

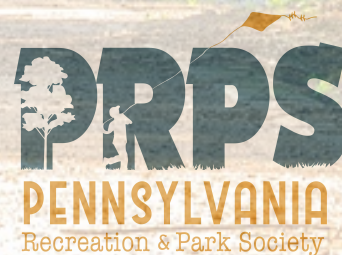
2022 PENNSYLVANIA PARK AND RECREATION PROVIDER STUDY:

FUNDING, COVID-19 IMPACTS, AND SYSTEMIC RACISM IN PARKS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Local park and recreation providers have experienced complex challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic, while simultaneously working to manage their services in a way which is more equitable and inclusive to diverse populations. Given that these timely challenges are relevant to the membership of the Pennsylvania Recreation & Park Society, researchers from Penn State sought to assess Pennsylvania park and recreation providers' (i.e. local officials and parks and recreation directors) perceptions and experiences related to investment, contributions of parks and recreation, and equity during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the nation's large scale reckoning with systemic racism. Moreover, this study explored the factors most influential in local officials' funding allocation decisions for parks and recreation. We administered online surveys to PA park and recreation directors and local officials in Fall of 2021 and Spring of 2022. The data gathered and analyzed through this study can assist the Pennsylvania Recreation and Park Society in current and future efforts to share relevant and timely information with local park and recreation professionals and effectively advocate and position parks and recreation for more consistent funding across the state. This report presents the data from this study. While findings are presented in detail in the subsequent sections, some of the key findings are as follows:

- Officials and directors reported that tax-based funding largely remained the same from 2019 to 2021.
- A majority of directors reported that their operational costs increased from 2019 to 2021, whereas officials were relatively split in their reporting that operational costs had increased or remained the same during this time period. Reasons cited for stable operational costs included sound budgetary/purchasing practices, delayed investments, volunteers/partnerships, and reduction of services. Those who reported increased operational costs cited increased labor/material prices, aging infrastructure, impact from high use, costs associated with COVID-19 policies/safety, weather events, and loss of staff and volunteers as reasons.
- Approximately one-third of officials and half of directors reported that their communities sought CARES Act funds for conservation trails, parks, and/or recreation purposes. Among those who sought funds, success rate in receiving the funds was high.
- A majority of officials and directors reported that their communities planned to seek ARPA relief funds for conservation, trails, parks, and/or recreation purposes.

- Critical consciousness of systemic racism in parks (CCSRP), or the extent to which individuals are critically aware of how systemic racism impacts parks, was moderate. CCSRP was higher among directors and those working in urban or suburban communities compared to officials and those working in rural communities. Among officials, CCSRP was higher among those with more liberal social and economic ideologies.
- Both officials and directors reported that most of their community members and local institutions were not at all vocal about racial inequities in parks and recreation.
- Among officials, the overall importance and quality of parks and recreation during the COVID-19 pandemic was high, and parks and recreation were perceived to provide solutions to important community issues, especially youth development, community health, and real estate development.
- The majority of officials regarded parks and recreation as just as essential as other services in their community during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Park and recreation services were statistically perceived as more important during the pandemic among officials who 1) believed they help solve important community problems; 2) had a more vocal constituency in support of parks; 3) personally used these services; and 4) had a good/excellent working relationship with their park and recreation leadership.
- When officials were asked how they would hypothetically allocate budget dollars across a series of community services during a budget deficit and surplus, parks and recreation realized the highest average amount gained during a surplus, but also had the greatest amount taken away during a deficit, suggesting that while parks and recreation are important to officials, they are considered a non-essential amenity.
- The vast majority of officials have used (or their family has used) their local parks or participated in local organized recreation programs. A large majority report having a good or excellent working relationship with their community's park and recreation director.
- A majority of park and recreation agency directors reported that during the pandemic, their agencies had experienced increased use of parks, programs were cancelled or cut, new programs were developed, maintenance was deferred, and staff development activities were reduced.
- With regard to advocating to local officials for consistent funding for parks and recreation, directors perceived that one-on-one engagement with officials, photos, and use of data on parks, trails, and/or facility usage were most effective.

SECTION 1: STUDY BACKGROUND AND METHODS

Local park and recreation services provide important contributions to health, wellbeing, and quality of life. Park and recreation services are regarded highly by the public (Mowen et al., 2018), and recent evidence suggests these services have been especially appreciated and heavily utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic (Mowen & Powers, 2021; Grima et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2020). In a recent Pennsylvania study, findings indicated a majority perceived park and recreation services to be essential in their communities during the pandemic, with many citing benefits to physical and mental health as well as the provision of safe and COVID-19 friendly recreation opportunities (Mowen & Powers, 2021). Furthermore, in urban areas, parks, plazas, and other recreation facilities were perceived to be important spaces for expressing opinions about various social issues including racism, gender equality, and economic opportunities (Mowen & Powers, 2021). Although it is clear that the public values parks and recreation and they are an important stakeholder for these services, the perspectives of other stakeholders warrant attention. The ability of parks and recreation to provide community benefits relies on consistent and equitable investment, and thus understanding what drives investment of public dollars towards local park and recreation services has been a topic of intense interest within the profession. Providers of park and recreation services including local government officials and park and recreation directors are responsible for investment and policy decisions and thus their perspectives warrant attention. In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and the nation's reckoning with systemic racism, it is critical to understand local providers' perceptions and experiences related to investment, equity, and contributions of parks and recreation.

The purpose of this study was to assess Pennsylvania park and recreation providers' perceptions and experiences related to investment, contributions of parks and recreation, and equity during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and the nation's large scale reckoning with systemic racism. Moreover, this study explored the factors most influential in local officials' funding allocation decisions for parks and recreation. The data gathered and analyzed through this study can assist the Pennsylvania Recreation and Park Society in current and future efforts to share relevant and timely information with

local park and recreation professionals and effectively advocate and position parks and recreation for more consistent funding across the state.

This study consisted of online surveys to Pennsylvania local elected officials (borough and city council members, township and county supervisors/commissioners, and mayors), appointed officials (township, city, and borough managers/secretaries, and county clerks/administrators), and park and recreation directors. One online survey was administered to local officials (both elected and appointed) and another online survey was administered to park and recreation directors (distributed by PRPS). The local officials' survey was distributed with the assistance of several associations including: Pennsylvania Municipal League, County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania State Association of Township Supervisors, and Pennsylvania State Association of Boroughs. Due to an anticipated underrepresentation of urban officials (based on prior studies), we also sent targeted direct emails to officials in 13 urban areas (cities with 50,000 or more residents). Data collection began in Fall 2021 and concluded in early Spring of 2022.

Results of this study are presented in the following five sections which outline the organizational characteristics and demographics, findings regarding financing and funding, findings regarding racial inequities in parks and recreation, findings specific to local officials in Pennsylvania, and findings specific to park and recreation directors in Pennsylvania.

SECTION 2: ORGANIZATIONAL AND DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILES

LOCAL OFFICIALS

Officials most often served rural townships with populations between 2,500 and 25,000 people.

Regarding organizational characteristics, a majority of respondents (60%) indicated their local community was a rural area, followed by suburban areas (30%) and urban areas (10%). In terms of the type of local government, townships and boroughs were the most commonly reported within the sample (53% and 35%, respectively) with the remainder of respondents indicating their local government to be a town, city, or county (11%). When asked about the size of the population their local government served, approximately one-third of respondents indicated they served a population of less than 2,500 people. Approximately half of respondents reported their local government served between 2,500 people and 25,000 people, with the remaining 15% of the sample indicating they served a population of more than 25,000 people (Table 1).

Regarding the demographic characteristics of local officials, 55% of the sample indicated they were in an appointed position and 45% of respondents indicated they were elected to their position. Officials were, on average, 59 years old. A majority were male (61%), White (95%), and non-Hispanic (99%). The political ideology regarding social and economic issues within the sample was moderate and slightly conservative leaning, on average. When asked how they generally felt about economic issues, 16% of the respondents indicated liberal, 29% indicated moderate, and 55% indicated conservative. Regarding social issues, respondents were equally balanced in political ideology, with approximately one-third of respondents each indicating liberal, moderate, or conservative (Table 2).

Table 1. Organizational Characteristics

Organizational Characteristics	Local Officials n (%)	Agency Directors n (%)
Residential Location		
Urban	40 (10)	17 (13)
Suburban	125 (30)	94 (69)
Rural	248 (60)	25 (18)
Type of Agency/Organization		
Township	219 (53)	73 (54)
Borough	143 (35)	12 (9)
Town	1 (<1)	1 (1)
City	17 (4)	13 (10)
Multi-municipal Authority	0 (0)	16 (12)
County	30 (7)	14 (10)
Non-profit	0 (0)	5 (4)
Other	4 (1)	2 (2)
Population Size Served		
Less than 2,500	132 (32)	0 (0)
2,500 to 4,999	102 (25)	2 (2)
5,000 to 9,999	68 (16)	14 (10)
10,000 to 24,999	50 (12)	60 (44)
25,000 to 49,999	30 (7)	31 (23)
50,000 to 99,999	11 (3)	16 (12)
100,000 to 249,999	13 (3)	4 (3)
250,000 or more	8 (2)	9 (7)

Note. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

PARK & RECREATION DIRECTORS

Directors most often served suburban townships with populations between 10,000 and 25,000 people.

Regarding organizational characteristics, just over two-thirds of respondents (69%) indicated their local community was a suburban area, followed by rural areas (18%) and urban areas (13%). In terms of the type of local government, townships made up around half of the sample (54%) while borough, city, multi-municipal authority, and county were each indicated by approximately 10% of respondents. The remainder of respondents indicated their local government to be a town, city, or county (11%). When asked about the size of the population their local government served, a little over one-tenth of respondents indicated they served a population of under 10,000 people. Respondents most often indicated serving between 10,000 and 25,000 people (44% of the sample), followed by approximately 23% of the sample indicating they served between 25,000 and 50,000 people, with the remainder of the sample indicating they served a population of more than 50,000 people (Table 1).

Regarding demographic characteristics, park and recreation directors were an average of 48 years old, 93% were White, 100% were non-Hispanic, and 52% were male (Table 2).

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics

Demographic Characteristics	Local Officials n (%)	Agency Directors n (%)
Race		
Black or African American	1 (<1)	2 (2)
White	173 (95)	78 (93)
Other	8 (4)	4 (5)
Ethnicity		
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	1 (<1)	0 (0)
Non-Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	181 (99)	84 (100)
Gender		
Female	71 (39)	44 (48)
Male	113 (61)	41 (52)
Age		
18-35	6 (4)	12 (15)
36-50	28 (17)	35 (43)
51-64	69 (42)	29 (35)
65 and older	60 (36)	5 (6)
Officials Only – Elected vs. Appointed		
Elected	129 (53)	-
Appointed	163 (40)	-
Neither	30 (7)	-
Officials Only - Political Ideology*		
Social Issues	Mean = 4.13 (n = 182)	-
Economic Issues	Mean = 4.78 (n = 181)	-

Note. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

*Note. 7-Point Scale where 1 = Very Liberal, 4 = Moderate, 7 = Very Conservative

SECTION 3: FINANCING AND FUNDING

MEDIAN CAPITAL AND OPERATIONAL BUDGETS FOR PARKS AND RECREATION

As a function of the different average community size among the official and director samples, directors reported higher median operational and capital budgets compared to officials.

When officials were asked about their local government agency's total operating and capital budgets for parks and recreation, the median reported operational budget was \$32,900 while the median capital budget was \$10,000.

When directors were asked about their local government agency's total operating and capital budgets for parks and recreation, the median operational budget was \$618,460 while the median capital budget was \$225,000. Such differences are, in part, a reflection of the different sized communities represented in the official and director samples, with directors typically representing more populated areas compared to officials.

TAX FUNDING AND EXPENDITURE TRENDS

Officials and directors reported that tax-based funding largely remained the same (69%) from 2019 to 2021. A majority of directors (70%) reported that their operational costs increased during this time period, whereas officials were relatively split in their reporting that operational costs had increased (46%) or remained the same (47%).

Respondents were asked how their tax-based funding and operational costs (e.g., staffing, materials, maintenance) had changed over the time period from 2019 to 2021. According to local officials, despite the pandemic, tax-based funding over the last three years was most often reported to have remained the same (68%) or have increased (20%). Directors shared this perspective, and a majority of directors reported that tax-based funding had remained the same (69%) and about 22% indicated that tax-based funding has increased over the past three years (2019-2021).

Perception of the change in operational costs differed between officials and directors (Table 3). Officials were relatively split in their perceptions, such that 47% indicated that operational costs had remained the same and 46% indicated operational costs had increased. However, among directors, a large majority (70%) indicated an increase in operational costs during the three year period; 23% said that costs had remained the same.

When officials were asked why operational costs have been stable, sound budgetary/purchasing practices, delayed investments, volunteers/partnerships, and reduction of services were cited as reasons. Respondents who reported increased operational costs also cited increased labor/material prices, aging infrastructure, impact from high use, costs associated with COVID-19 policies/safety, weather events, and loss of staff and volunteers as reasons. Reasons for revenue and expenditure trends from the perspective of park and recreation directors were similar to those cited by local officials.

Table 3. Changes in Funding and Operational Costs from 2019–2021

Status of Funding and Operational Costs	Local Officials %	Agency Directors %
Tax-Based Funding		
Increased	20	22
Remained the Same	69	69
Decreased	12	10
Operational Costs		
Increased	46	70
Remained the Same	47	23
Decreased	7	8

Note. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

CARES ACT AND ARPA RELIEF FUNDING

Approximately one-third of local officials and half of directors reported that their communities sought CARES funds. Among those who sought

funds, success rate in receiving the funds was high. A majority of local officials and directors reported that their communities planned to seek ARPA relief funds for conservation, trails, parks, and recreation.

Regarding the use and allocation of federal relief funds for parks and recreation, both local officials and parks and recreation directors were asked if they had received, planned to receive, or sought out CARES and/or ARPA funds. Approximately one-third of officials reported that their community sought an allocation of CARES funds for conservation, trails, parks, and/or recreation purposes. A large majority of these officials (95%) indicated they had or will receive these funds. Fifty-seven percent of officials said that they would seek allocation of ARPA funds for conservation, trails, parks, and/or recreation.

When directors were asked about CARES and ARPA funds, 53% said that their agency sought an allocation of CARES funds and 66% of these said that they received or anticipated receiving an allocation of these funds for conservation, trails, parks, and/or recreation purposes. Also, 73% indicated their agency planned to seek an allocation of ARPA funds for these same purposes.

Respondents were also asked open ended questions regarding their intended uses for CARES and ARPA Funds. Responses from directors and officials included investments in trails, playgrounds, support features, addressing inequities in service, open-space preservation, stormwater and/or environmental mediation, and maintenance equipment to cover COVID-related expenses.

SECTION 4: AWARENESS OF RACIAL INEQUITIES IN PARKS

CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF SYSTEMIC RACISM IN PARKS

Critical consciousness of systemic racism in parks (CCSRP) was moderate, but higher among directors and urban/suburban providers.

Both officials and directors were asked questions to assess critical consciousness of systemic racism in parks (CCSRP) (Powers, Pitas, & Mowen, in review). This measure consists of 8 items (see Table 4) and assesses awareness of impacts of systemic racism in parks, including issues such as redlining, sense of welcome and belonging, park access, racial representation in planning, leadership, as well as gentrification effects.

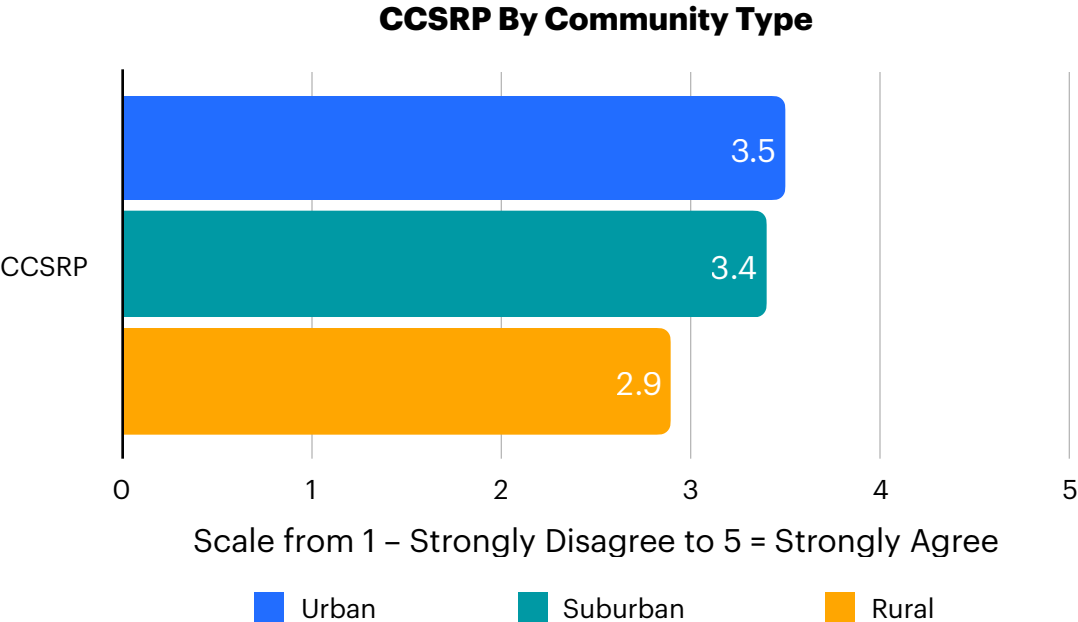
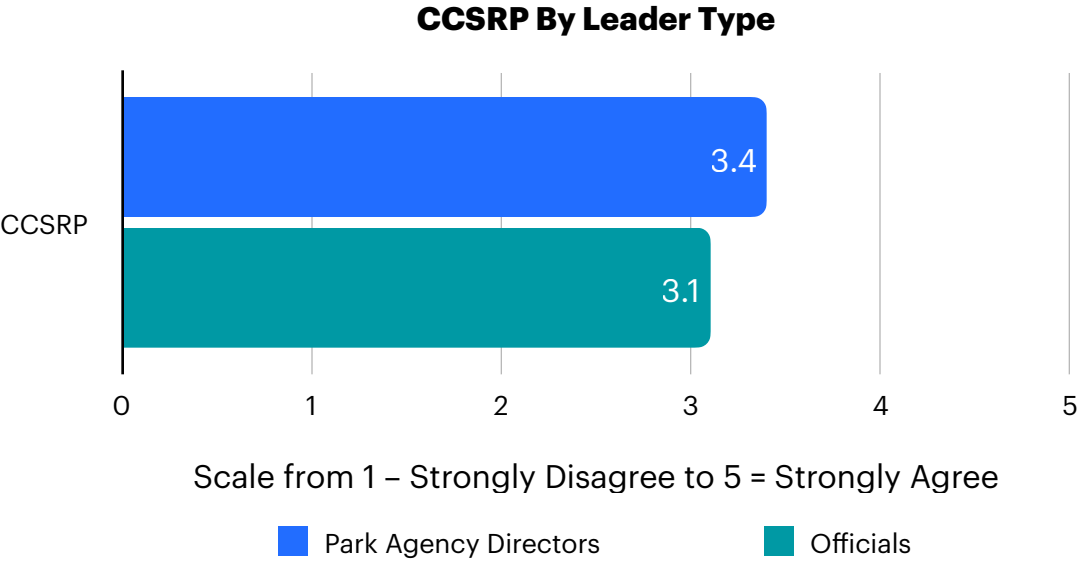
Table 4. CCSR Items and Means

Item	Mean (% Agree or Strongly Agree)
Experiences with racism in parks can undermine sense of welcome and belonging for people of color	3.52 (57.3)
Aspects of systemic racism can undermine sense of welcome and belonging in parks for people of color	3.28 (47.8)
Compared to Whites, people of color are underrepresented in park and recreation leadership positions	3.26 (39.8)
The legacy of redlining has resulted in inequitable access to greenspace	3.26 (38.6)
The voices of people of color have been historically underrepresented in park and recreation planning/decision making	3.24 (39.2)
The legacy of residential segregation limits the racial and/or ethnic diversity of users at neighborhood parks	3.18 (39.8)
Large scale park investments can result in gentrification in low-income communities of color	3.04 (27.0)
There are inequities in park access based on race	2.87 (30.9)
Critical Consciousness of Systemic Racism in Parks (8 Item Index)	3.20

Note. 5-point scale from 1 – Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree

Findings indicate a moderate level of CCSRP among park providers. With regard to individual topics, respondents were more aware of how interpersonal racism in parks can undermine sense of welcome and belonging among people of color, followed by the underrepresentation of people of color in park and recreation leadership positions.

Significantly higher overall CCSRP was observed among directors (3.39 out of 5) than officials (3.12 out of 5) and individuals working in urban (3.54) or suburban communities (3.41) compared to those from rural areas (2.93). Officials with more conservative social and economic ideologies exhibited lower CCSRP scores than did those with more liberal ideologies.



VOCALNESS

Both officials and directors reported that most community members and local institutions were not at all vocal about racial inequities in parks and recreation.

When asked about community vocalness with regard to racial inequities in parks and recreation, officials generally reported their community members (60%) and local institutions (57%) were not at all vocal about racial inequities with respect to parks and recreation in their community. When directors were asked, they also commonly indicated that their community members (48%) and local institutions (52%) were not at all vocal on racial inequities in parks and recreation (Table 5).

Table 5. Vocalness About Racial Inequities in Parks and Recreation

Status of Funding and Operational Costs	Local Officials %	Agency Directors %
Community Members		
Not at All Vocal	60	48
Slightly Vocal	20	24
Somewhat Vocal	8	12
Moderately Vocal	9	10
Extremely Vocal	4	6
Local Institutions		
Not at All Vocal	57	52
Slightly Vocal	17	20
Somewhat Vocal	16	18
Moderately Vocal	8	6
Extremely Vocal	2	4

Note. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

SECTION 5: TOPICS ADDRESSED ONLY AMONG LOCAL OFFICIALS

OFFICIALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPORTANCE AND PERFORMANCE OF PARKS AND RECREATION WITH COMMUNITY CONCERNS

The overall importance and quality of parks and recreation during the COVID-19 pandemic was high, and parks and recreation were perceived to provide solutions to important community issues.

When officials were asked to rate the importance and quality of parks and recreation in their community (on a scale of one to seven with one being the lowest and seven being the highest), results indicated average of 5.6 out of 7 for importance and 5.3 out of 7 for quality.

Local officials and directors were also asked a series of questions to evaluate their perceptions of important issues facing their community as well as the extent to which parks and recreation provided solutions to those issues. Of these, youth development, public safety (i.e., from crime), community health, and real estate development were the most important priorities. Parks and recreation was perceived to provide solutions to these issues as well, but less so for public safety priorities. Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) ranked lowest among these priorities, and parks and recreation's perceived contributions to DEI were also perceived as low (Table 6).

Table 6. Importance of Community Issues and P&R’s Contribution to Solutions

Community Issue/Priority	Mean Importance (%)*	Mean Contribution of Parks and Recreation** (%)
1. Youth Development	4.4 (87.5)	4.2 (77.2)
2. Public Safety	4.2 (77.3)	3.8 (53.8)
3. Community Health	4.0 (70.8)	4.1 (73.2)
4. Real Estate Development	4.0 (62.6)	4.1 (64.6)
5. Environmental Stewardship	4.0 (61.4)	3.9 (56.3)
6. Managing Growth	3.9 (56.1)	3.6 (35.9)
7. Economic Development	3.9 (52.2)	3.7 (45.4)
8. Civic Engagement	3.8 (52.0)	3.7 (37.8)
9. Diversity, Equity, Inclusion	3.6 (48.9)	3.2 (25.3)

*Note. 5-point scale from 1 = Very Unimportant to 5 = Very Important community issue

**Note. 5-point scale from 1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree that p&r provides solutions to issue

THE IMPORTANCE AND ESSENTIAL NATURE OF PARKS AND RECREATION TO OFFICIALS DURING COVID-19

The majority of officials regarded parks and recreation as just as essential as other services in their community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Officials were asked specifically how important they thought parks and recreation was in their community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Seventy-eight percent said parks and recreation was important or very important to their community during COVID-19, while only 6% said parks and recreation was unimportant. Reasons why parks and recreation were important related to healthy and safe recreation activities, nature connection in the outdoors, and providing places/programs to support mental well-being and reduce anxiety due to the lockdowns.

When asked if park and recreation services were just as essential as other community services, a majority agreed or strongly agreed (83%) with this statement. Additionally, park and recreation services were statistically more important to officials who 1) believed they help solve important community problems; 2) had a more vocal constituency in

support of parks; 3) personally use these services; and 4) had a good/excellent working relationship with their park and recreation leadership.

OFFICIALS' FUNDING ALLOCATION UNDER HYPOTHETICAL SURPLUS/DEFICIT SCENARIOS

Parks and recreation was often allocated the highest amount of funds when budgets were in a hypothetical surplus, but also received the biggest cuts to funding when budgets were in a hypothetical deficit.

Officials were asked how they would hypothetically allocate budget dollars across a series of community services during a budget deficit and surplus. In these scenarios, parks and recreation realized the highest average amount added (18.8%) during a surplus, but also had the greatest amount taken away (15.7%) during a deficit, suggesting that while parks and recreation are important to officials, they are considered a non-essential amenity. Moreover, officials who reported that parks and recreation were important or very important to their community were more likely to allocate additional funding in a surplus and less likely to reduce budgets during a deficit (Table 7).

Table 7. Hypothetical Changes in Local Services Spending

Local Service	Amount Added % (Rank)	Amount Taken Away % (Rank)	Net Allocation*
Fire Protection	18.1 (2)	8.3 (3)	9.57
Police Protection	14.8 (3)	8.3 (4)	6.69
Parks & Recreation	18.8 (1)	15.7 (10)	2.9
Transportation	13.3 (4)	12.3 (9)	1.21
Education	5.8 (7)	6.7 (2)	-0.72
Housing & Community Development	10.0 (5)	11.3 (8)	-1.09
Hospitals & Health	4.2 (9)	6.1 (1)	-1.88
Public Welfare	8.0 (6)	9.8 (5)	-2.01
Libraries	5.4 (8)	10.5 (6)	-5.30
Corrections	1.6 (10)	11.1 (7)	-9.39

*Note: Net Allocation = Amount Added – Amount Taken Away

OFFICIALS' WORKING RELATIONSHIP WITH PARK AND RECREATION LEADERSHIP AND USE OF PARK AND RECREATION SERVICES

The vast majority of local officials have used their local parks or participated in local organized recreation programs. A large majority report having a good or excellent working relationship with their community's park and recreation director.

When officials were asked about their personal use of local parks and recreation in their community, a majority of local officials indicated that they (and/or their family members) had used their local parks (87%) or had participated in organized recreation programs (77%). Moreover, when officials were asked to describe their working relationship with the individual most responsible for providing park and recreation services in their community, only 10% indicated a very poor to average relationship, while 51% reported a good to very good relationship, and 39% reported an excellent relationship.

SECTION 6: TOPICS ADDRESSED ONLY AMONG DIRECTORS

DIRECTORS' PERCEIVED IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON PARK AND RECREATION AGENCIES

When asked whether their agency had experienced various impacts associated with the COVID-19 pandemic, park and recreation directors were most likely to report increased use of parks (92%), programs being canceled and/or cut (76%) and new programs being developed (73%).

Directors were less likely to report hiring freezes (21%), loss of full-time staff (20%), and permanent closure of facilities (9%; Table 8).

Table 8. COVID-19 Agency Impacts

Impact	% Yes	% No	% Unsure
Use has increased at local parks	92	4	3
Programs have been canceled and/or cut	76	24	0
New programs have been developed	74	22	4
Maintenance has been deferred	53	43	3
Staff development activities (e.g., travel, training) have been reduced	52	44	3
Lost part time staff positions	35	64	1
Organizational restructuring has occurred and/or is planned for the future	31	67	2
Hiring freezes have been implemented	21	76	3
Lost full time staff positions	20	79	1
Facilities have been permanently closed	9	89	2

Note. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding

DIRECTORS' PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF ADVOCACY FOR PARK AND RECREATION FUNDING

Direct engagement with local officials, photographs, and data on parks, trails, or facility usage were perceived to be the most effective strategies when advocating for consistent funding with local officials.

Directors were asked to indicate their opinions regarding effective funding advocacy strategies for park and recreation funding. Direct engagement with local officials, photographs, and data were the top strategies cited (Table 9). For example, one-on-one conversations with officials (60%) and park visitation/facility usage data (51%) were believed to be “very effective.” Strategies perceived to be less effective were community petitions (16%), story-telling (28%), and charts/infographics (30%).

Table 9. Effectiveness of Advocacy Strategies

Advocacy Strategy	Mean	% Somewhat Effective	% Very Effective
One-on-one conversations with officials	4.42	28	60
Photographs	4.33	42	49
Park, trails, and/or facility usage data	4.32	37	51
Resident survey data	4.25	42	46
Facility quality data (e.g., age, condition, maintenance)	4.25	44	43
Economic impact data	4.21	43	45
Tours of facilities or programs with officials	4.16	31	48
Citizen testimonies at public meetings	4.13	50	37
Data on facility inequities or gaps in service	4.10	44	37
Meetings with community advocates of parks and recreation	4.03	48	31
Charts, infographics, and/or illustrations of data	4.01	48	30
Storytelling (i.e., community member testimonials)	3.95	51	28
Community petitions	3.51	41	16

Note. 5-point scale from 1 = very ineffective to 5 = very effective.

SECTION 7: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the era of the COVID-19 pandemic and the nation's large scale reckoning with systemic racism, Pennsylvania park and recreation providers faced a variety of impacts to their programs, facilities, and services. Agencies most often experienced increased use of parks, programs were cancelled or cut, new programs were developed, maintenance was deferred, and staff development activities were reduced. Corresponding with impacts of the pandemic, increases in operational costs were common due to increased labor/material prices, aging infrastructure, impact from high use, costs associated with COVID-19 policies/safety, weather events, and loss of staff and volunteers. In cases where providers indicated more stable operational costs, they cited reasons such as sound budgetary/purchasing practices, delayed investments, volunteers and partnerships, and reduction of services. Contrary to frequent increases in operational costs, a majority of directors and officials reported that tax-based funding had remained relatively consistent during the same time period.

Local officials play a significant role in tax-based funding allocations for parks and recreation, and thus we sought to assess their perceptions of parks and recreation's contributions during the pandemic, and how such contributions, among other factors, may be associated with funding allocation decisions. Officials considered parks and recreation to be of high importance and quality during the pandemic, and recognized the contribution of parks and recreation to important community priorities. In particular, they felt that parks and recreation contributed most to youth development, community health, and real estate development. Furthermore, park and recreation services were statistically perceived as more important during the pandemic among officials who 1) believed they help solve important community problems; 2) had a more vocal constituency in support of parks; 3) personally used these services; and 4) had a good/excellent working relationship with their park and recreation leadership.

While they regarded parks and recreation as just as essential as other services in their community during the COVID-19 pandemic, response to hypothetical funding scenarios indicate that officials still perceive parks and recreation as a discretionary service. When officials were asked how they would hypothetically allocate budget dollars across a series of community services during a budget deficit and surplus, parks and recreation realized

the highest average amount gained during a surplus, but also had the greatest amount taken away during a deficit, suggesting that while parks and recreation are important to officials, they are considered a non-essential amenity. Given the discretionary nature of parks and recreation in the minds of local officials, advocating to officials for consistent funding for parks and recreation remains an important priority. When asked about the effectiveness of various funding advocacy strategies, directors perceived that one-on-one engagement with officials, photos, and use of data on parks, trails, and/or facility usage were most effective. Moreover, as a means of supplementing tax-based funding and recovering operational costs, directors and officials commonly reported that they had or were intending to seek relief funding through the CARES Act or ARPA relief funds to be used for conservation, trails, parks, or other recreation purposes. Those who sought CARES Act funding (about a third of officials and half of directors) were largely successful, indicating that their agencies had or would receive funding. A majority planned to seek ARPA funding as well.

In addition to assessing park and recreation funding in the era of COVID-19, we also sought to assess park and recreation providers' awareness of how systemic racism impacts parks and how various community stakeholders bring attention to racial inequities in parks and recreation. Drawing on previous research which indicates a significant legacy of systemic racism upon park access/distribution, BIPOC experiences within parks, and ethno-racial representation in participation and management of parks, we developed a series of items to reflect critical consciousness of systemic racism in parks (CCSRP), or the extent to which individuals are critically aware of how systemic racism impacts parks. Overall CCSR was moderate among our sample, indicating room for growth in knowledge of how systemic racism impacts parks. Such knowledge is important, as it may be an important contributor to actions which support racial equity. CCSR was higher among directors and those working in urban or suburban communities compared to officials and those working in rural communities. Among officials, CCSR was higher among those with more liberal social and economic ideologies. Finally, we asked officials and directors about the extent to which members of their community or local institutions were vocal about racial inequities in parks and recreation; most indicated these community stakeholders were not at all vocal about these inequities.

In conclusion, parks, recreation, and trails have generally been seen as valuable assets among different audiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic era, and these resources attracted significant federal investment. Despite that infusion, there are still opportunities

to invest and extend the impact of parks and recreation through other sources of funding and there remains work that needs to be done to promote equity throughout all aspects of park and recreation operations including leadership, policy, funding, and resource allocation.

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PENNSYLVANIA RECREATION & PARK SOCIETY

The Voice of Pennsylvania Recreation and Parks

PRPS is the principal statewide association providing professional development, leadership, advocacy and resources for those working and volunteering in the parks and recreation field.

The Society's members include managers of municipal and state recreation and park systems, recreation therapists and wellness specialists, higher education professors and students, managers and programmers of commercial recreation facilities, suppliers and manufacturers of recreation and park products and services, and citizen members of community recreation and park boards across the Commonwealth.

PRPS serves its members and corporate, organizational and community partners by providing industry news and trends, legislative advocacy, technical assistance and resources, and many professional development opportunities and networking forums each year.

Founded in 1935, PRPS is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) professional membership association with nearly 2,000 members statewide.

