

Measuring Trails Benefits: Quality of Life

How do trails affect quality of life?

Trails can measurably improve a community's quality of life by providing opportunities for social connection, and safe places for recreation and commuting. Trails are an amenity that keeps existing residents and attracts new people; an asset that contributes to community identity. When residents use trails frequently, they become an integral part of community life.

These benefits focus on residents, rather than visitors. As such, the trails that can bring the greatest benefits to residents often are close to where people live and work, providing physical connections within a community.

Although community trails may not attract visitors who spend money in local businesses, they are an invaluable component of cities and towns across the U.S. These benefits cannot be measured in dollars, but, as the following research highlights demonstrate, the benefits can be measured in other ways.

Additional details on each of these topics, as well as other relevant research, are available at <http://headwaterseconomics.org/trail>.

Select Research Highlights

- In [Whatcom County, Washington](#), 95 percent of long-time residents—many of whom are mountain bikers, hikers, and trail runners—state that trails are important to their decision to stay in the area.¹
- In [Bloomington, Indiana](#), property owners adjacent to trails most commonly identified convenience and access to recreation, physical fitness, social connection, and connection to the natural environment as benefits of living near trails.²
- In [Jackson, Wyoming](#), nine out of ten respondents use pathways and trails. Residents use area pathways and trails every other day in the summer and every three days in the winter. Ninety-six percent of residents stated that outdoor recreation was an important factor in their decision to move to or stay in the area.³
- In [Missoula, Montana](#), 86 percent of residents had used city parks in the previous 12 months. Seventy-three percent of respondents used hiking trails, 56 percent used paved commuter trails, and 49 percent used natural area/wildlife habitat within the past year.⁴
- In [Methow Valley, Washington](#), one-third of residents ranked recreational opportunities as the top reason why they moved to the area. Ninety-three percent of residents reported that the trail network was either the most important (63%) or an important (30%) factor in their decision to purchase real estate in the valley.⁵



How to use this information:

This research is intended to help community leaders better understand the potential social benefits of trails for residents.

This summary is one of five handouts describing the state of research related to the benefits of trails. The four other summaries address:

- Public health
- Business impacts
- Property value
- General benefits

This series offers a succinct review of common benefits identified in the 100+ studies in Headwaters Economics' free, online, searchable [Trails Benefits Library](#).

- Along the [Washington and Old Dominion Trail in Virginia](#), 95 percent of trail users come from counties adjacent to the trail. Nearly all (93%) respondents identified health benefits from the trail as having high importance. A safe place to recreate had the next-highest ranking (73%). The opportunity to view nature (60%) and fostering a sense of community (47%) had the next-highest importance level.⁶
- Along three trails in rural [northern and eastern Nebraska and western Iowa](#), 74 percent of respondents indicated that they used the nearby trails for recreation daily, weekly or occasionally. Sixty-eight percent said the trails had a positive impact on their community.⁷

Methods

Measuring the role trails play in residents' quality of life is often done using a combination of surveys and user counts.

Survey data generally are obtained via either user surveys conducted on a specific trail or general surveys of residents conducted via mail, phone, or the Internet. Findings from surveys conducted with trail users only can only be extrapolated to trail users. Findings from random surveys of area residents can be extrapolated to the broader community.

These surveys can be used to learn about trail use, the role trails play in users' daily life, reasons for moving to or staying in the area, and aspects of a trail that could be improved. The studies summarized here provide examples of the types of questions to ask and how to interpret the findings.

User surveys are often conducted in conjunction with user counts along trails. User counts can be conducted using volunteers stationed at trailheads and other access points, or by using remote technology allowing representative sampling of more sites during a longer period of time.

Original studies and additional details on methods can be found in the Trails Benefits Library at <http://headwaterseconomics.org/trail>.

Contact

Megan Lawson, Ph.D. megan@headwaterseconomics.org, 406.570.7475.

*The strong
use of trails
and pathways
demonstrates that
public and private
funds have been
well-invested
in creating,
maintaining and
completing the
community's
trails
and pathways.*

- RRC Associates, 2015

Footnotes

1 Whatcom Mountain Bike Coalition. 2014. 2014 WMBC Rider Survey.

2 Corning, S., R. Mowatt, and H. Chancellor. 2012. "Multiuse Trails: Benefits and Concerns of Residents and Property Owners." *Journal of Urban Planning and Development* 138(4): 277-285.

3 RRC Associates. 2015. Jackson Hole Pathways and Trails Survey. Prepared for Teton County, WY; Friends of Pathways; Jackson Hole Chamber of Commerce; Town of Jackson, WY; Headwaters Economics. Boulder, CO: RRC Associates.

4 Leisure Vision and PROS Consulting. 2011. Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment Survey: Findings Report. Missoula County and City of Missoula, Montana.

5 Resource Dimensions. 2005. Economic Impacts of MVSTA Trails and Land Resources in the Methow Valley. Methow Valley Sport Trails Association.

6 Bowker, J., Bergstrom, J., Gill, J., and Lemanski, U. 2004. The Washington & Old Dominion Trail: An Assessment of User Demographics, Preferences, and Economics. USDA Forest Service, University of Georgia and National Park Service.

7 Greer, D.L. 2001. Nebraska Rural Trails: Three Studies of Trail Impact. School of Health, Physical Education and Recreation, University of Nebraska at Omaha.