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# CONNECTING YOUTH TO NATURE SURVEY

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A SUMMARY OF RESULTS FROM  
AN NRPA MEMBER SURVEY



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## Introduction

Today, people have an increasingly disconnected relationship with nature. The causes are numerous, including our overscheduled lives, the allure of technology and poor access to quality parks and open space. This detachment is particularly acute among today's youth, who are spending less time outdoors than their parents and grandparents did at the same age. As a result, children are growing up without a one-on-one relationship with nature, denying them the many physical and mental health benefits resulting from being outdoors. A further concern is that the lack of regular outdoor activity may lead to today's youth being less willing to support financial investments for park and recreation agencies when they become taxpaying adults.

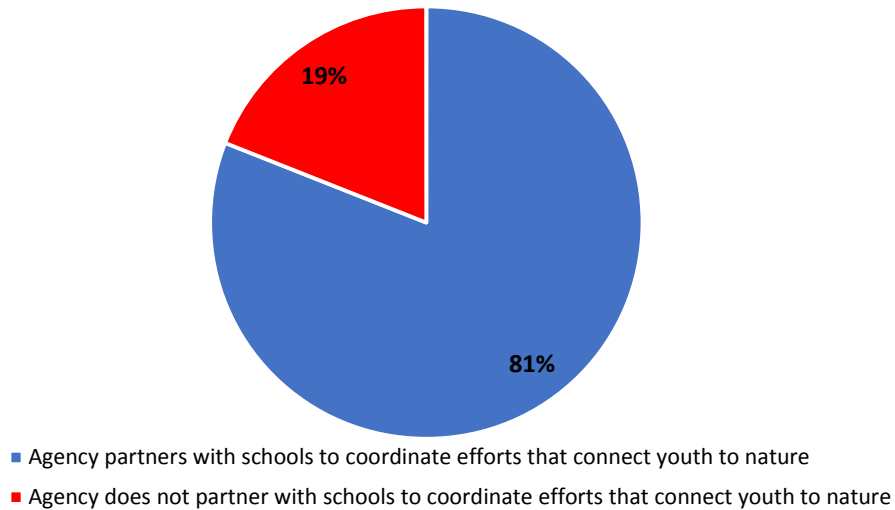
Local park and recreation agencies are now working to reconnect young residents to nature. Through out-of-school time programming, the installation of nature play spaces and the establishment of outdoor recreation opportunities, park and recreation agencies provide a multitude of opportunities to connect children, families and communities with the outdoors every day. However, visitors to our public lands are not always reflective of the full spectrum of our country's diversity. To address this, park and recreation agencies across the country are developing strategies that create equitable access to nature — specifically for urban and underserved populations.

To support the NRPA Innovation Lab in Austin, Texas — focused on the topic of connecting communities with nature — the NRPA Research team sent a 16-question survey to directors at urban park and recreation agencies. This survey looked at how urban park and recreation agencies are bridging the gaps between youth and nature, and the challenges they face in making programs more widely available and effective. The survey generated responses from 68 park and recreation agencies, the findings from which inform this report.

## Key Findings

One way that park and recreation agencies can help connect their community's youth to nature is by coordinating with local schools on specialized programming and schoolyard greening efforts. Examples of the programming and activities include coordinated afterschool programs, nature-based field trips, and formal and informal shared usage agreements that transform schoolyards into publicly accessible spaces where children can play outside of school hours. Eighty-one percent of survey respondents report that their agencies partner with schools to coordinate efforts that connect youth to nature.

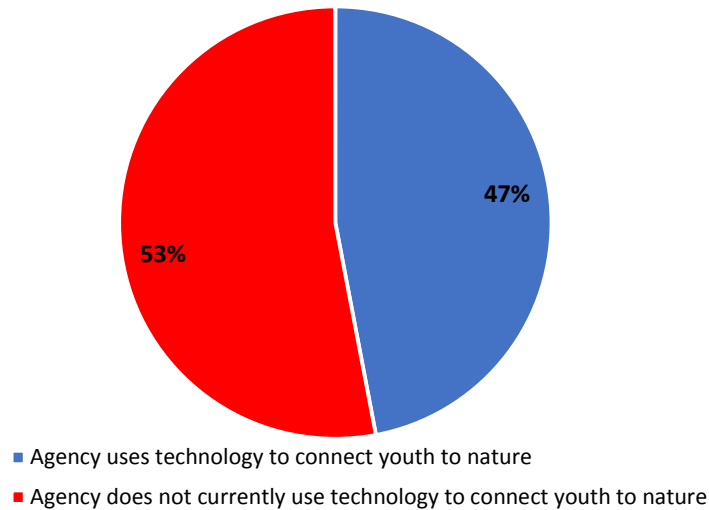
**Park and Recreation Agencies Coordinating Efforts  
with Schools to Connect Youth to Nature**  
(Percentage Distribution)



The splendor of nature and the outdoors competes with many things for youth’s attention. The list of potential distractions includes school, homework, family and friends. In recent years, the growing allure of technology has been taking up a greater percentage of a typical youth’s day, whether it is engaging in social media, playing games or watching videos. In many cases, the growth in technology usage has substituted for other forms of leisure, including playing outside and exploring nature in local parks. Nearly half of park and recreation agency directors specifically identify technology as a significant barrier that is pulling youth away from opportunities to interact with nature.

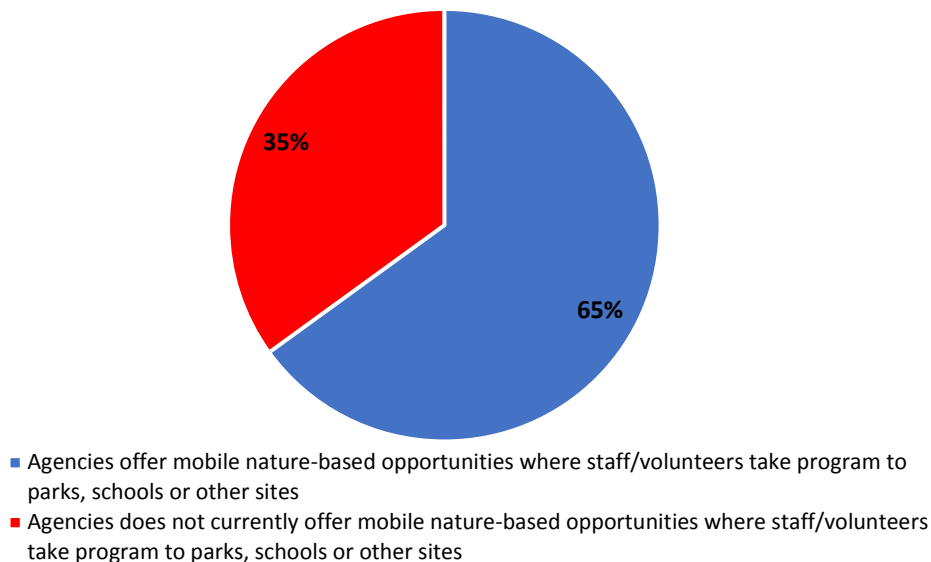
Many agencies, however, see technology not just as a deterrent to greater outdoor time, but also as a tool to reconnect youth to nature. As a result, nearly half of park and recreation agencies are using technology in this way. Examples of how park and recreation agencies are harnessing technology to connect youth to nature include the development of mobile apps that engage youth in citizen science, gamify outdoor exploration and cultivate curiosity about the natural world. Parks are starting to incorporate the use of technology and apps into existing nature programs and are encouraging the use of technology outdoors by installing public charging stations attached to benches and waystations.

**Park and Recreation Agencies  
Using Technology to Connect Youth to Nature**  
(Percentage Distribution)



Park and recreation agencies also understand that nearby opportunities to connect with the natural world and engage in programs that teach about nature are not always available. By creating programs that bring environmental education and recreation experiences to youth, parks are becoming mobile classrooms, traveling science laboratories, “pop-up” recreation sites and roving, in-school park environmental educators. These are a few of the strategies parks employ to increase the numbers of young people they reach each year.

**Park and Recreation Agencies Taking Mobile Nature-Based  
Opportunities Directly to Parks, Schools and Other Sites**  
(Percentage Distribution)

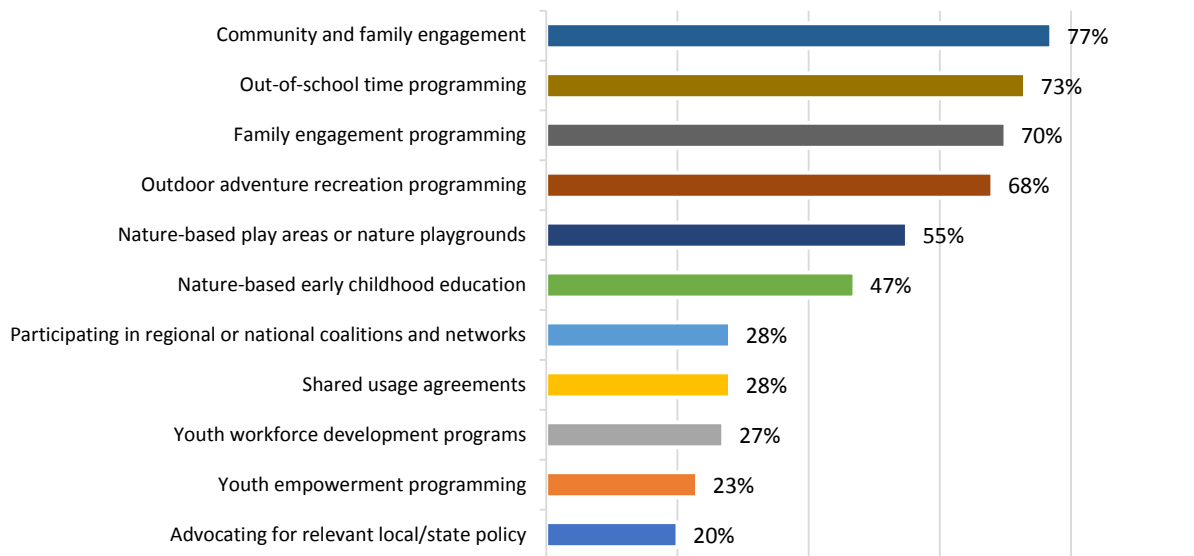


Park and recreation agencies employ many different strategies and tactics to connect their community’s youth to nature. Widely employed strategies include community and family engagement (77 percent), out-of-school time programming (73 percent) and family engagement programming (70 percent).

Other strategies employed by park and recreation agencies to connect youth to nature include:

- Outdoor adventure recreation programming (68 percent)
- Nature-based play areas or nature playgrounds (55 percent)
- Nature-based early childhood education (47 percent)

**Park and Recreation Agencies' Strategies to Connect Youth to Nature**  
(Percent of Agencies)



A third of urban park and recreation agencies use mapping or other data tools to identify where the greatest need is for connecting youth-to-nature programming. GIS mapping and demographic data help agencies identify areas in their communities that lack quality parks and open space. In many cases, areas that lack quality parks and open space may overlap areas with significant numbers of underserved populations who lack the means to safely travel to areas where they would be able to connect to nature.

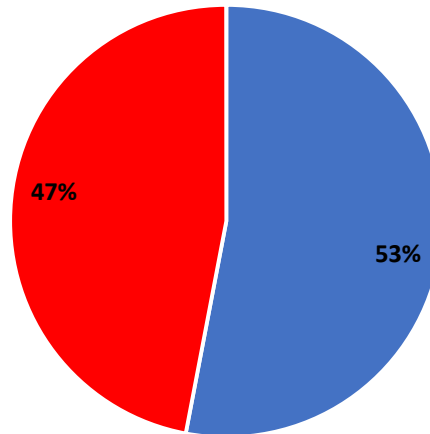
Data suggests that youth living in underserved communities — particularly those of underrepresented racial and ethnic groups and those from low-income households — have fewer exposure opportunities with nature. Whether it is because of living in a neighborhood that lacks parks, trails, rivers and other open space, or due to a lack of safe transportation

options to reach such space, these children are less likely to benefit from the transformative power of connecting with nature.

To address this, just over half of urban park and recreation agencies currently deploy strategies with the goal of eliminating this disparity. These actions include:

- Incorporating nature programming in day camps and afterschool programs
- Community outreach in underserved communities to identify both barriers and opportunities to greater participation in nature-based activities
- Offering grant programs designed to attract underrepresented youth into nature-based fields and summer programs
- Investing in infrastructure that improves pedestrian and bike trails in underserved communities.

**Agencies' Use of Strategies  
to Engage Underserved Youth with Nature  
(Percentage Distribution)**



- Agency employs strategies to engage underserved youth with nature
- Agency does not currently employ strategies to engage underserved youth with nature

Whereas park and recreation agencies are investing significant resources into programs designed to connect their community's youth to nature, most employ rudimentary measures to track the impact of these programs. Eighty-four percent of survey respondents report that their agencies measure the impact of their connecting youth to nature programming by counting the number of students that participate in this programming. Similarly, a quarter of agencies track the number of hours that students spend engaged in nature programming.

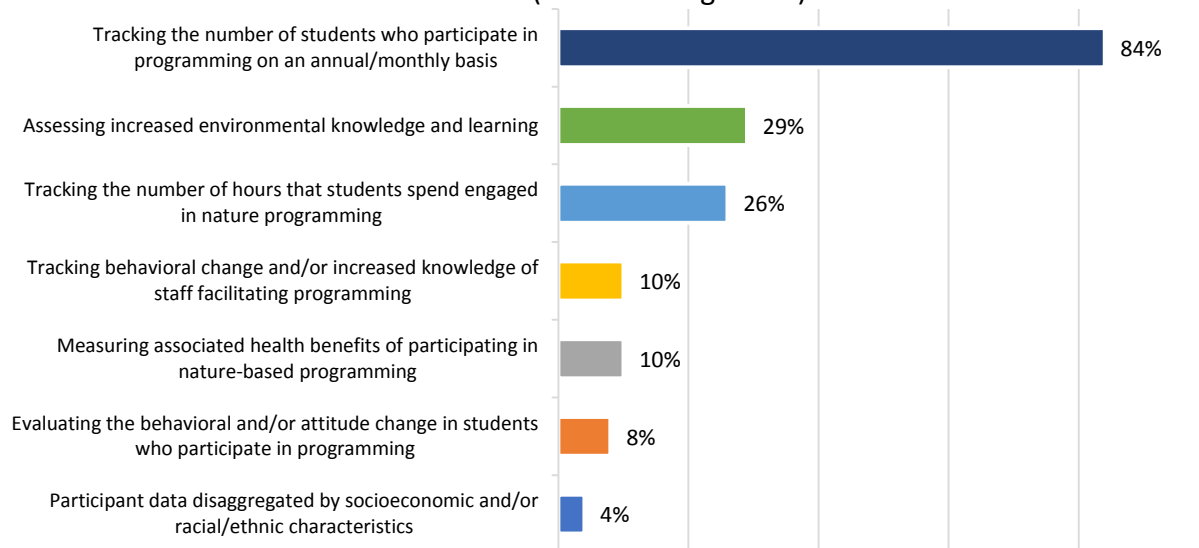
Less frequently, park and recreation agencies are tracking whether this programming is changing youth's knowledge and attitudes of nature. Twenty-nine percent of survey respondents indicate that their agencies are assessing increased environmental knowledge and learning. Even fewer agencies are doing the following:



- Tracking behavior change and increased knowledge of staff facilitating programming (10 percent)
- Measuring associated health benefits of participating in nature-based programming (10 percent)
- Evaluating the behavioral and attitude changes in students that participate in programming (8 percent)

### How Park and Recreation Agencies Measure the Impact of Its Connecting Youth to Nature Programming

(Percent of Agencies)



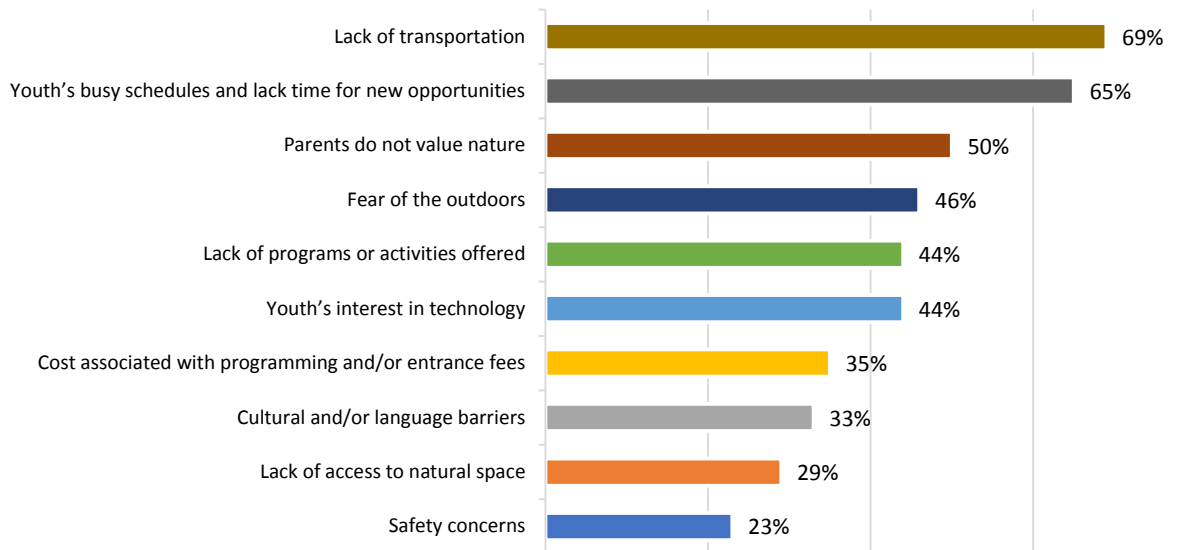
## Barriers

There are many barriers that keep youth from experiencing the outdoors and connecting to nature. By better understanding these barriers, park and recreation professionals can design programming and activities that overcome these impediments.

At least half of survey respondents identified three barriers: a lack of transportation (69 percent), over-programmed youth who lack time in their schedules to engage with the outdoors (65 percent) and parents do not place a high value on nature (50 percent). Other impediments that park and recreation professionals see as keeping youth in their communities from engaging with nature and the outdoors include:

- Youth’s fear of the outdoors (46 percent)
- Lack of programs or activities offerings (44 percent)
- Youth’s interest in technology (44 percent)
- Costs associated with programming and park entrance fees (35 percent)
- Cultural or language barriers (33 percent)
- Lack of access to natural space (29 percent)
- Safety concerns (23 percent)

### Barriers that Prevent Youth in the Community from Experiencing Nature and the Outdoors (Percent of Agencies)



Also keeping youth from connecting with nature are barriers that keep park and recreation agencies' programs from completely fulfilling this need. The greatest barriers preventing park and recreation agencies from expanding their programs the connect youth to nature are resource oriented:

- Limited staff capacity (86 percent)
- Costs associated with offering additional opportunities to connect youth to nature (58 percent)
- Lack of transportation (36 percent)

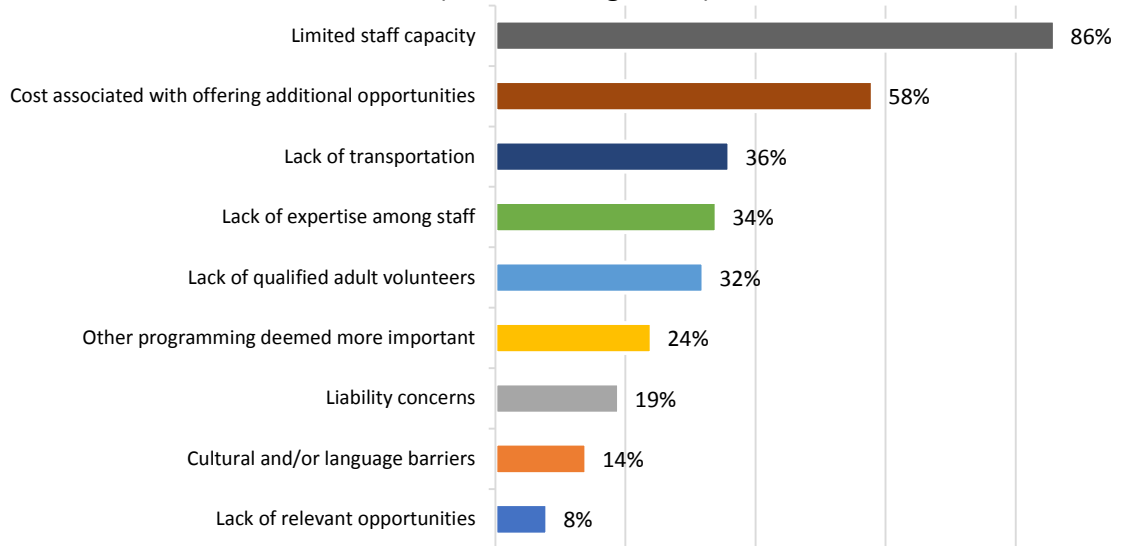
Some survey respondents indicate that their programs to connect youth to nature suffer from a lack of suitable staff, whether it is a lack of expertise among its staff (34 percent) or an inability to find qualified adult volunteers (32 percent). Further, a quarter of park and recreational professionals report that in an environment of scarce resources, the agency deems other programming beyond nature education to be of greater importance.

Other factors that park and recreation professionals see as keeping their agencies from being able to connect more youth to nature programming in their communities include:

- Liability concerns (19 percent)
- Cultural or language barriers (14 percent)
- Lack of relevant opportunities (eight percent)



### Barriers Preventing Park and Recreation Agencies From Expanding Efforts to Connect Youth to Nature (Percent of Agencies)



## Conclusions

While park and recreation agencies are community leaders in providing opportunities for youth to connect with the natural world, there is still more to learn about how to effectively employ strategies that connect youth to nature given limited park and recreation resources. In addition, to advocate for increased investments in and support for programs that connect youth to nature, park and recreation agencies are in need of further resources that effectively measure the impact and reach of their efforts.

This work is especially important for a younger, more diverse generation that lacks the same opportunities of their parents' generation. By developing strategies that address diversity and inclusion in all nature programs and spaces, park and recreation agencies can ensure the next generation of environmental stewards reflects the demographics of the nation and that all Americans benefit from and understand the importance of green space and nature experiences.