

# Canadian City Parks Report

Findings and Impact 2019–2024



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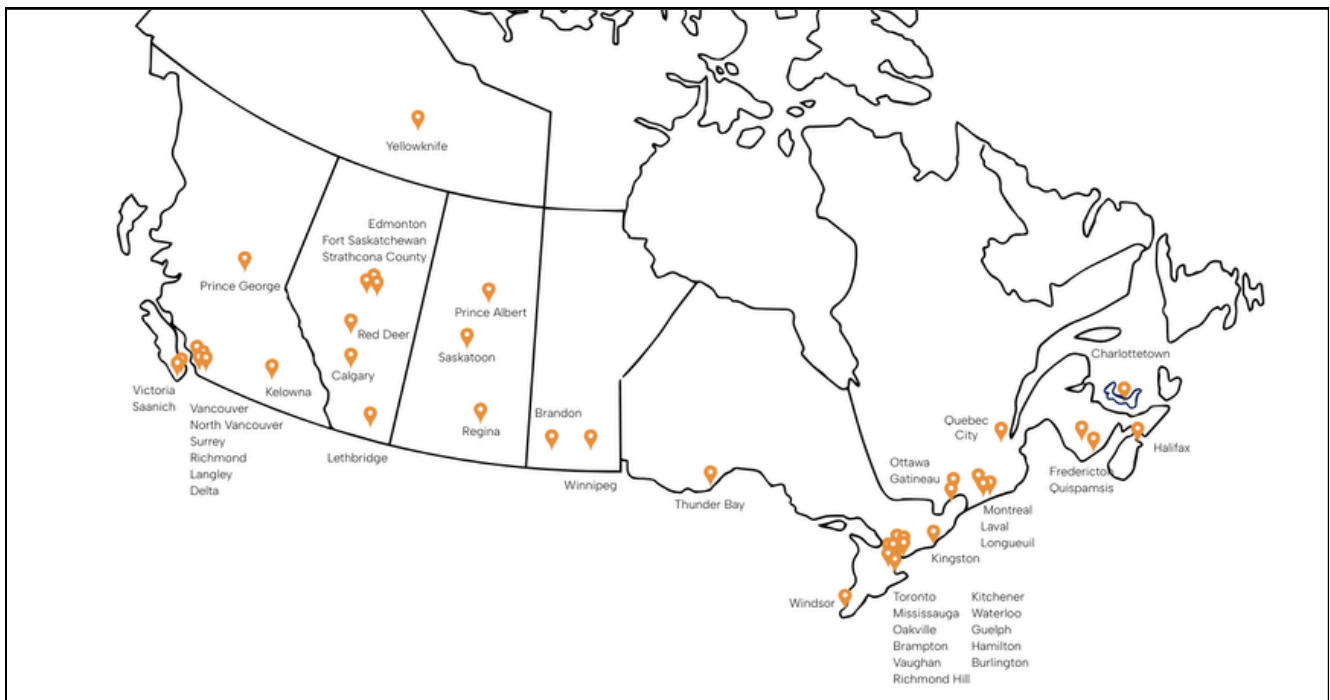




# Introduction

City parks staff steward some of our most vital yet undervalued public assets: urban parks and green spaces. These areas are far more than patches of grass, they are dynamic community hubs, crucial environmental infrastructure, and essential public health resources.

The Canadian City Parks Report (CCPR) equips municipal park staff, community advocates, non-profits, and the public with data and stories that made the case for parks. Between 2019 and 2024, the report was released annually, showcasing trends, challenges, and opportunities in our sector. Forty-six municipalities participated over these years, collectively representing 48% of Canada's population.



When Park People launched the CCPR in 2018, we anticipated 10 municipalities would participate in that first year. Instead, 23 stepped forward. The enthusiasm was evident from the start, demonstrating that we had identified and addressed a critical gap in available information about Canadian city parks. Advocates cited the report in deputations to City Councils, city staff referenced the CCPR in policy development, nonprofits have used the research to support grant applications and mainstream media turned to the reports as coverage of park issues surged moving into 2020.

## An Unprecedented Time

We wrote these five reports against the backdrop of massive societal upheaval. The COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally altered how Canadians relate to urban parks, with impacts that continue to resonate. The movement for racial justice sparked by George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis in 2020 catalyzed a broader reckoning with systemic racism in parks and public spaces—and how it shapes who has power over how parks are created, maintained, and programmed, and who can access and enjoy these shared resources.

Meanwhile, climate change shifted from distant threat to immediate reality. British Columbia's 2021 heat dome claimed over 600 lives, most of them isolated seniors trapped indoors without access to cooling spaces. Hurricane Fiona devastated Atlantic Canada in 2022, toppling urban tree canopies and destroying park infrastructure. Across the country, weather has become increasingly volatile: droughts force park volunteers into bucket brigades to save newly planted gardens, while recurring floods prompt communities to reimagine what they need from green spaces. Parks and recreation staff play a key role in supporting communities in these crisis situations. This work often piles on top of continuing to deliver regular operational work, not to mention reckoning with these crises in their own lives and experiences of their cities.

Yet this turbulent period also brought meaningful federal investment in urban nature. The National Urban Parks Strategy launched in 2021, committing to 6 new national urban parks by 2025. The Natural Infrastructure Fund arrived in 2022, directing \$200 million in projects toward urban green infrastructure like Toronto's ravine system. The Healthy Communities Initiative invested \$60 million in public spaces as part of pandemic recovery—an unprecedented commitment to urban placemaking. Finally, the 2023 Climate Adaptation Strategy answered years of advocacy by acknowledging at the federal level what communities already knew: mitigation alone cannot address the climate crisis.





## A Window of Opportunity—and What Comes Next

In retrospect, 2020–2023 may represent a high-water mark for urban green space investment, particularly for park non-profits. The convergence of pandemic recovery funding, new dedicated urban park resources, and surging public appreciation for the spaces that sustained communities through lockdown fueled remarkable innovation. Parks revealed themselves as multifaceted assets: social service infrastructure, biodiversity sanctuaries, and sites for reconciliation. We were fortunate to be able to capture much of this evolution in the annual CCPR.

From the vantage point of 2026, the landscape has shifted dramatically. Parks are more broadly valued than ever, yet economic headwinds have upended municipal funding models. A slowing real estate market and provincial and federal policy changes are impacting the development charges that many municipalities depend on for park capital investment. Non-profit organizations that benefited from the pandemic funding wave now face a receding tide of support.

The paradox is stark: just as we grasp the unrealized potential of our parks, the gap between current and required investment has never been wider. Although this is sobering, it also represents an extraordinary opportunity. If we unite as a sector to secure the support that parks need, the coming years could mark a turning point in our efforts to build resilient, healthy, inclusive, and joyful cities.

To support this vision, Park People is evolving the CCPR in 2026. First, we will maintain the current city data profiles that have proven invaluable to practitioners and advocates and hope to include new cities representing more of Canada. Second, we are moving from a story-based approach toward more targeted, action-oriented information that park practitioners can apply in their own work.

Learn more about this evolution in the report's conclusion.





Photo : Arts in the Parks, Toronto. Credit: Toronto Arts Foundation.

## How to Use This Report

This report synthesizes the major findings from the CCPR over these pivotal years. It serves as a curated and thematically organized index of links to stories from across the years, with comments on the trends we witnessed through that time. To dive even deeper into the CCPR, particularly the data in the city profiles, find all of the reports in [our library](#).

The report concludes with directions for the reader on how to contribute to the ongoing research. In 2026 and 2027, Park People is diving deeper, collaborating more and sharing what we learn along the way. We hope you join us.



# At a Glance

1

## **Health Imperative: Parks as Essential Public Health Investment**

One of the most consistent trends across the CCPR data is the growing use and recognition of city parks as essential public spaces, a shift dramatically accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. What were once considered amenities are now firmly recognized as critical spaces that support the mental and physical health and well-being of city residents.

2

## **The Funding Gap: Resources and Capacity Constraints**

Despite documented increases in park use and public valuing of parks, municipalities report ongoing financial and staffing constraints that limit their capacity to maintain and enhance park systems.

3

## **Environmental Function: Climate Adaptation and Biodiversity**

Urban parks serve important environmental functions, particularly in climate adaptation and supporting urban biodiversity, roles that have gained increased attention as climate impacts intensify.

4

## **Equity and Access: Addressing Systemic Barriers**

Beginning prominently in 2021, participating municipalities increasingly reported efforts to address equity, inclusion, and reconciliation in park planning and management, reflecting broader societal reckonings with systemic barriers to park access and enjoyment.

5

## **Evolving Practice: Community Engagement and Complex Operations**

Park management now encompasses complex social dimensions beyond traditional maintenance, including community engagement strategies and navigation of challenging urban issues that intersect with public space.

# 1. Health Imperative: Parks as Essential Public Health Investment

One of the most consistent trends across the CCPR data is the growing use and recognition of city parks as essential public spaces, a shift dramatically accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. What were once considered amenities are now firmly recognized as critical spaces that support the mental and physical health and well-being of city residents.

## Growth in Use (2020–2021)

The 2021 report found greater use of parks than in the preceding year. This wasn't just a temporary blip; after an initial reduction in use of parks and greenspaces with park closures during the early stages of the pandemic, park use returned to pre-pandemic levels. The 2022 and 2023 reports indicated a sustained increase in park visitation with a large majority of users expecting this elevated use to continue post-pandemic.

## Public Health and Well-Being Imperative

Parks have become vital for mental and physical health.

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**95%**

of residents believed parks positively impacted their **physical health**.  
~ 2024 report

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**93%**

of residents believed parks positively impacted their **mental health**.  
~ 2024 report

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**71%**

of Canadians felt parks had a positive impact on their **social well-being during the pandemic**.  
~ 2021 report



This reinforces the idea that parks are not just nice-to-haves, but must-haves for community resilience.



*"Our cities' green spaces have never been more important as communities grapple with the realities of a global pandemic... our city parks have become essential spaces to restore our physical and mental well-being at a stressful and uncertain time."*

~ 2020 report

## Winter Wonderland

The pandemic spurred an increased use of parks in winter.

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# 50%

of Canadians in 2021 reported **using parks more in winter** than pre-pandemic, with **73%** expecting this trend to continue.

~ 2021 report

In Regina, the city started a new winter grant program to support outdoor community-led programming.

Prince Albert saw a 400% increase in downhill skiing and a 250% increase in cross-country skiing over 2019 levels.

Calgary installed 14 portable fire pits.

And Brampton expanded its outdoor skating rinks.

This opens new avenues for winter programming as well as a need for year-round maintenance.

Photo credit: Family Skating Day, Toronto. Credit: Friends of Regent park.



## Read more:

**2019**

### [Take It to the Park](#)

*New, creative programming brings arts, food, and mental health therapy to city parks*

### [Brrrrring People Out in Winter](#)

*Initiatives helping residents suit up and get outside into parks during the colder months*

**2020**

### [The Feel Good Factor](#)

*How urban biodiversity improves our well-being and why that matters even more during COVID-19*

### [The Space Squeeze](#)

*As populations and development boom in many cities, finding space for new parks is creating challenges—and spurring innovation*

### [Take Me Out to the Dog Park](#)

*How cities are dealing with the high demand for—and high controversy around—dog parks*

### [Feed Them and They Will Come](#)

*How creative community groups and city support are growing connections through food in parks*

**2023**

### [Plan for Higher Park Use](#)

*Over the past three years, we've reported on the sharp uptick in usage of city parks across Canada*

**2024**

### [Making Room for Parks](#)

*How Mississauga is expanding parkland in a growing urban neighbourhood to meet future demand*

### [Food For Thought](#)

*How the City of Victoria is using parks as a tool towards food justice*





## 2. The Funding Gap: Resources and Capacity Constraints

Despite documented increases in park use and public valuing of parks, municipalities report ongoing financial and staffing constraints that limit their capacity to maintain and enhance park systems.



### Budgetary Shortfalls as the Norm

A major finding across all years is the struggle to adequately fund park operations and maintenance. This leads to a detrimental cycle of deferred maintenance and an inability to meet public expectations.

**80%**

of cities reported **insufficient park operating budgets.**  
~ 2024 report

**78%**

of cities cited **inadequate staffing levels.**  
~ 2024 report

### Backlog of Repairs

The under-investment contributes to a growing backlog of essential repairs and renewals, making future projects more expensive.

**94%**

of cities said they were challenged by **aging infrastructure.**  
~ 2021 report

## Public Willingness to Invest

Counterintuitively, while municipalities struggle, the public largely supports more funding.

The political constituency for parks clearly exists, and its influence needs to be harnessed to support greater investment from all orders of government.

# 85%

of residents support **more public funding for park improvements**, including maintenance, amenities, and programming.  
~ 2024 report

## Pandemic's Fiscal Shadow

The 2022 report highlighted that COVID-19 significantly impacted municipal park budgets.

# 93%

of cities reporting **negative impacts on capital budgets** and **73% on operating budgets**.  
~ 2022 report

### Park Budgets in the Time of COVID-19 (2022)

1. While park budgets remained stable during the pandemic, additional pressures from sanitization and maintaining high use areas meant cities had to stretch budgets further.
2. The pandemic contributed to delayed park projects and rising material costs, which may have longer term impacts on park renewals.
3. A sharpened focus on equity coming out of the pandemic means many cities are planning new park strategies that ensure funding is more equitably distributed.



## Exploring New Models

The 2023 report suggested that cities need to "**explore new park typologies and funding arrangements**" to adapt to increasing demands without commensurate budget increases.



# 3. Environmental Function:

## Climate Adaptation and Biodiversity

Urban parks serve important environmental functions, particularly in climate adaptation and supporting urban biodiversity, roles that have gained increased attention as climate impacts intensify. Parks are more and more understood as 'upstream solutions' for the environmental and economic impacts of extreme weather events.



### Climate Change Solutions

Parks are recognized as vital green infrastructure for climate change mitigation and adaptation. They provide urban cooling through tree canopy, absorb stormwater through permeable surfaces, and support biodiversity. The 2023 report called for cities to "systematize climate resilience park improvements."





## Biodiversity under Threat

Despite their importance, protecting and enhancing biodiversity within urban parks remains a challenge. The 2020 report specifically focused on "the importance of urban biodiversity, and the role that city parks can play to support and connect valuable ecosystems." Threats from climate change make this task even more difficult.

## Naturalization Efforts

There's a growing trend towards "prioritiz[ing] public education along with naturalization" (2023 report), indicating a shift towards more ecologically sensitive park management.

## Green infrastructure adoption

The 2023 report indicated that

**80%**

of cities are moving towards using **green infrastructure solutions** (e.g., bioswales, permeable pavement) for stormwater management in parks.

~ 2023 report

Securing the funding necessary to implement these solutions at full scale remains a challenge.

Photo: The Meadoway, Toronto. Credit: Toronto and Region Conservation Foundation.



Since 2020 Park People has explored the different ways Canadian cities are addressing climate change and biodiversity loss.

## Read more:

**2024** [Learning to Bend with the Wind](#) – *Lessons learned from Hurricane Fiona in Charlottetown*

[Protecting Biodiversity from National to Local](#) – *How Nature Canada is building a web of partners at all scales to help Canada achieve its biodiversity conservation goals*

**2023** [Planning Through the Lens of Nature](#) – *How Brampton is fusing nature and recreation through its Eco Park Strategy*

[Reconfiguring our Relationship to Water](#) – *Naturalizing the mouth of Toronto's Don River*

**2022** [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*

[The Nourishment of Nature](#) – *How we can foster a greater sense of connection to nature through awareness, reciprocity, and gratitude—and why that matters.*

**2021** [Hot Cities, Cool Parks](#)

[Valuing Parks as Natural Infrastructure](#) – *Why cities are moving more towards putting a price on what parks provide*

[Sharing the Benefits of Green Space](#) – *How using an environmental justice lens can help tackle climate change resilience and inequity in parks*

[Changing Climate Changing Parks](#) – *How climate change is impacting how we plan, design, and maintain parks*

[Eight Climate Resilient Canadian Park Projects](#) – *How cities are planning parks to help adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change*

**2020** [The Feel Good Factor](#) – *How urban biodiversity improves our well-being and why that matters even more during COVID-19*

[Deepening the Conservation Conversation](#) – *How we can both deepen the conversation about biodiversity and broaden it to include more people*

[Connecting the Dots](#) – *Why habitat corridors are important for urban biodiversity and what cities are doing to make sure parks large and small are connected*





# 4. Equity and Access: Addressing Systemic Barriers

Participating municipalities reported on their efforts to address equity, inclusion, and reconciliation in park planning and management, reflecting broader societal reckonings with systemic barriers to park access and enjoyment.



## Bridging Equity Gaps

The reports consistently highlight disparities in park access and experience, especially for marginalized, racialized, and Indigenous communities.

24%

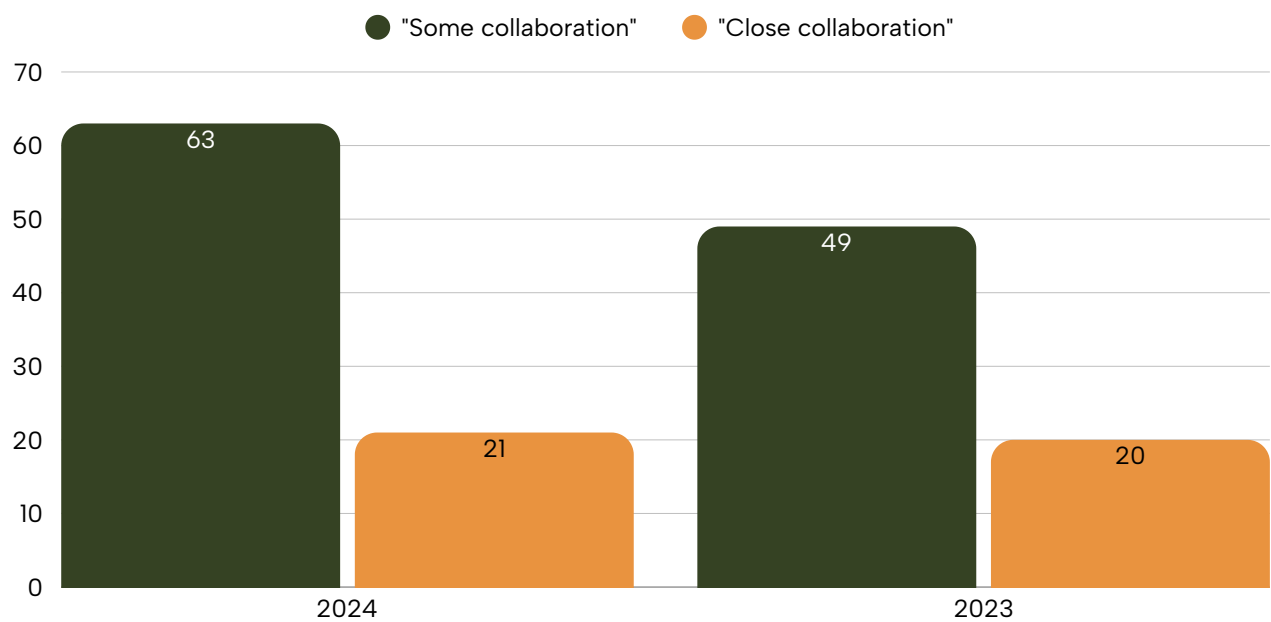
of Black, Indigenous and other racialized communities reported **fear of ticketing** and **22% harassment** in parks, a significantly higher rate than other demographics  
~ 2021 report

Photo: "Nature and Engagement in Economically Stressed Communities" workshop with Akiima Price, Park People Conference.



This underscores the need to address systemic barriers. Increasing collaboration within municipalities is one approach, as shown in the graph below ‘close’ collaboration between parks departments and anti-racism/equity offices, which is defined as meeting 5 or more times/year, remains steady although overall collaboration is increasing.

Percentage of municipalities that indicate collaboration with Anti-Racism/Equity Office:



Close collaboration = meeting 5 times/year or more.

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.  
~ 2022 report

## Reconciliation in Practice

Many cities have prioritized embedding a reconciliation/decolonization lens into their work (e.g., **76%** in 2022).

This involves concrete actions such as:

- Renaming parks to honour Indigenous histories and presence.
- Collaborating with Indigenous communities on park design, planning, and programming.
- Returning important indigenous cultural and environmental practises to land in urban parks (e.g. prescribed burns).

Photo: kihciy askiy Ground Blessing ceremony, Edmonton. Credit: Teresa Marshall.



*“There is still plenty of work left to undo the colonial violence of the past, and governments at the municipal, provincial and federal level should actively engage in meaningful Indigenous consultation to lead the creation of cultural learning spaces in city parks as a starting point. In order to achieve successful consultation, engagement strategies must build authentic relationships with multiple Indigenous community members and respectfully make space for varying Indigenous worldviews. Further, municipalities must acknowledge that empowering Indigenous community members to lead educational programming, park signage, language camps, and plant/medicine gardens also empowers the community as a whole.”*

~ Reclaiming Urban Spaces is a Decolonial Act, Nickita Longman, 2022 report.





*"I think for Indigenous Nations, parks can be important places to occupy and to reclaim... This is our home. We think of it as an extension of our community."*

~ Working Together in t̥əmt̥əx̥w̥t̥ən/ Belcarra Regional Park, Gabriel George, 2024 report.

## Universal Design

The reports consistently show a growing focus on inclusion through accessible design, ensuring parks are usable by all people, regardless of age or ability. With a large majority of cities (e.g., **87%** in 2021 and **78%** in 2022) prioritizing the development of universally accessible designs in their park projects.

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# 87%

of cities prioritized  
**accessible design** in 2021,  
**78%** in 2022.

As described in "Leading Through Lived Experience" (2024 report), a key strategy is to consult people with lived experience of disability. For example, Waterfront Toronto established a permanent Accessibility Advisory Committee composed of individuals with disabilities to review the design of all future projects.

Photo: Waterfront Toronto's Accessibility Advisory Committee on a site tour with Waterfront Toronto staff. Credit: Waterfront Toronto.



# 5. Evolving Practice:

## Community Engagement and Complex Operations

Park management now encompasses complex social dimensions beyond traditional maintenance, including community engagement strategies and navigation of challenging urban issues that intersect with public space.

### Desire for voice

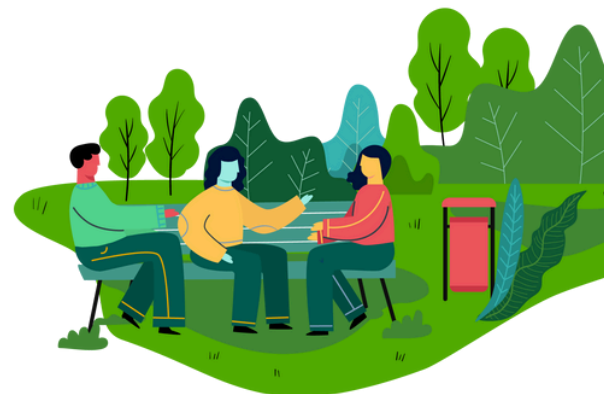
While residents deeply value parks, a significant portion (e.g., **52%** in 2024) feel disempowered and lack a voice in park decisions. Cities often struggle to provide ongoing, proactive community engagement beyond standard consultations due to limited resources (e.g., **83%** of cities in 2024). The 2023 report called for increased "funding and supports for community involvement."

### Collaboration is key

The 2024 report, titled "Bridging the Gap: How the park sector can meet today's complex challenges through collaborations and partnerships," emphasizes the growing importance of working with non-profits and other city departments.

# 84%

84% of cities saw **increased collaboration between parks and other city departments** during the pandemic.  
~ 2021 report



## Managing diversity of use

With increased use and diverse activities taking place in parks comes increased potential for conflict between different user groups. The 2023 report advises cities to "experiment with flexible designs and policies to manage conflicting use."

In 2022 municipalities reported an increasing interest in wide variety of activities and spaces including but not limited to:



Photo: Multi-use trail, Kelowna. Credit: Tourism Kelowna.



## Homelessness in Parks

A profound and challenging trend is the rise of homelessness in parks, reported by **90%** of cities in 2022. This necessitates a shift towards human rights-based approaches to providing amenities and services, as advocated in the 2023 report to "adopt rights-based encampment strategies."



## Evolving Role of Park Staff

Parks departments are increasingly tasked with addressing issues beyond traditional park management, including social equity, reconciliation, and climate change. Systems problems require systems solutions and require capacity, skills and resources to integrate social and environmental justice and larger scale climate solutions into 'park work'. This highlights a critical need for more funding, training, and strategic inter-departmental collaboration.

# 92%

of cities agreed that in recent years parks departments are facing **increased pressure to address issues beyond 'traditional' park issues.**

~ 2024 report

Photo: Protest against an encampment eviction, Trinity Bellwoods Park, Toronto. Credit: Hector Vasquez.



# Conclusion: Impacts and What's next?

Since 2019, readers have used the CCPR to:

## Inform Their Work in Municipalities

Cities used it for benchmarking comparator cities, compiling council reports, internal strategic reviews, and understanding how other municipalities overcome challenges.



*"... we have found the outputs very helpful on the planning side and I know the other sections also find it helpful for their work to understand what challenges are arising elsewhere and how they are being overcome."*

~ Municipal planner, 2024

## Advocate for Parks

The report provided credible national evidence for conversations with senior decision-makers, justifying investments in parks and recreation, and elevating parks from "nice to have" to essential public infrastructure. Organizations used the data repeatedly when highlighting park importance, and particularly to support arguments for accessible and inclusive park design.



*"The Canadian City Parks report has offered us a polished, accessible way to converse with high-level decision makers about the issues facing our urban green spaces. This is essential as 57% of the world's population lives in cities and we need park spaces for mental health, exercise as well as places to learn about biodiversity and ecological stewardship."*

~ Nonprofit Organization Reader, 2023



## Conduct Academic Research and Teach Students

The CCPR served as teaching material in university courses, baseline data for graduate research, and filled a gap as the only national dataset on park trends in Canada. The CCPR has been cited in English, French, Spanish and Japanese across various sectors including health, urban and community planning, urban ecology, recreation and more.



*"I use it every year in my parks management class and other recreation/tourism courses we teach."*

~ Academic Reader, 2025

## Develop Compelling Communications about Parks and their Value

The report helped frame parks within broader issues like mental health, equity, and democratic access to green spaces. It was used in presentations, webinars, social media, and publications reaching regional and national audiences.



*"You do an excellent job of putting these [reports] together – topical, evidence-based, well-written and illustrated – they are a must-read for folks in this profession."*

~ Consultant Reader, 2021

Many of the examples above reflect the report's broader use: setting benchmarks, informing communications, and strengthening advocacy. These are valuable outcomes, but our aim for 2026 is to build on them—we want to help people adapt promising practices from the reports in their own cities.





## What's Next for Park People and the Canadian City Parks Report

In the coming years, we aim to provide park professionals, advocates and non-profits with the detailed, actionable information they need to scale the positive innovations captured in past CCPRs. We are starting with:

- A toolkit that will take readers along a step-by-step path towards creating opportunities for equitable nature connection. This resource will have case studies from across Canada and practical tools that can be applied to their work.
- A collaborative report focused on Indigenous-led urban landcare in communities across Canada.

Parks are a locally responsive and relevant solution to so many challenges affecting our cities. They contribute to addressing national and international goals and agendas such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 11, Sustainable Cities and Communities), the Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (commonly known as 30x30) as well as the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). With over 80% of Canadians living in cities, Canada can leverage investments in city parks to build community strength and deliver the climate resilience, social connection, human wellbeing, and biodiversity preservation we need.

### How can you get involved?

- If you work for a municipality and are interested in participating in future CCPRs, please [contact us here](#).
- Want to learn about the benefits of sponsoring this report and other Park People projects? [Please reach out here](#).
- [Sign up](#) for our newsletter





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