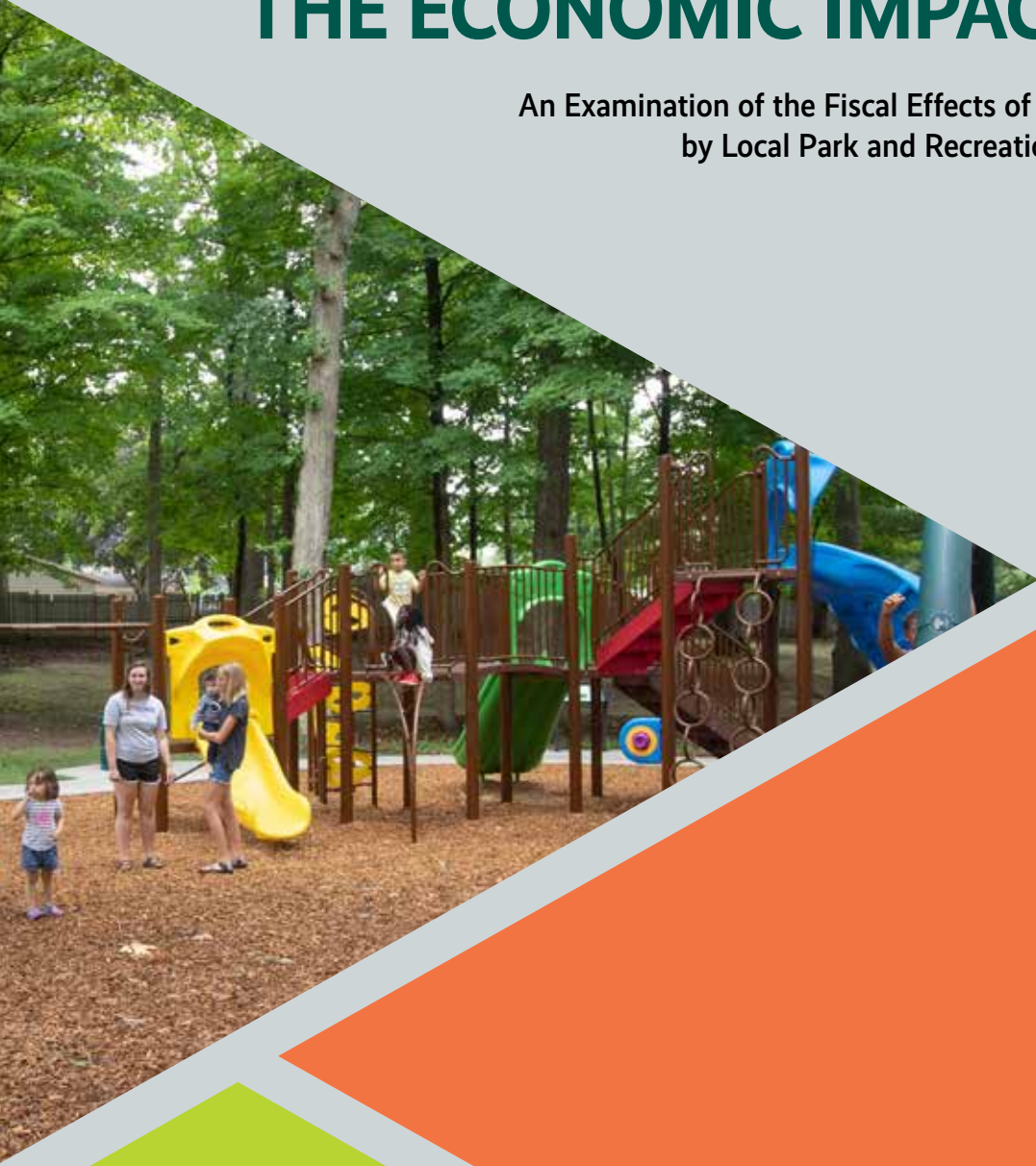


# THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF PARKS

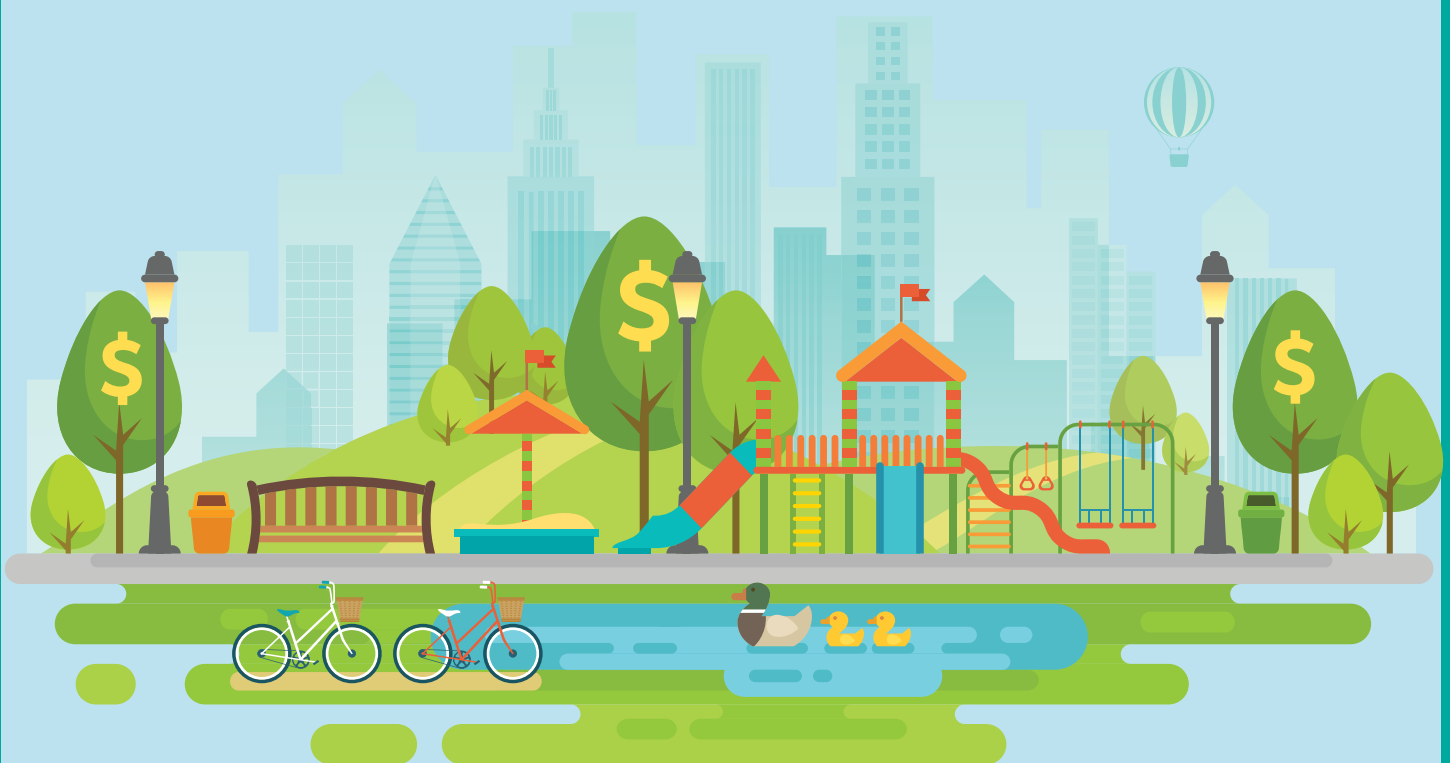
An Examination of the Fiscal Effects of Operations and Capital Spending  
by Local Park and Recreation Agencies on the U.S. Economy



NATIONAL RECREATION  
AND PARK ASSOCIATION

## KEY FINDINGS

**Local public park and recreation agencies in the United States generated more than \$201 billion in economic activity and supported almost 1.1 million jobs that boosted labor income by more than \$63 billion from their operations and capital spending in 2021.**



### Impact of Local Park and Recreation Agencies on the U.S. Economy – 2021

	Economic Activity	Employment
<b>Total Impact</b>	<b>\$201.4 billion</b>	<b>1,065,832 jobs</b>
Operations Spending	\$102.1 billion	609,093 jobs
Capital Spending	\$99.3 billion	456,739 jobs

Sources: IMPLAN and Center for Regional Analysis – George Mason University for NRPA, U.S. Census Bureau

Parks and recreation is essential infrastructure in healthy, vibrant and resilient communities. Through the tireless efforts of hundreds of thousands of full-time, part-time and seasonal workers — and supported by countless volunteers and advocates — local park and recreation agencies have a positive impact on the lives of millions of people. Park and recreation facilities, amenities and programming are diverse; they range from no- or low-cost fitness opportunities (such as a walking trail or a fitness class at a community center) and access to nutritious meals at out-of-school time programs for youth to providing our cities, towns and counties with cleaner air and water thanks to preserved open spaces.

Park and recreation professionals and their agencies make critical contributions to their communities as highlighted by the National Recreation and Park Association's (NRPA) Three Pillars:

- **Health and Wellness** – Local park and recreation agencies provide spaces, programs and services that are essential to a community's vitality. They also serve as key factors in advancing health equity, improving individual and community-level health outcomes, and enhancing quality of life. Park and recreation professionals are uniquely positioned to create — in partnership with the community, public health leaders and other local organizations — upstream solutions that catalyze and transform park and recreation agencies into holistic and people-centered Community Wellness Hubs.
- **Equity** – Every person in every community deserves to benefit from the power of parks and recreation. The very philosophy behind public parks and recreation is the idea that all people — regardless of race, ethnicity, age, income level, identity or ability — have access to programs, facilities, places and spaces that improve quality of life and build healthy communities. Parks and recreation truly builds communities — communities for all.
- **Conservation** – Creating resilient and climate-ready communities depends on parks and recreation. Park and recreation professionals are champions in addressing our most pressing environmental challenges; the parks and open spaces they manage maximize the benefits of nature to achieve positive and equitable health and economic impacts at the community level.

Park and recreation professionals and their agencies make another valuable contribution: promoting economic activity that makes our cities, towns and counties more prosperous. Just how significant is the impact of local park and recreation agencies on the U.S. economy?

To answer this question, NRPA joined forces with the Center for Regional Analysis at George Mason University in 2015, to conduct the first nationwide study on the economic impact of local park and recreation agencies' operations and capital spending. Since then, NRPA and the Center for Regional Analysis have partnered twice more to update that landmark 2015 research: in 2018, 2020, 2022 and 2023. Each of the studies focuses exclusively on the direct, indirect and induced effects local park and recreation agencies' spending have on economic activity using U.S. Census Bureau data compiled for the analysis. This report summarizes the key findings of the 2023 research.

# U.S. ECONOMIC IMPACT

Local park and recreation agencies employed nearly 326,000 full-time and part-time employees in 2021, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. This includes almost 161,000 full-time park and recreation professionals. That translates to more than \$41 billion of operations spending by the nation’s more than 10,000 local park and recreation agencies. This spending — combined with capital expenditures — ripples through the national, regional and local economies as park and recreation employees spend their paychecks, park and recreation agency vendors hire workers, and both agencies and their vendors purchase products and services to serve their clients.

The result of park and recreation expenditures on the nation’s economy is immense. The shared impact of operations and capital spending by U.S. local park and recreation agencies in 2021 resulted in more than \$201 billion in economic activity and nearly \$97 billion in added gross domestic product (GDP) and supported nearly 1.1 million jobs that paid salaries, wages and benefits totaling \$63 billion.



Local park and recreation agencies generated more than \$201 billion in economic activity and supported nearly 1.1 million jobs in 2021.

People attend the 32nd Annual Independence Day Parade in Farragut, Tennessee.  
Photo by Carisa Ownby.

## Impacts of Local Park and Recreation Agency Spending on the U.S. Economy – 2021

	Total Impact of Local Park and Recreation Agencies' Spending
Economic activity (transactions)	\$201.39 billion
Value added (gross domestic product)	\$96.82 billion
Labor income (salaries, wages, benefits)	\$63.03 billion
Employment (jobs)	1,065,832 jobs

Sources: IMPLAN, Center for Regional Analysis – George Mason University for the National Recreation and Park Association, U.S. Census Bureau

## STATE-LEVEL ANALYSIS

This study also examined the economic impact of local park and recreation agencies' spending in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The methodology used in the state-level analysis mirrored that for the national study. The estimates of total economic impacts include the direct, indirect and induced effects of operations and capital spending by local park and recreation agencies in each state and the District of Columbia.

### Impact of Local Park and Recreation Agency Spending on State Economies – 2021

State	Employment	Labor Income	Value Added	Output
Alabama	9,798	\$398,704,487	\$570,702,548	\$1,309,907,431
Alaska	1,537	\$82,455,209	\$126,856,456	\$264,175,941
Arizona	16,144	\$842,530,384	\$1,229,479,203	\$2,611,583,243
Arkansas	5,412	\$231,508,840	\$337,779,912	\$812,108,830
California	105,185	\$7,015,817,289	\$9,852,445,969	\$20,610,171,288
Colorado	39,666	\$2,289,009,753	\$3,373,686,516	\$7,412,567,838
Connecticut	4,647	\$207,123,013	\$301,891,489	\$542,528,518
Delaware	711	\$34,019,865	\$47,120,297	\$97,396,913
District of Columbia	3,166	\$265,576,281	\$347,723,530	\$846,038,307
Florida	82,175	\$4,235,872,315	\$6,627,002,141	\$15,204,744,352
Georgia	21,321	\$1,009,936,445	\$1,559,049,716	\$3,412,751,970
Hawaii	6,268	\$346,881,667	\$494,130,828	\$922,757,607
Idaho	3,898	\$142,695,442	\$218,568,328	\$587,289,523
Illinois	50,116	\$2,618,156,004	\$3,857,814,811	\$7,719,590,054
Indiana	9,422	\$318,649,774	\$543,058,517	\$1,269,172,310
Iowa	6,501	\$246,902,422	\$400,057,101	\$936,465,472
Kansas	8,341	\$340,007,723	\$482,982,394	\$1,054,388,638
Kentucky	5,057	\$192,529,258	\$267,231,646	\$772,561,017
Louisiana	8,748	\$352,020,886	\$551,029,980	\$1,260,213,280
Maine	1,887	\$71,301,968	\$106,220,231	\$213,746,212
Maryland	18,336	\$1,054,928,798	\$1,539,157,747	\$3,090,438,029
Massachusetts	8,462	\$564,270,832	\$757,906,719	\$1,422,694,593
Michigan	17,094	\$857,517,869	\$1,281,006,934	\$3,019,862,866
Minnesota	21,645	\$1,313,220,147	\$1,942,746,032	\$4,233,369,257
Mississippi	4,967	\$199,452,694	\$296,239,547	\$772,874,085
Missouri	15,970	\$691,649,606	\$1,042,371,522	\$2,187,473,188

### Impact of Local Park and Recreation Agency Spending on State Economies – 2021 (cont.)

Montana	1,646	\$67,521,983	\$94,580,651	\$230,669,752
Nebraska	5,577	\$276,019,493	\$416,952,138	\$984,900,955
Nevada	14,122	\$768,177,531	\$1,308,670,952	\$2,684,109,240
New Hampshire	1,286	\$50,177,976	\$74,285,761	\$150,279,811
New Jersey	10,913	\$531,555,264	\$696,409,460	\$1,171,593,908
New Mexico	4,995	\$190,548,003	\$270,234,178	\$577,786,899
New York	49,565	\$3,568,361,982	\$5,212,213,153	\$10,127,185,662
North Carolina	25,384	\$1,248,318,025	\$1,861,717,329	\$4,140,349,212
North Dakota	5,083	\$178,576,529	\$259,217,469	\$667,742,465
Ohio	33,567	\$1,733,786,369	\$2,563,841,528	\$5,499,400,171
Oklahoma	9,197	\$447,366,134	\$681,849,607	\$1,753,213,809
Oregon	13,237	\$693,613,577	\$1,008,293,802	\$2,037,032,443
Pennsylvania	14,606	\$886,365,375	\$1,303,968,438	\$2,800,882,729
Rhode Island	1,063	\$57,651,215	\$78,385,103	\$148,300,764
South Carolina	12,705	\$546,478,992	\$803,372,743	\$1,799,386,345
South Dakota	2,447	\$88,430,728	\$122,585,910	\$306,467,307
Tennessee	11,256	\$529,233,512	\$759,322,617	\$1,506,053,763
Texas	74,722	\$4,298,709,928	\$6,246,759,900	\$13,756,542,099
Utah	15,960	\$583,774,292	\$882,830,752	\$1,961,890,359
Vermont	854	\$35,615,430	\$51,787,857	\$118,470,769
Virginia	23,057	\$1,082,581,591	\$1,646,102,520	\$3,356,202,188
Washington	23,475	\$1,703,928,040	\$2,637,557,108	\$5,092,555,395
West Virginia	1,745	\$60,317,087	\$103,781,471	\$245,121,969
Wisconsin	15,258	\$826,673,253	\$1,195,523,909	\$2,758,529,235
Wyoming	3,705	\$165,161,863	\$253,205,824	\$543,010,454

Sources: IMPLAN, Center for Regional Analysis – George Mason University for the National Recreation and Park Association, U.S. Census Bureau

NOTE: The sum of the state-level impacts presented in this table does not equal the national-level economic impact estimates presented in the previous section. The difference reflects how the full economic impact of local park and recreation agency spending is not confined within state borders. For example, if the playground equipment installed at a park in Kalispell, Montana, came from a manufacturer located in Florida, the value of that product production would not count as an impact on the Montana economy, nor does the study include such an impact in the estimates for Florida.



Children play in the water in front of a fire truck in the park. Photo courtesy of Ginger Clark, Centreville-Washington Park District.

These estimates of the economic impact generated from park and recreation agency spending come from an input-output model that estimates direct, indirect and induced effects of those expenditures.

- **Direct effects** reflect the spending by local park and recreation agencies — whether for operations or capital programs — and include wages and benefits for agency employees and spending on equipment, utilities, goods and services.
- **Indirect effects** capture the spending associated with local park and recreation agencies' vendors. An example is an agency contracting with a local landscaping company to mow ballfields. The landscaping company hires employees, purchases mowers and contracts with a bookkeeping service; in turn, the bookkeeping service leases office space, employs workers, purchases office supplies and so forth.
- **Induced effects** track the impact of consumer spending (from wages) by park and recreation agency employees and employees working for the agency's vendors.

The model estimates the total effects on output, employment, labor income and value added resulting from park and recreation agencies' operations and capital spending:

- **Output** measures the value of the resulting transactions
- **Employment** is the number of headcount jobs, both full and part time
- **Labor income** includes salaries, wages and fringe benefits
- **Value added** is the measure most equivalent to GDP and includes property income, dividends, corporate profits and other measures

## Your Local Park and Recreation Agency Generates Additional Economic Benefits

While the figures presented in this report are significant, they represent only one aspect of the economic benefits of public parks. Indeed, the conclusions of this report are conservative estimates of parks and recreation's full economic benefits.

Beyond the impact of local park and recreation agency spending, other critical economic impacts from public parks include:

- **Health and wellness:** Parks and recreation promotes improved physical and mental health. This not only helps people feel better, but it also can help lower medical and insurance costs for those people taking advantage of those facilities and activities. [NRPA-commissioned research resources](#) demonstrate how parks and recreation supports healthy, productive lives and resilient, cohesive communities. Eighty-three percent of U.S. adults responding to a [June 2023 NRPA Park Pulse](#) agreed that it is important to have access to indoor and outdoor recreational areas, classes and activities in order to lead a healthy lifestyle. Ninety-three percent of U.S. adults responding to the [June 2021 NRPA Park Pulse](#) poll indicated that their mental health was improved by services offered by local park and recreation professionals and agencies.
- **Conservation and resiliency:** Park and recreation agencies' protection of land, water, trees, open spaces and wildlife improves air and water quality in communities. Through effective land management methods and green infrastructure investments, parks and recreation makes communities more resilient to natural disasters, reducing disaster recovery and insurance costs. Ninety-three percent of respondents to NRPA's [2019 Engagement With Parks](#) survey indicated it is essential that their local government acquire, construct and maintain local parks, trails and green spaces near bodies of water to protect natural resources in their community. Six in seven U.S. adults responding to an [April 2023 NRPA Park Pulse](#) poll expressed support for their local park and recreation agency's environmental initiatives.
- **Property values:** Economic research has demonstrated consistently that homes and properties located near parklands have higher values than those located farther away. Higher home values not only benefit the owners of these properties, but also add to the tax base of local governments. Six in seven respondents to the [2023 Engagement With Parks](#) survey indicated that they seek high-quality parks and recreation amenities when choosing a place to live.
- **Economic development:** Parks and recreation improves the quality of life in communities and benefits the local economic development of a region. Eighty-seven percent of corporate executives responding to a [2023 Area Development](#) survey rated quality-of-life features as an important factor when choosing a location for a headquarters, factory or other company facility. Further, 94 percent of adults responding to the [March 2020 NRPA Park Pulse](#) poll expressed support for their local government investing in infrastructure improvements that promote economic activity in their community.
- **Visitor spending:** Many local park and recreation agency amenities spur tourism to their respective locales, generating significant economic activity, including (but not limited to) increased sales at local restaurants/bars and hotels. An [August 2017 NRPA Park Pulse](#) poll found that people seek out park and recreation amenities — such as beaches, parks, trails and secluded and relaxing places — when choosing a vacation destination. An [August 2021 NRPA Park Pulse](#) poll noted that more than nine in 10 U.S. adults find park and recreation summer activities create fond memories.



## KEY CONCLUSIONS



Ashland Park along the Ohio River in Clarksville, Indiana, overlooking the Louisville, Kentucky Skyline. *Photo courtesy of Ken Conklin.*

Park and recreation professionals at the more than 10,000 agencies across the United States positively contribute to their communities in many different ways. Not only are parks leading the way in terms of health and wellness, equity, and conservation, but they also drive significant economic activity.

Local park and recreation agencies generated more than \$201 billion in U.S. economic activity and supported nearly 1.1 million jobs from their operations and capital spending alone in 2021. These results, combined with studies on the state and [national](#) park systems, are proof that public parks are robust engines of economic activity.

Parks and recreation is a part of a broader outdoor recreation economy. The [Bureau of Economic Analysis](#) estimates that the outdoor recreation economy represents \$563.7 billion of gross domestic product (GDP) — or 2.2 percent of the U.S. economy.

Beyond the impact of their expenditures, park and recreation agencies generate even more economic value through their promotion of health and wellness, as well as conservation and resiliency that foster higher property values and increase tourism. Critically, park and recreation amenities are the cornerstones to improving a locality's or region's quality of life — a significant factor in attracting employers and workers to an area.

When combined with the ability to deliver healthier and happier communities, the powerful impact parks and recreation has on economic activity highlights the fact that park and recreation agency offerings are not merely a “nice-to-have” luxury government service. Instead, parks and recreation transforms our cities, towns and counties into vibrant and prosperous communities for all.

Policymakers and elected officials at all levels of government should take notice and support greater and more stable taxpayer funding of parks and recreation. Local park and recreation agencies not only help raise the standard of living in our neighborhoods, towns and cities, but they also spark economic activity that can have ripple effects well beyond any initial expenditure in creating jobs and prosperity throughout our nation.

## METHODOLOGY

This study uses data from the U.S. Census Bureau to estimate operational spending by local park systems. The [Survey of Public Employment & Payroll](#) offers estimates of agency employment and payrolls, while the [Annual Survey of State and Local Government Finances](#) provides agency operations spending data. Researchers at the Center for Regional Analysis at George Mason University (GMU) derived its capital spending estimates from reports available from the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) and a review of budget records for dozens of park systems selected to reflect a diverse range of localities and park operating characteristics.

The GMU researchers used the IMPLAN economic input-output model to estimate the total economic impacts, often called “economic contributions,” generated by park system operating expenditures and capital spending. Consistent with previous studies prepared for NRPA, the researchers categorized park agency spending as if it were private-sector businesses operating parks, recreation and similar entertainment venues. In their judgment, this is more accurate than treating the expenditure as general local government spending (i.e., park and recreation agency spending patterns are much more like a privately-run entertainment venue than a local tax office).

The researchers adjusted the model inputs to reflect actual compensation paid to park system employees, which is often different than what private-sector firms pay their employees. The IMPLAN model is the most widely used tool for estimating economic impacts. This model is updated frequently to reflect shifts in the structure of the economy; therefore, the results reported here are not directly comparable to the findings of previous analyses.



More than 100 people (kids and adults) came together to create the largest community painted mural in Minnesota. The mural is 30'x30' and represents elements that the children found beautiful in the city. The majority of the mural was painted with one-inch brushes or smaller. *Photo courtesy of Jennifer Fink, City of New Brighton, Minnesota.*



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