METHODOLOGY FOR PRODUCING THE REGIONAL PARKS SYSTEM ANNUAL USE ESTIMATE

METROPOLITAN COUNCIL

July 2026

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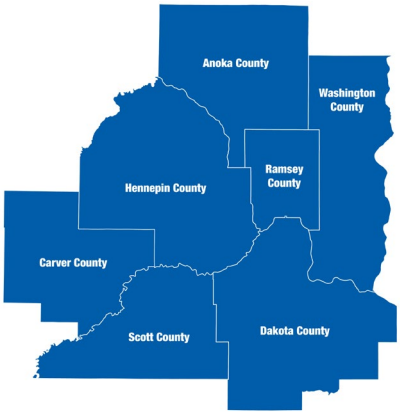

The Metropolitan Council is the regional planning organization for the seven-county Twin Cities area. The Met Council operates the regional bus and rail system, collects and treats wastewater, coordinates regional water resources, plans and helps fund regional parks, and administers federal funds that provide housing opportunities for low- and moderate-income individuals and families. The 17-member Met Council board is appointed by and serves at the pleasure of the governor.

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Introduction

The seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area is home to an expansive regional parks and trails system nationally renowned for its beauty, size, and variety of features. With 46 regional parks, 12 park reserves, eight special recreation features and more than 500 miles of regional trails, visitors enjoy ample opportunities for gathering, contemplation, recreation, and fun. It also preserves significant green space and wildlife habitat.

The Regional Parks System is operated by 10 partner agencies, including cities, counties, and special park districts, which work with the Met Council to protect natural resources and provide outdoor recreation for public enjoyment. The Met Council provides long-range system planning, investment, and coordination. The Met Council has produced annual use estimates for our regional parks and trails since 1995.

How the Annual Use Estimate is Calculated

One person entering a park or trail represents one visit. If a person visits a park or trail once each week for a year, it would count as 52 visits.

Counting Park and Trail Visits

The annual use estimate is based on the four-year average of summer visitor counts, including bikers and cyclists, pedestrians, horse-riders, boats, vehicles, and charter buses that enter the park through recognized park entrances. Entrances are designated by park agencies and updated annually. People in vehicles and buses are not counted individually. To determine the number of people entering in vehicles or buses, a person-per-vehicle average is multiplied by the number of vehicles or buses in each sample count. The person-per-vehicle averages come from the most recent Metropolitan Council Parks and Trails Visitor Survey. This year, the 2021 Visitor Study averages are used.

Counts are taken in two-hour samples between Memorial Day and Labor Day. Two-hour sample counts begin at 8 a.m., 10 a.m.,12 p.m., 2 p.m., 4 p.m., and 6 p.m. The entrances and times are chosen randomly, and the samples are split evenly between weekdays and weekends. Entrances deemed high use by agencies are 50% of each unit's sample. Samples are drawn equally from the first and second half of summer.

Averaging Counts to Reduce Anomalies

Agencies are scheduled to complete 16 sample counts per park, park reserve, regional trail, or special recreation feature unit. The samples for the current year and the three previous years are combined to determine the annual use for each park and trail. The four-year approach results in enough weekend and weekday samples to meet the requirements of at least 25 data points. New units counted for the first time have 52 samples, distributed between weekdays and weekends, drawn to establish a visitation baseline in the absence of multiple years of data.

The four-year approach reduces the effect of extreme weather or other anomalies on each unit's estimated visitation. It reduces the effects of a temporary closure of a popular facility and road construction to the facility. The four-year average also somewhat underestimates increased visitation associated with a major new facility feature, such as a swim pond or play structure. By the fourth year of the facility's existence, its visitation is fully represented in the data. The annual estimate makes no attempt to correct for overestimates due to temporary closures or underestimates due to facility additions. All agencies in the regional system are adding desirable facilities and experiencing temporary closures of facilities that are being redeveloped. Therefore, it is believed that the four-year average has negligible effects when comparing visitation across agencies.

Season Calculations and Additional Data

Summer visitation is calculated by taking the total number of people entering the park during each sample and multiplying it by the number of entrances and time slots that sample represents. Winter, spring, and fall seasonal visitation estimates are then calculated from the summer visitation using seasonal multiplier data derived from the Metropolitan Council 2021 Parks and Trails Visitor Survey.

Camping visits and special events are also added to the annual estimate. A camping visit is defined as a camper in the park for any part of a day, so a family of four who camped one night would be counted as 8 total visits. Special events are added to the annual use estimate when event attendance was greater than 300 people and the event did not take place during the sample counts. If sample counts occurred during a special event, counts are not included in the estimate. Camping and special event data are not averaged across four years since the implementing agencies have records reflecting those types of visits on an annual basis.

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