This includes expanding park maintenance and offerings, like making pilot programs spurred during the pandemic permanent or addressing the overuse of trails and natural areas through education and signage.

PARK BUDGETS AND PLANNING

93%

said Covid negatively impacted the municipality's parks capital budget and planning.

73%

said Covid negatively impacted park operating budgets.

ENGAGEMENT AND PROGRAMMING

92%

said that new park programs or pilots sparked by Covid have been extended or made permanent.

92%

said Covid changed the way the municipality engaged with communities about park projects (e.g., more intentional outreach to equity-seeking groups, more online methods).

76%

said that park use increased in 2021, compared to 2020.

48%

said the municipality offered social services in parks during the pandemic (e.g. pop-up food banks/distribution or vaccination clinics), either provided directly by the municipality or through a non-profit partner.

31%

said the municipality increased the presence of by-law officers in parks in 2021 to enforce physical distancing.

NATURE IMPACTS

72%

said the municipality had to address overuse of natural areas and/or trails during the pandemic due to increased visitors and use (e.g., through educational campaigns, signage, etc.).

59%

said the municipality expanded nature stewardship program offerings (e.g., tree planting, invasive pulling, guided walks) or is considering new/expanded natural stewardship program offerings due to increased interest since the pandemic.



Findings by theme

See the latest trends in Canadian city parks organized by five themes: nature, inclusion, growth, collaboration, and activation.

Nature Connection

In our survey of over 3,000 residents of Canadian cities, nearly half of respondents said that visiting naturalized areas for activities like hiking and bird-watching was a new habit they had picked up during the pandemic.



This time spent in nature is translating to a greater desire to give back to the places that nurtured us during the pandemic, with 57% of cities indicating they are creating new or expanded nature stewardship programs to respond to increased demand.

All of this is good news for Canadians—and for our planet. As we outline in the report, cultivating a greater sense of connection to nature grounded in reciprocity has a multitude of benefits, including boosting feelings of generosity towards others and heightening environmentally sustainable behaviours. When we feel that we are a part of nature, and not apart from it, we just feel better.

However, we also know that not everyone is able to experience urban nature in the same way, whether due to lack of time or access. Luckily, community leaders are helping to address these barriers, reminding us that we don't have to look far. As Zamani Ra, an environmental educator and founder of CEED Canada reminded us: we are nature ourselves. So if you can't take a hike, take a deep breath instead.

KEY INSIGHTS

- ★ **Nature connection is high among residents of Canadian cities.** On average, 87% of city residents said they feel connected to nature, including 48% who felt strongly connected. But nature connection seems to grow with age, starting with 83% for 18-29 year olds and rising to 94% for those 65 and older.
- ★ **Pandemic heightened interest in urban nature.** 48% of city residents said spending more time in naturalized spaces was a new activity they picked up during the pandemic. While positive, this did impact maintenance with 71% of cities saying they had to address overuse of natural areas and trails during the pandemic.
- ★ **Nearby nature is key.** Canadians strongly indicated they value nature experiences close to home, like smelling wildflowers, with 71% indicating visiting naturalized spaces within a 10-minute walk helped boost their sense of connection to nature, while just 50% listed traveling to larger spaces. Additionally, 63% of respondents said they wanted to see more native plant gardens and naturalized spaces within parks.

TAKE-AWAYS

1. **Address barriers to accessing urban nature** such as lack of time, inadequate access to nearby natural areas, and accessibility challenges. Prioritize investment in naturalized spaces in neighbourhood parks as well as providing tips for experiencing nature from home, free transit passes to larger parks, and the ability to call in to an audio-guided outdoor nature walk.
2. **Promote reciprocity in nature programming and education** by relaying both the benefits of

nature connection for personal wellness and the ways in which we can give back through participating in stewardship activities, being mindful of our personal impact, or simply picking up trash along our favourite trail.

- 3. Recognize and honour the role of Indigenous Peoples as the inherent caretakers of the land** at the core of nature education and stewardship programs. Centre the work of Indigenous leaders and organizations by supporting their programming and building meaningful relationships.

NATURE

Indicators

Through spending more time in parks over the past couple of years, city residents have come to recognize the immense value provided by urban nature.

Overall, people are visiting natural spaces more often, feeling more connected to nature, and want to see more naturalized spaces and plantings in their city parks. However, 90% of cities said protecting and enhancing natural spaces is a challenge and only 20% have a standalone biodiversity strategy in place. Intentional planning to ensure natural areas are managed in support of urban biodiversity will be important to meet the public's growing interest in connecting with nature through parks.

91%

of city residents said parks have had a positive impact on their connection to nature during the pandemic. This number was only 83% in 2021.

87%

of city residents report feeling connected to nature, with 48% indicating that they feel strongly connected to nature.

NATURE

67%

of cities have a climate change strategy in place that addresses parks through actions like enhancing parks and green spaces to support mitigation and protecting green and grey infrastructure from extreme weather events.

63%

of city residents would like to see more native plant gardens and naturalized spaces in parks.

54%

of city residents said that naturalized or "wild" parks or green spaces are the park spaces they visit most often, an increase of 20% from our 2021 report.

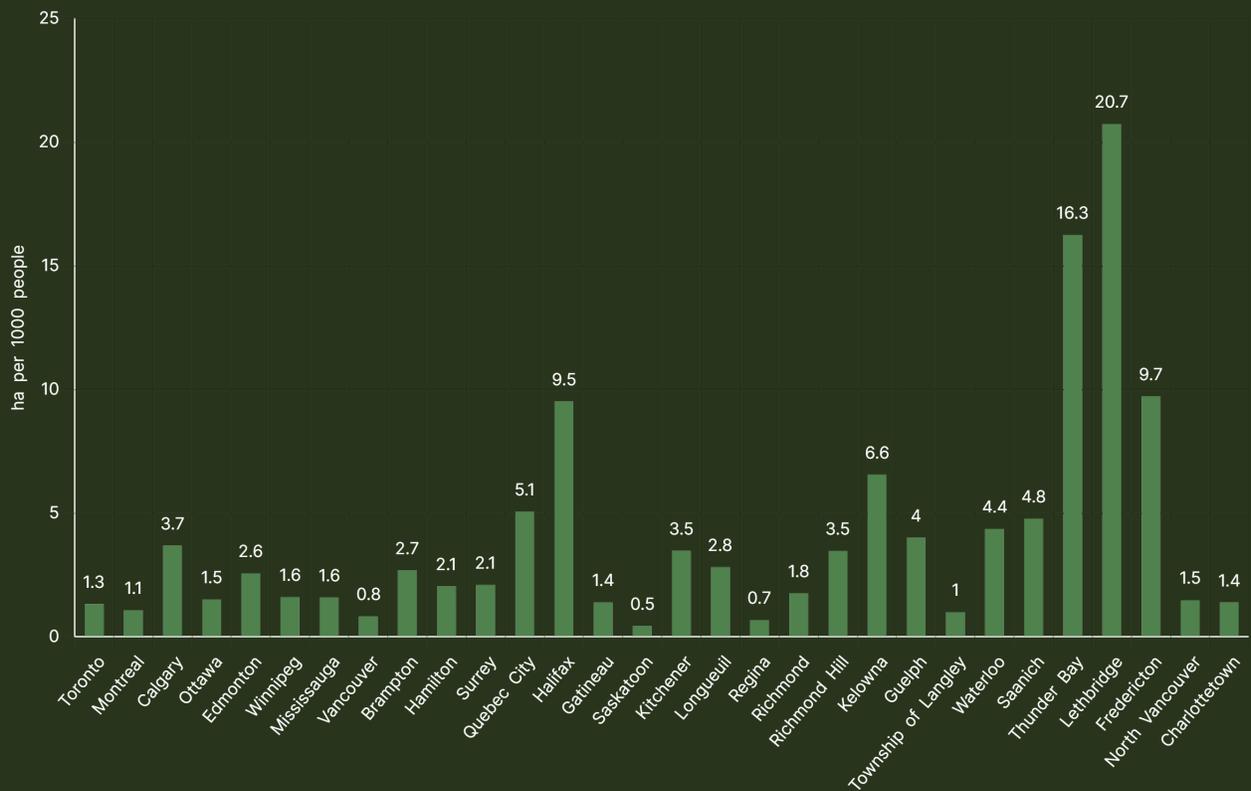
20%

of cities have a citywide biodiversity strategy and 60% of cities have biodiversity objectives embedded within other environmental plans.

Nature stories featuring expert interviews and leading practices from across Canada:

- **The Nourishment of Nature**
How we can foster a greater sense of connection to nature through awareness, reciprocity, and gratitude—and why that matters.
- **Cultivating Nature Connection Together**
How leaders from across the country are using different methods to promote a sense of connection to nature by meeting people where they're at.

Hectares of natural area / 1,000 people



Natural areas provide many benefits in cities, ranging from improving our air quality, providing habitats for flora and fauna to thrive, and enhancing connection to nature. On average, cities provide 4 ha of natural area per 1,000 residents, with natural areas making up 48% of cities' park systems. However, 90% of cities said that protecting and enhancing biodiversity and natural environments is a challenge, with some specifically citing damage from high use during the pandemic.

.....
Arranged by population size

Decolonization

The past year has demonstrated the ways in which parks are ideal spaces for decolonizing public spaces.

Parks are a site of gathering, and one of the few spaces left in a city that are free to access, making them an important places for transformative intercultural and intergenerational learning.

As the number of unmarked graves at residential school sites continue to grow, so does the urgency for work that holds up Indigenous Peoples and cultures.



In 2021, we witnessed an inspiring increase in Indigenous leadership through renaming parks, conducting educational programming, advising on native plant species, and bringing ceremonial practices into parks. These actions not only strengthen community connection, but also aid us in reckoning with and revisioning the way we've come to understand our history, and in turn, our future.

Perhaps the most important element of decolonizing park spaces is the way in which a city engages with the Indigenous community who has ancestral ties with the land. Centering Indigenous knowledges in everything from park development projects to returning to native plant growth has been the driving force towards more inclusive public spaces.

KEY INSIGHTS

- ★ **Native plant species are a must.** Second to year-round public washrooms in parks, respondents to our survey of residents in Canadian cities said they would like to see more native plant gardens and naturalized spaces in city parks. Further, 87% of respondents are in favor of returning to a more naturalized, native plant species biodiversity within parks.
- ★ **People are ready to let go of names from the past.** 59% of survey respondents said they are in favour of renaming city parks that are currently named after colonial figures, and instead, restore Indigenous place names. Alternatively, only 7% remained strongly against name changes.
- ★ **Representation can be an opportunity for learning.** 68% of city residents are in favor of seeing more Indigenous representation in park spaces, including increased Indigenous presence through signage, educational programming, and art installations, while 20% remained unsure.

TAKE-AWAYS

1. **Ensure Indigenous consultation is at the forefront of park improvement initiatives.** Indigenous Peoples must be engaged as rights-holders, whose territories city parks are built on. This means learning the Indigenous processes and cultures of the territory your city is in.
2. **Renaming city parks helps us better understand our histories** and learn about Indigenous processes of naming, both sacred and otherwise. This can include reclaiming existing place names or supporting Indigenous-led processes that allow the people of the land to provide a new name.

- 3. **Returning to and conserving native plant species must be a priority** and this work must be done in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples who hold knowledge about these plants and how they fit into a larger kinship network of species.

INCLUSION

Indicators

City residents feel strongly that parks should be spaces for all.

As our survey results made clear, people recognize we experience parks differently along lines of gender, race, age, income, ability, and more—and want everyone to feel welcome in parks and be able to access the amenities that they need. In particular, many city residents took notice of encampments and indicated an openness to sharing space with unhoused neighbours, and expressed growing interest in enhancing Indigenous representation in parks, including restoring Indigenous place names and native plant species.

87%

of city residents would like to see more Indigenous or native plants in parks.

77%

of city residents said they believe people experience parks differently based on aspects of their identity (e.g., race, gender, age).

68%

of city residents would like to see more Indigenous representation in parks through art, regional herbs and medicines, sculptures, or public signage.

59%

of city residents are in favour of renaming park spaces to restore Indigenous place names, with 16% against this practice, and the remaining unsure.

55%

of city residents who identify as having visible or invisible disabilities visit parks 2-3 times per week or more – 10% less than people who do not identify as having a disability (66%).

46%

of city residents have noticed the presence of encampments in parks in their municipality. Of these respondents, 62% reported no negative impact on their personal use of parks.

Inclusion stories featuring expert interviews and leading practices from across Canada:

- **Reclaiming Urban Spaces is a Decolonial Act**
Examining Prairie cities' efforts to decolonize park spaces and honour the Indigenous histories of the land they are built upon.
- **Engaging with the Rights of Native Plants in Parks:**
How cities can build better kinship in city parks through the conservation and reintroduction of native plants in collaboration with Indigenous Peoples.

Creative Funding

Doing more with less. That's been a key challenge we've heard from cities each year in the Canadian City Parks Report.

And this year is no different—in fact, many cities said that while the pandemic didn't result in budget cuts, they had to stretch their funding to cover additional public health-related costs.



Cities also reported that they've noticed residents now expect more from their parks in terms of amenities and quality—not surprising given the amount of time that people spent in parks during the last two years.

Meeting these needs will be a challenge. Covid-19 has impacted the construction of new and upgraded parks, lengthening timelines for completion and contributing to higher material costs, which could have consequences for how quickly cities can respond to changing needs moving forward.

Responding to resident needs isn't just about money, it's also about process. As we profile in this year's report, some cities are experimenting with participatory budgeting programs that allow residents more of a say on how dollars are spent and new granting programs that assist residents in creating dynamic public spaces.

KEY INSIGHTS

- ★ **Covid stretched budgets, but funding was stable.** 86% of cities said insufficient operating budgets were a challenge, but many noted Covid hadn't reduced available funds—just stretched them. Cities reported impacts including reduced park program offerings (65%), staffing levels (50%), and maintenance standards (42%).
- ★ **Cost and complexity of parks is rising.** 93% of cities said Covid impacted capital budgets, including delaying projects and increasing the cost of materials. This may have long-term impacts on park renewal, as 97% of cities also listed aging infrastructure as a challenge—the third year in a row this was a top concern.
- ★ **City residents support more public park funding.** 87% of city residents support more public funding for parks, including 36% who want investments prioritized for maintenance, 35% for higher quality designs, and 19% for community programming. Two-thirds of public survey respondents felt their parks were well-cared for, while 23% felt they were not.

TAKE-AWAYS

1. **Embed equity within park investment** by layering data such as demographics, historical investment patterns, and environmental measures like tree canopy coverage into park planning. This allows cities to prioritize investment in parks beyond just measures of development growth, which may leave communities that don't see as much development behind over time.
2. **Consider more participatory funding models for public spaces**, allowing community members to actively collaborate through participatory budgeting or flexible

grants. Plan adequate staff time for community engagement and internal discussions in order to move ahead projects that may not fit within the city's typical approach.

3. Advocate for additional investment in parks

by building on the high support amongst residents of Canadian cities for more public funding and the growing recognition of parks as critical public health infrastructure. Use the data and research in this report to make the case to decision-makers.

GROWTH

Indicators

The majority of city residents (55%) reported that they had spent more time in parks over the past year than the year prior.

This is down slightly from 66% in last year's survey, however 58% of respondents said they'd like to spend more time in parks, suggesting that while the increased use of parks we saw during the height of the pandemic is waning, park use continues to remain higher than pre-pandemic levels. The impact of parks on well-being continues to grow with increases in reported positive impacts across all metrics, including mental and physical health, connection to nature, neighbourhood and community, and social connection.

87%

of city residents said they wanted to see more public funding go towards improving parks and green spaces, including maintenance (36%), amenities and higher quality designs (35%) and community programming (19%).

66%

of city residents consider their city parks and green spaces to be well cared for.

58%

of city residents are not satisfied with the amount of time they currently spend in parks (would like to spend more time).

53%

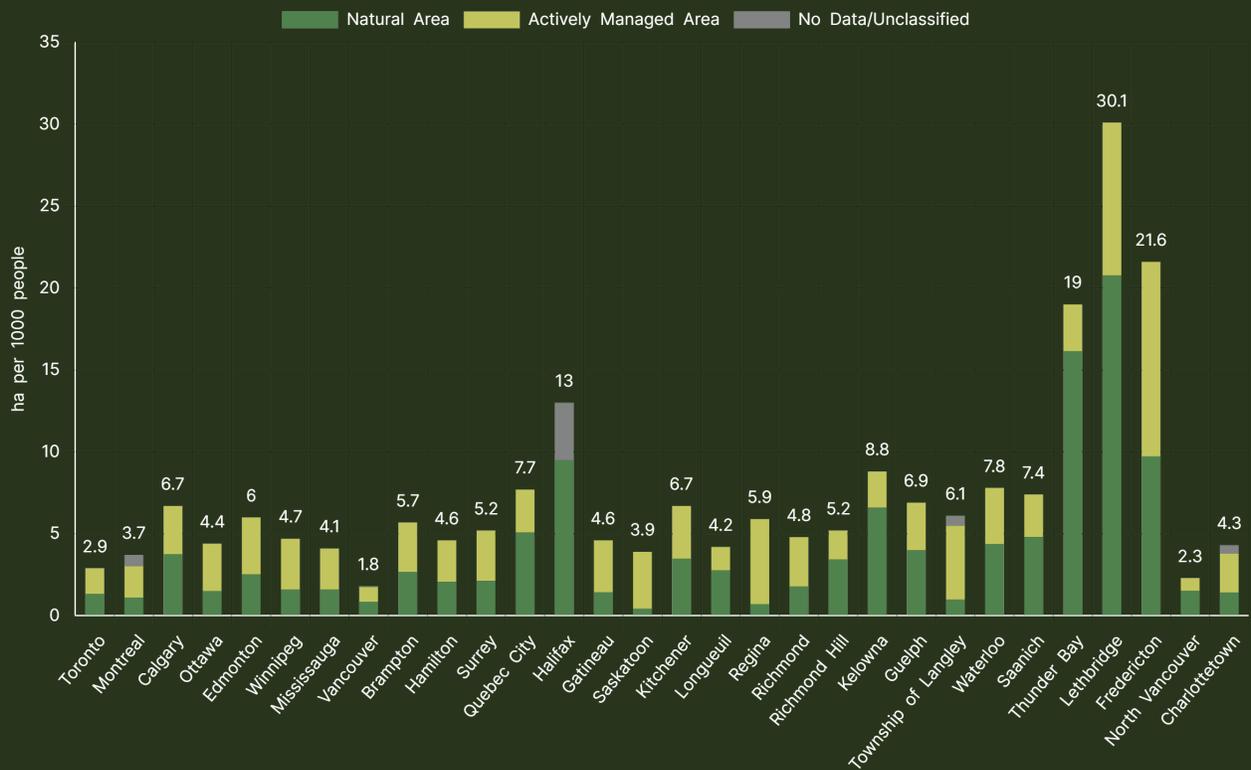
of cities have park system master plans in place that have been updated within the last 10 years.

Growth stories featuring expert interviews and leading practices from across Canada:

- **Park Budgets in the Time of Covid**
How the pandemic has impacted park budgets and sparked a heightened focus on the importance of equity-led investment.
- **Working Together to Fund Parks**
How collaborative funding approaches, and investment from other levels of government, are opening up new ways to support parks.

Hectares of parkland / 1,000 people

+ % of parkland that is natural area, actively managed, or unclassified

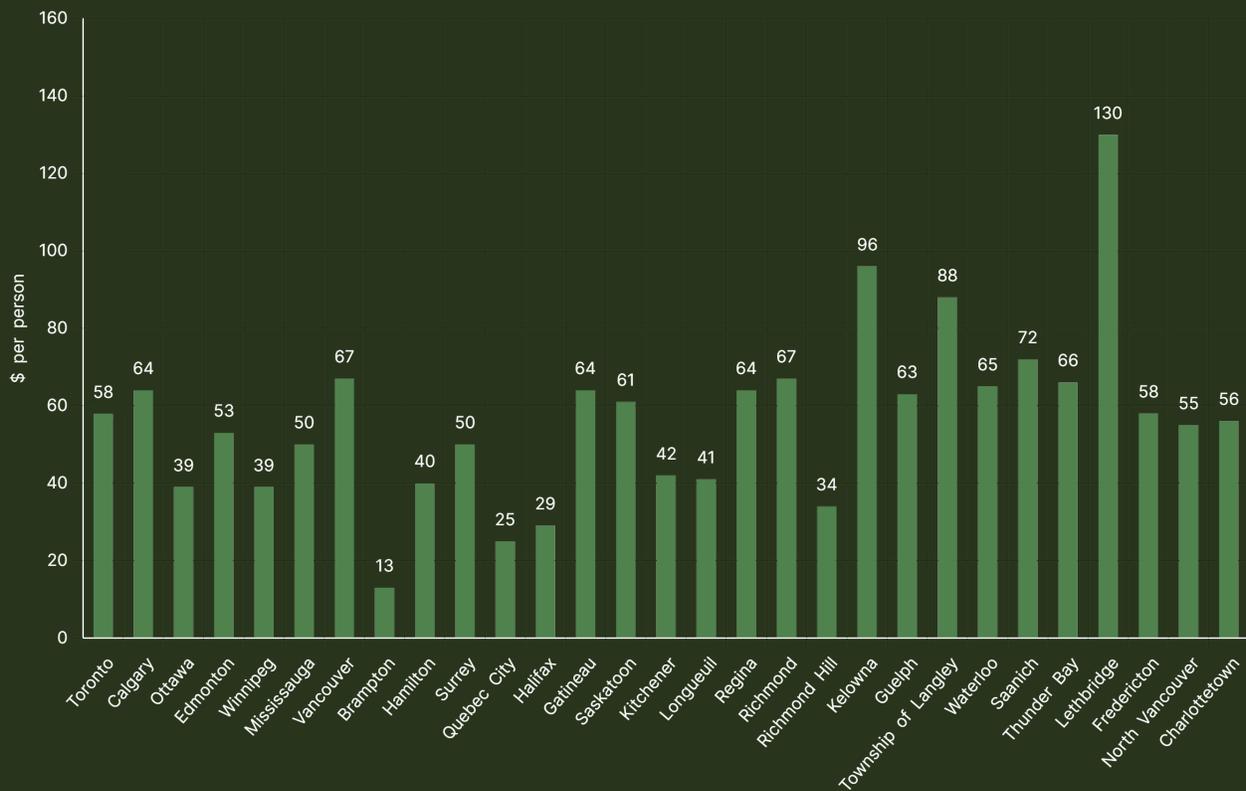


This chart shows the amount of parkland for every 1,000 residents, broken down into three categories: natural parkland (“wilder” areas that receive less maintenance), actively managed parkland (“traditional” parks that often include features like playgrounds and mowed lawns), and unclassified where data was unavailable. There is no “correct” amount of parkland per population as it depends on local

context, with denser, more urbanized cities typically ranking lower than smaller rural or suburban cities. This year, cities are providing an average of 7.3 ha of parks and green space per 1,000 residents, an improvement from 7.0 ha in our 2021 report. Ensuring these numbers do not decrease as populations grow will be key to meeting future parkland needs.

.....
Arranged by population size

Park operating expenditures / person (\$)



This chart shows the actual amount spent on operating expenses in 2021, a change from previous years where we reported on proposed/approved operating budgets for the current year. As with parkland per population, there is no “correct” operating expenditure amount. The average is \$57 per person—a number that has remained stable for the past four years of the report. However, as we cover in this year’s Growth stories, cities are facing new pressures from sustained elevated park use levels that began early in the pandemic—a trend that is expected to continue into the future. As cities turn their attention to pandemic recovery and building future park systems, it will be important that operating budgets increase to meet new demands through an equity-informed lens.

.....
Arranged by population size

.....
Toronto and Winnipeg provided 2020 actuals as 2021 data is not yet available.

.....
Data not available for Montreal.

Reimagining Engagement

As the pandemic transformed the landscape of park engagement, cities got creative, finding new ways to involve communities through digital platforms and distanced outdoor activities in lieu of traditional town halls.

We heard from city staff that experimenting with these new methods has allowed them to reach broader audiences and rethink engagement practices moving forward.



However, the rush to meet emerging needs through pop-up projects like pedestrianized streets sometimes meant engagement was expedited or bypassed altogether. Communities have taken notice, making their voices heard through advocacy on issues from golf courses to encampments, sometimes using parks as a space of protest.

In light of these new pressures and opportunities, some cities are changing their approach to park engagement, prioritizing ongoing relationship-building with communities beyond one-off project consultations. To aid this work, cities are moving toward approaches that better share power with communities, including co-designing engagement processes, employing community members to engage their peers, letting communities lead the sense-making process after gathering feedback, and more.

KEY INSIGHTS

- ★ **Few feel they have a voice in park planning.** Only 22% of city residents feel they have a voice in decision-making about their local parks—a decrease from 34% last year. The top barrier to participating in park planning processes was not being sure of how to get involved, and respondents who identified as Black, Indigenous, or a person of colour were more likely to report experiencing barriers.
- ★ **Relationships weaker with equity-deserving groups.** Only 38% of community park groups who identified as equity-deserving said they had a strong relationship with their municipality, compared to 51% of groups that did not identify as equity-deserving, highlighting the opportunity to take an equity-based approach to deepening community relationships.
- ★ **Growing focus on equity-based engagement, despite challenges.** 92% of cities said Covid-19 has changed the way they engage communities on park projects, with 35% reporting it has sparked more intentional outreach to equity-deserving groups. However, 79% of cities said engaging hard-to-reach groups remains a challenge.

TAKE-AWAYS

1. **Take a proactive and neighbourhood-based approach** to ongoing relationship-building with local groups to stay on the pulse of emerging needs and ensure there is a strong foundation of trust when formal engagement processes happen.
2. **Evaluate internal policies and practices** to ensure there are protocols to meaningfully address barriers to participation, provide appropriate compensation to community

partners, sustain relationships in the event of staff turnover, and formalize sharing back outcomes with engagement participants.

- 3. **Foster reciprocal relationships with community park groups** through designating a staff contact for them to liaise with, providing in-kind and financial support, creating clear processes to make simple requests for park enhancements, and helping to promote community-led work through city communication channels.

COLLABORATION

Indicators

City residents and community park groups are eager to get involved in supporting their municipalities to make parks great.

However, only 22% of city residents feel like they currently have a voice in influencing decision-making about their local park, down from 34% last year, raising questions about the effectiveness of online engagement methods cities have leaned on more heavily during the pandemic. There's an emerging opportunity to improve collaboration by providing clear and meaningful avenues for engagement in park planning processes and volunteer-led programming, especially for groups who have historically experienced barriers to participation.

81%

of cities said they switched to more online methods due to Covid, while 54% said there is a greater interest in new and creative engagement methods, and 35% said covid made them more intentional about outreach to equity-seeking groups.

63%

of cities said they have a strong relationship with community or volunteer park groups (e.g. resident-led volunteer groups, like park friends groups), whereas only 44% of park groups feel that they have a strong relationship with their municipal parks department. 83% of these groups would be interested in deepening their relationship with the municipality if there was an opportunity to do so.

51%

of city residents do not feel that they have a voice or the ability to influence what goes on in their local parks (up from 41% in 2021), compared to 22% that said they did and the remaining unsure.

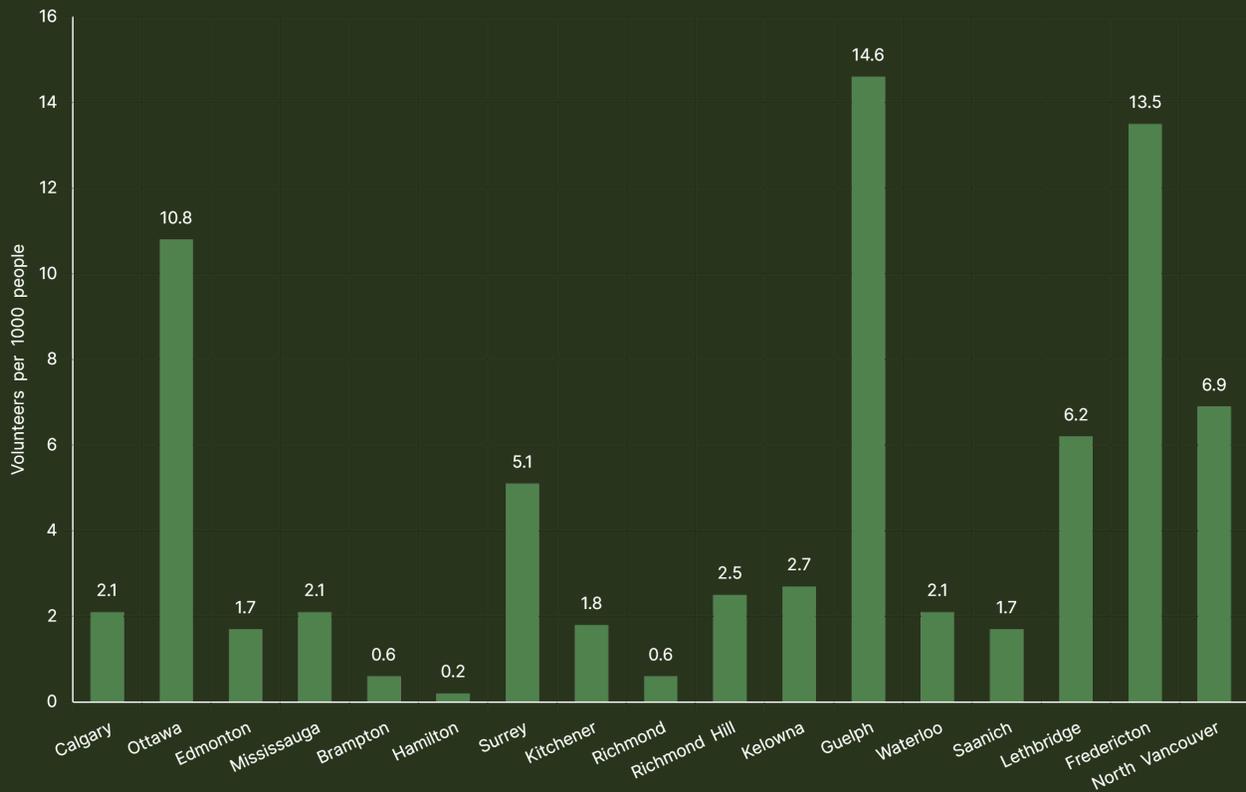
48%

of city residents that identified as Black, Indigenous or a person of colour reported that they're unsure how to get involved in municipal park planning processes and 35% are unsure if their participation would make a difference – both barriers that prevent them from becoming more involved – compared to 39% and 31% for white respondents, respectively.

Collaboration stories featuring expert interviews and leading practices from across Canada:

- **Moving at the Pace of Trust**
How investing in ongoing trust-building beyond one-off consultations can help repair relationships, redistribute power, and reimagine parks.
- **Engaging with Equity**
How park engagement can lay the foundation for relationships that last well beyond the end of a consultation period.

volunteers / 1000 people



Volunteers involved in city-led volunteer programs are crucial to supporting stewardship and restoration efforts, community events in parks, and so much more. While many of these programs shuttered throughout the pandemic, we're seeing many volunteers return en masse to activate their parks once more. This year, cities have an average of 4.4 volunteers per 1,000 residents—up from 2.7 last year and inching closer to the 11.6 volunteers per 1,000 we saw pre-pandemic.

.....
 Arranged by population size

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 Data not available for
 Charlottetown, Guelph,
 Halifax, Longueuil, Montreal,
 Quebec City, Regina,
 Saskatoon, Thunder Bay,
 Toronto, Township of Langley,
 Vancouver, and Winnipeg

Community Care

The past three years have challenged traditional understandings of the purpose of parks.



No longer just places to walk a dog, play baseball, or take kids to the playground, parks across the country are being transformed into hubs of community support to address some of the most pressing issues of our time.

As inequities have surfaced and deepened throughout the pandemic, we profile how community programs that bring food distribution, healthcare, survival supplies, conflict mediation, and grief counselling to local green spaces reimagine the ways parks can support equitable urban life. Through these programs, parks are not only helping to fill gaps in our social safety net but also between people, strengthening relationships across social divides.

Perhaps one of the most visible gaps parks are filling, in the context of a national urban housing crisis, is providing a home. As we explored in our 2020 Canadian City Parks Report, many parks departments have a troubled track record in responding to encampments, opting for approaches heavy on enforcement rather than engagement.

There is growing recognition, however, of the need for more inclusive practices that centre the well-being of unhoused communities that is pushing some cities to take steps towards approaches rooted in human rights and relationship-building.

KEY INSIGHTS

- ★ **Surveillance-based approaches continue to dominate.** 90% of cities said houselessness is a challenge—stable from last year. In responding to houselessness, 76% of parks departments said they use bylaw enforcement and 66% use design strategies aimed at crime prevention, while only 10% engage directly with unhoused communities, highlighting there is still work to be done to shift toward more inclusive approaches.
- ★ **Encampments do not disrupt park use for most.** 62% of city residents who had noticed park encampment(s) said the encampment had not negatively impacted their use of parks, pointing to the openness of park goes to share space with unhoused neighbours.
- ★ **Parks relied upon for essential services.** 93% of public survey respondents said that meeting basic needs is an important role parks play in cities with year-round public washrooms at the top of the list for desired amenities. 48% of cities said they had implemented social service programs in parks, such as health clinics or food distribution.

TAKE-AWAYS

1. **Invest in both the material and social well-being of unhoused communities** by ensuring basic amenities and services are in place in parks, but also designing park programming that taps into people's skills, interests, and creativity. Co-design programs with unhoused neighbours to ensure the activities will not result in displacement or discomfort.
2. **Approach encampments through a human-centred rather than operational lens**, leaning into the strengths of park

professionals as connectors and convenors. Build relationships with unhoused residents and community partners, while fostering an organizational culture of openness, reflection and learning throughout the process.

- 3. Develop an encampment strategy, in collaboration with unhoused residents and community partners**, that identifies overarching core values such as harm reduction, reconciliation, and leadership of people with lived experience, to guide decision-making on park issues affecting unhoused communities.

ACTIVATION

Indicators

Throughout the pandemic, city residents have turned to parks for a diverse range of activities like eating meals, hanging out with friends, and getting exercise in all seasons.

As parks have increasingly become a destination for social outings, city residents are asking for more relaxed bylaws around alcohol consumption, with 59% of municipalities reporting they've noticed increased interest in drinking in parks over the past year. Another area where park planning has not yet caught up to new demands is winterized washrooms—with only 43% of washrooms open year-round, supply lags behind demand despite the increased use of parks we've seen during the past two winter seasons.

93%

of city residents said they tried a new activity in parks during the pandemic, such as more regular walks, visiting natural areas, socializing with friends/family, and eating meals, and they're still doing these activities regularly.

90%

of cities reported having a community grant program in place that can be used for parks.

79%

of city residents said that parks have had a positive impact on their social well-being and their connection to their neighbourhood or community (74%) over the past year. This is an increase of 8% and 4%, respectively, compared to 2021 data.

69%

of city residents said they wanted to see more year-round public washrooms in parks. On average, only 43% of cities' park washrooms are winterized.

48%

of city residents agree that people should be allowed to consume alcohol in parks, with 34% in disagreement, and the remaining either unsure or neutral.

44%

of city residents said they wanted to see increased access to winter recreation activities in parks.

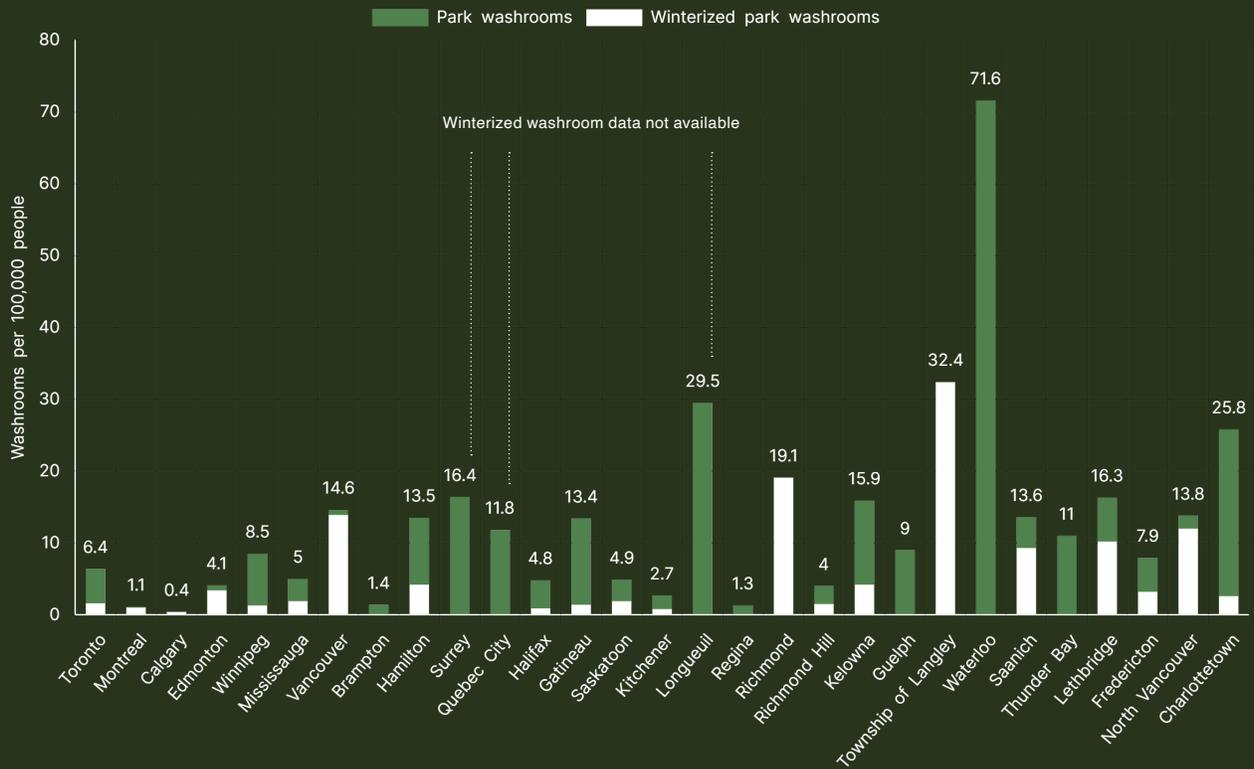
29%

of city residents said their winter park use increased over the past year compared to previous seasons. In 2021, half of city residents spent more time outdoors during winter.

Activation stories featuring expert interviews and leading practices from across Canada:

- **A Human-Centred Approach to Houselessness**
The unique opportunity of parks departments to play a positive role in addressing houselessness.
- **Parks as Sites of Community Care**
How a care lens can help us move toward more equitable models of addressing well-being and safety in parks.

Washrooms / 100,000 people + winterized washrooms



Interest in winter park use has steadily increased over the past several years; however, the provision of winterized washroom facilities in parks has lagged behind. On average, only 43% of park washrooms are open year-round. In fact, 69% of survey respondents indicated that they would like to see more year-round public washrooms in parks—this was the most highly requested amenity.

Arranged by population size

Data not available for Ottawa.

Data on winterized washrooms not available for Surrey, Quebec City and Longueuil



We didn't write the Canadian City Parks Report so it can sit on a virtual shelf—we want it to be used.

To help put the report's learnings into practice, we have developed a [training session](#) designed for municipal staff teams and park professionals, and will be hosting [webinars and other learning opportunities](#) centred around the stories in this report in 2022.

To stay in touch about these, please subscribe to our [newsletter](#). You can also follow us on Twitter at [@park_people](#). If you're interested in a custom workshop, you can find more information [here](#).

You can find video recordings as well as key take-aways from past Canadian City Parks Report webinars on our website, including sessions on climate justice, houselessness, community programming, small-scale biodiversity projects, and more.

If your city was not included in this year's report and you would like to see it included in 2023, please [get in touch](#). We're always looking for new cities to join.

Finally, we'd love to hear from you, whether you're a community member, city staff, or park professional. How have you used the report? What stories or data resonated most? What could we improve for next year? Please take 5 minutes to fill out this [feedback form](#), or [send us an email](#) to book a conversation with our research team.

Thank you for reading!



park people
amis des parcs

Park People helps people activate the power of parks in order
to improve quality of life in cities across Canada.

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