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# Homelessness in Parks

A summary of results from an NRPA membership survey



**NRPA**

National Recreation  
and Park Association



## **Homelessness in Parks: A Summary of Key Findings from an NRPA Research Survey**

Park and recreation agencies provide the members of their community with opportunities for physical fitness, a connection with nature and essential out-of-school-time care for children. But, behind the scenes, park and recreation agencies across the country increasingly find themselves on the frontline of community outreach. Many agencies go above and beyond historic expectations to be leaders in public health, setting the standards in sustainability and being a partner in reducing crime. And in many communities, park and recreation agencies are part of their cities' response to the delicate circumstances of homelessness.

The Department of Housing and Urban Development states that on any given night, over half a million people in the United States are individuals experiencing homelessness. The Department of Health and Human Services defines a homeless person as "an individual without permanent housing who may live on the streets; stay in a shelter, mission, single room occupancy facilities, abandon building or vehicle; or any other unstable or non-permanent situation." Research finds that approximately 30 percent of homeless individuals are unsheltered, living on the street, a park or in an abandoned building. There are a multitude of reasons why someone may be without a home, including loss of a job, rising rent prices, addiction, domestic violence, or mental illness.

In many communities, urban park and recreation agencies are finding themselves on the front lines of this issue because of the often heavy presence of homeless individuals on public parkland and in agency-run facilities. Matters surrounding homelessness are complex, with solutions that necessitate a holistic approach and collaboration between federal, state, and city agencies and nonprofit organizations.

The NRPA research team developed a 25-question survey to gain an understanding of the views and actions of park and recreation departments and other local government agencies toward the homeless population across the country. Sixty-five park and recreation agencies responded to the survey, the key findings from which are the basis of this report and were presented at the January 2017 NRPA Innovation Lab in Los Angeles.

Key survey highlights include:

- Cities' efforts to mitigate homelessness involve a citywide, cross-agency, cross-sector strategy, incorporating governmental agencies, non-profits, and faith-based and community organizations.
- Nonprofit organizations, departments of health and human services, and the police are cities' most frequently leaders in combating homelessness. Roughly three in five park and recreation agencies are partners in their cities' mitigation strategies.
- Most urban park and recreation agencies do not permit people to encamp on public land overnight, with more than half of agencies permitted to remove people with little or no notice.
- Three in four park and recreation agencies are using, or are considering the inclusion of, design and infrastructure elements that discourage people from staying overnight in parks.



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- A majority of urban park and recreation agencies rely on their cities' police departments to enforce anti-loitering rules on public park property.
- Over half of park and recreation agencies offer services to their homeless population, including access to restrooms and showers, shelter during periods of inclement weather and access to computers and telephones.

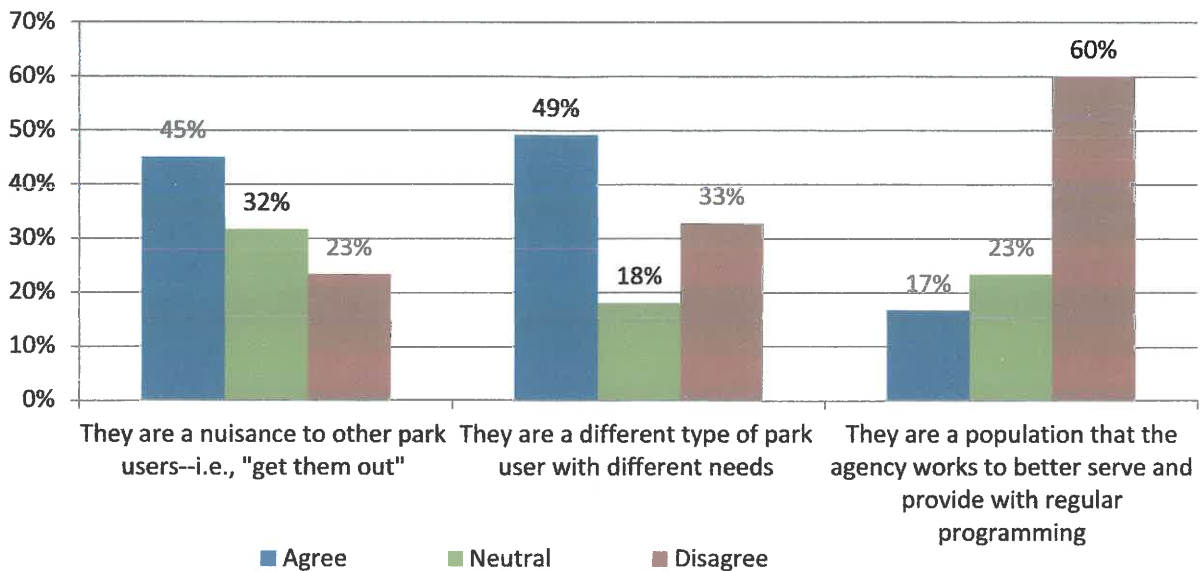
### **Viewing Homelessness in Parks**

Historically, park and recreation agencies have had a complicated relationship with the homeless community they serve. On one level, public parks are resources for the entire community, providing valuable services to all people. On another level, the prevalence of homeless individuals using park resources can put great pressure on the finite resources of park and recreation agencies. The circumstances of homelessness vary significantly by city, with each park and recreation agency facing a unique set of challenges and holding a unique perspective.

- Nearly half of urban park and recreation agency directors agree that individuals experiencing homelessness represent a different type of park user that has different needs (a third disagree with this statement).
- Forty-five percent of urban park and recreation agency directors view the homeless population as a nuisance that impedes other people's enjoyment of park resources. A quarter of urban directors disagrees with this statement.
- One in six urban park and recreation agency directors report that their agency is working to serve better and provide regular programming for their communities' homeless population.

Naturally, each of these statements is not mutually exclusive, with some agency directors agreeing with two or all three statements. In fact, there are agencies that see all three statements as working together to tackle homelessness in their cities.

### How Park and Recreation Agencies View Homelessness in Parks (Percentage Distribution)

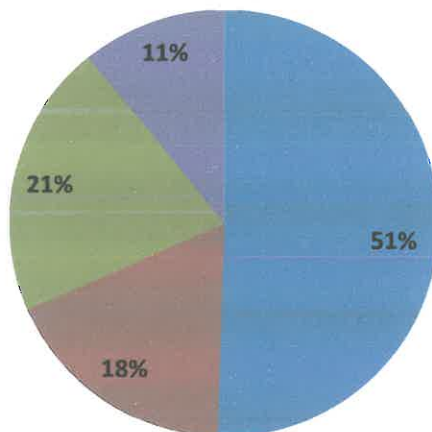


The issues surrounding homelessness are complex and touch many aspects of the community. As a result, mitigating homelessness cannot be the sole responsibility of one agency or one department within a city. In all, nine out of 10 urban park and recreation agency directors report that their city has tactics and strategies in place to alleviate homelessness in the community.

Half of urban park and recreation directors report that their city has a coordinated strategy to mitigate homelessness that includes partnering with other city agencies and departments, along with nonprofits, faith-based organizations, community organizations and other outside nonprofit partners. Other cities are less organized with their strategies for helping the homeless, with 18 percent of urban park and recreation agencies reporting that many of their cities' agencies contribute to strategy but in an uncoordinated fashion and 21 percent reporting ad-hoc tactics by some city agencies and outside nonprofits.



**Cities' Strategies for Mitigating Homelessness**  
(Percentage Distribution)



- Coordinated citywide, cross-agency, cross-sectoral strategy (including nonprofit organizations)
- Tactics among many city agencies, but not necessarily coordinated together
- Ad-hoc tactics by some agencies and outside nonprofits
- Little or no actions to mitigate homelessness

Park and recreation agencies typically do not lead their cities' efforts to mitigate homelessness. The leadership roles are instead taken by nongovernmental nonprofits and faith-based organizations (45 percent) and by the local department of health and human services (46 percent). In three out of 10 cities, the police department plays a leadership role in combatting homelessness. Only 11 percent of urban park and recreation directors indicate that their agency takes a leadership role in mitigating the homeless population in their communities.

More likely, park and recreation agencies act as partners or resources that their city use in their efforts to combat homelessness. Fifty-three percent of urban park and recreation directors indicate that their agency plays a partnership role in their cities' homelessness initiatives. Disappointedly, 36 percent of urban park and recreation directors indicate their agencies are neither a leader nor a partner in their cities' homelessness initiative even as their agencies' resources are affected by homelessness.

**Leaders and Partners in Cities' Homelessness Initiatives**  
(Percentage Distribution)

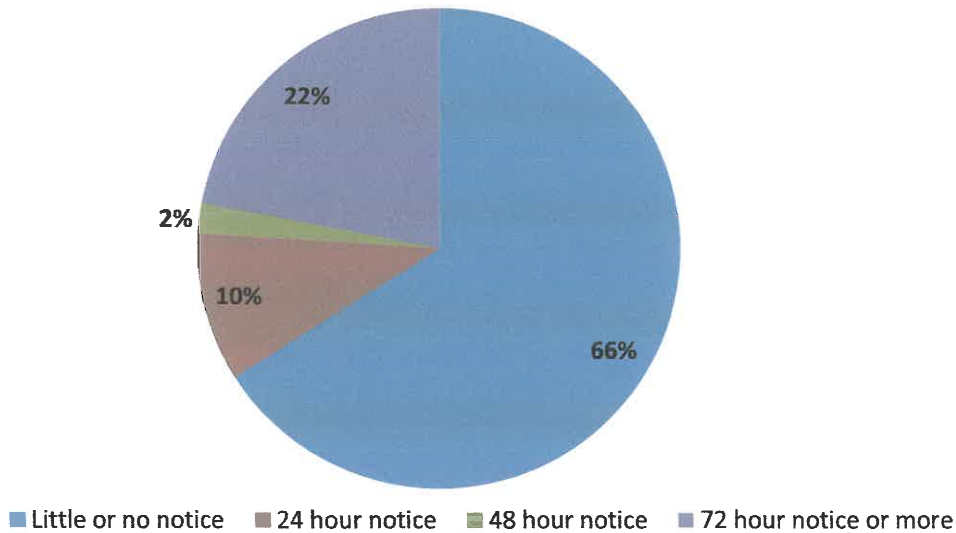
	Is a leader for the community	Is a partner or resource	Plays no significant role
Nonprofits/Faith-based organizations	45%	55%	*
Health/Human Services	46%	44%	10%
Park and Recreation	11%	53%	36%
Police	29%	65%	46%
Business Improvement Districts (BIDS)	3%	37%	60%
Libraries	2%	33%	65%
Schools	*	22%	78%

## Homelessness in Parks

Regardless of their role to end homelessness, park and recreation agencies are on the front line in these efforts as individuals experiencing homelessness frequently encamp on public parklands. Since these are public lands, they are resources available for the enjoyment of all the community's members. Thus, most urban park and recreation agencies—85 percent—do not permit people to encamp on parkland overnight. The vast majority of the remaining cities that do permit overnight camping only allow for short-term stays.

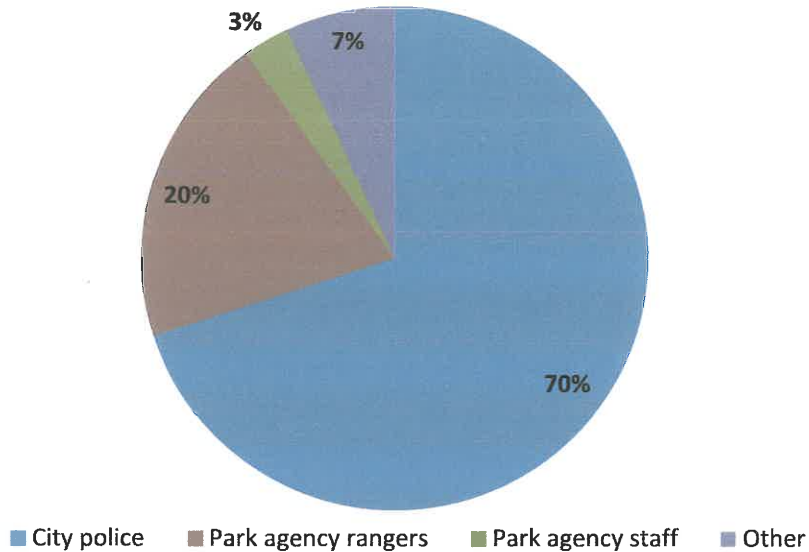
Some cities mandate that they may not remove people encamped on public parkland without giving prior notice. Twenty-eight percent of urban park and recreation agency directors indicate that their agency may remove people who are encamped only after providing notice, generally 72 hours. Fifty-six percent of urban directors indicate that their agency may remove homeless individuals encamped in their parks with little or no notice.

**Length of Notice Required Before Removing People Encamped on Public Parkland (Percentage Distribution)**



Typically, the city police department is the primary enforcer of anti-loitering rules for public parklands. Seven out of 10 urban park and recreation directors report that the city police are the primary enforcer of anti-loitering rules on public parkland. Another 20 percent of urban directors report that their own agency's rangers serve this function.

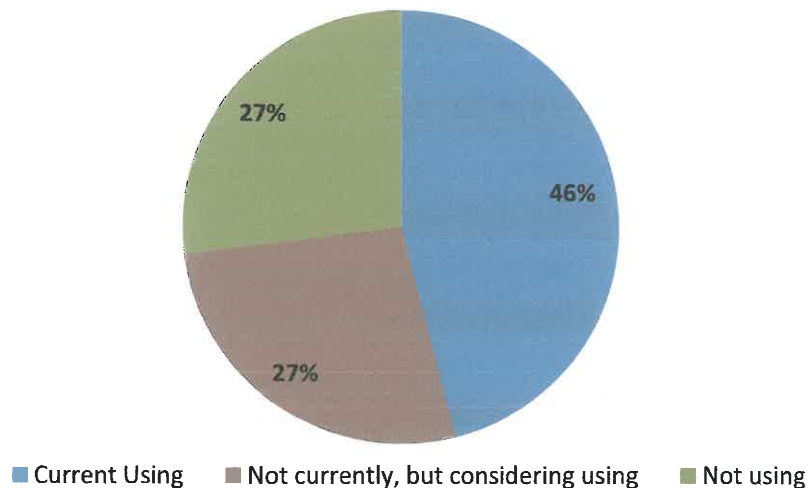
**Primary Enforcer of Cities' Anti-Loitering Rules on Public Park Property**  
(Percentage Distribution)



For park and recreation agencies, anti-loitering laws are not the only method available to discourage people from staying in public parks overnights. Another method includes using design features within public parks that discourage overnight stays. These features can include park bench design, fencing, lighting, maintenance of vegetation and security cameras.

Forty-five percent of urban park and recreation agency directors report that their agencies use design standards and infrastructure that discourage people from staying in parks overnight. Another 27 percent of urban directors indicate that their agencies are considering adding these features in the future.

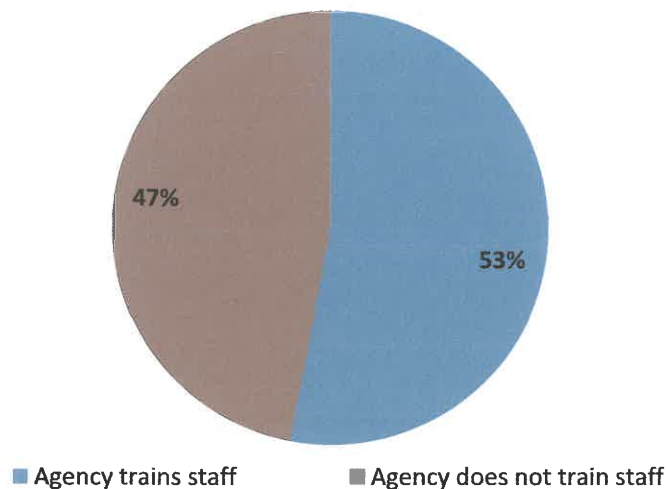
**Park and Recreation Agencies' Use of Design Standards and Infrastructure That Discourage Overnight Stays in Parks**  
(Percentage Distribution)



Virtually every urban park and recreation agency participating in this survey dedicates less than 10 percent of its annual operating budget to combat homelessness in its parks. Furthermore, most urban park and recreation agency directors indicate that their agency does not dedicate specific staff to address homelessness in their parks.

At the same time, many of these same park and recreation agencies agree on the importance of ensuring their employees are sensitive to the needs of this important constituency in their community. To achieve this goal, these agencies provided specific education and training for their staff to engage with this constituency more effectively and with greater empathy. Fifty-three percent of urban park and recreation agency directors report that their agency provides specialized training to park police, park rangers, and other agency staff to more effectively engage with homeless individuals.

**Park and Recreation Agency Training Employees to More Effectively Engage with Individuals Experiencing Homelessness**  
(Percentage Distribution)



Park and recreation agencies can also deliver services and provide programming geared toward the homeless population in their communities. These offerings are as diverse as the homeless population that they serve. Many of these services include the basic necessities of life while also providing a path for the individual to get on their own feet. In all, 54 percent of urban park and recreation agency directors report that their agencies provide at least one service that specifically serves the homeless population.

In virtually all cases, park and recreation agencies that offer at least one service to the homeless community make restroom facilities available to this population (91 percent). Other services and offerings park and recreation agencies make available to the homeless population include:

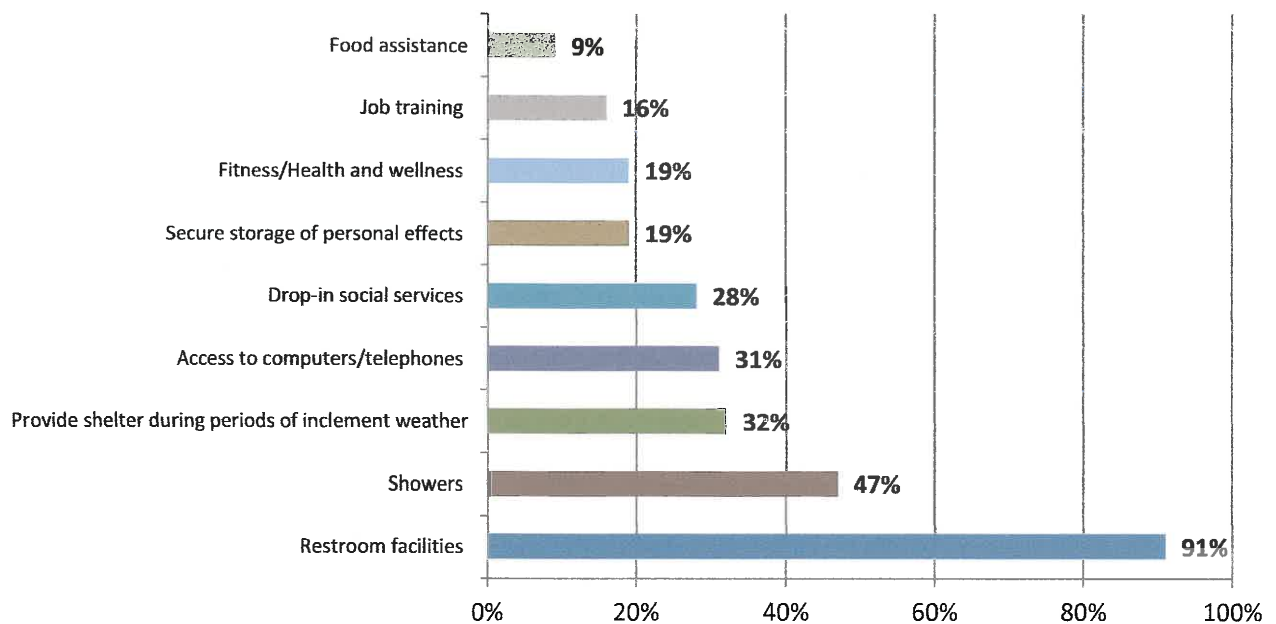
- Showers (47 percent)
- Emergency shelter during periods of inclement weather (e.g., extreme temperatures, storms) (32 percent)



- Computers and telephones (31 percent)
- Drop-in social services (28 percent)
- Secure storage of personal effects (19 percent)

Among the agencies reporting that their recreation and senior centers are available to serve as emergency homeless shelters during periods of inclement weather, their facilities served this function for three days during 2016.

**Services Offered by Park and Recreation Agencies  
to the Homeless Population**  
(Percent of Agencies that Offer Services to Homeless Individuals)



Beyond services, a quarter of urban park and recreation agencies have specific programming to the respective communities' homeless population. Among the most frequently reported programming offerings for the homeless population are:

- Drop-in hours for city agencies and nonprofits (64 percent of agencies that provide programming specific to their homeless population)
- Career skills (36 percent)
- Education/Training (36 percent)
- Health fitness programs (36 percent)
- Arts/Culture (21 percent).

## Conclusion

Cities across the United States handle the issue of homelessness in parks in their own way. While some cities have detailed plans and procedures that coordinate resources across governmental agencies and nonprofit organizations, other cities meet this challenge on a more ad-hoc basis.

Because of their open spaces, park and recreation agencies find themselves on the front lines when it comes to matters of homelessness in their communities. Whether by design or by circumstance, public parks and recreation centers are frequently the refuge for those currently experiencing homelessness. Many of these agencies provide essential services that offer those living under these challenging circumstances a level of dignity and an opportunity to get back on their own feet. Despite the heavy usage of their resources, park and recreation agencies are not always a part of the vast network of government department and nonprofit agencies designing and leading the strategies and tactics that confront homelessness.

The solutions to homelessness are not held to just one government agency or to a single nonprofit agency. It will take a coordinated strategy across the vast resources of both the public and private sector to tackle these issues. Park and recreation agencies, in their role of serving all members of their community, will be an integral part of the solution. NRPA will bring park and recreation professionals together with public and private sector stakeholders to continue the vital conversations in the search for answers.