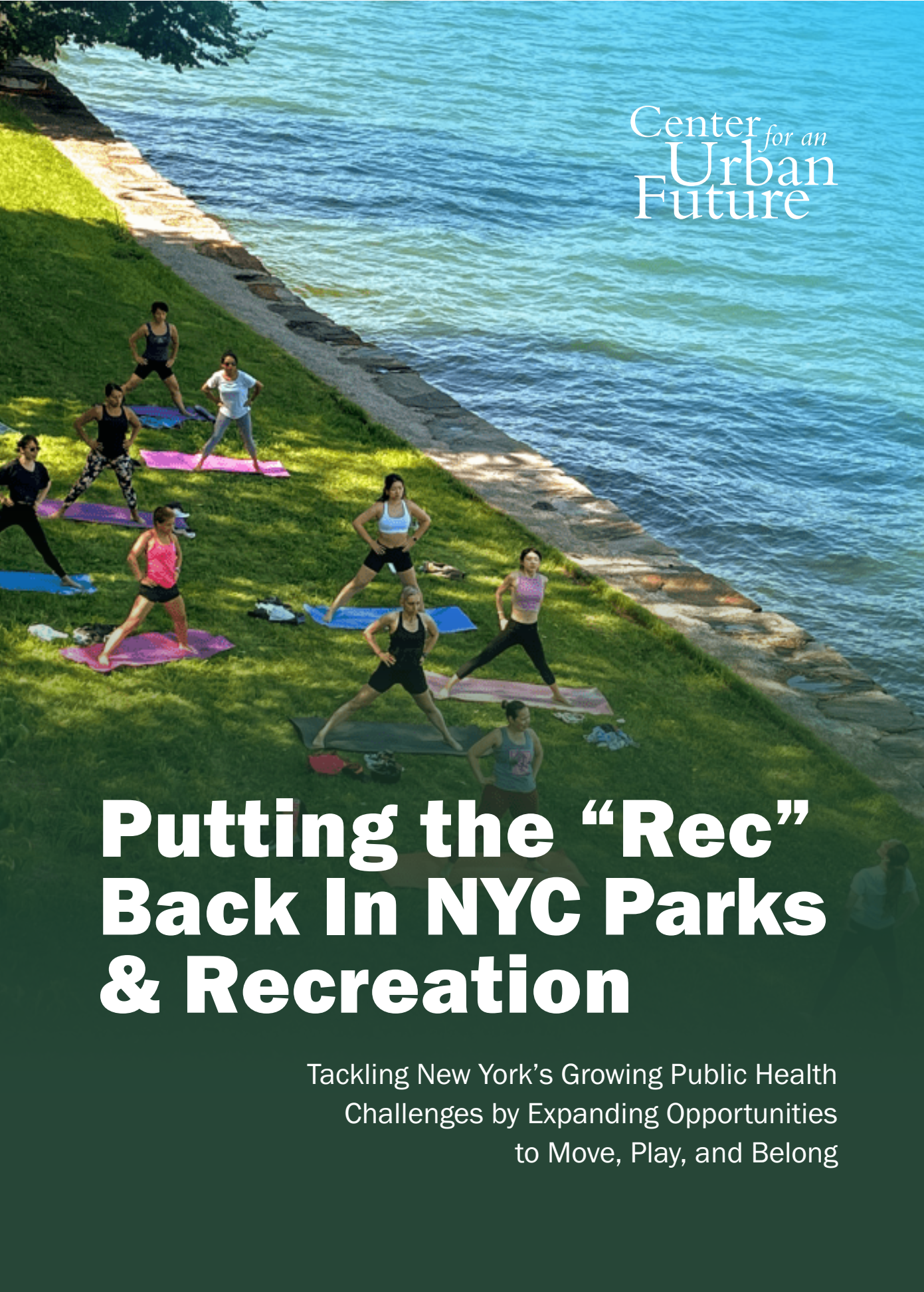


Center *for an*
Urban
Future

A group of approximately ten people are practicing yoga on colorful mats (pink, blue, purple) on a grassy bank next to a body of water. They are in various yoga poses, including lunges and standing poses. The background shows a calm body of water and a stone shoreline.

Putting the “Rec” Back In NYC Parks & Recreation

Tackling New York’s Growing Public Health
Challenges by Expanding Opportunities
to Move, Play, and Belong

Center *for an* Urban Future

Putting the “Rec” Back in NYC Parks &

Recreation is a publication of the Center for an Urban Future. Researched and written by John Surico, Dorian Block, and Eli Dvorkin. Data analysis by Rachel Neches. With research assistance from Natasha Ishak, Charlie McCabe, Samuel Weidman, Zamira Frost, Gracie Miller, Lina Mazioui, Julia Ross, Ben Cresto, Laura Turbay, Makenzie Rodrigues, Bella Hung, Elaina Kagan, Yona Litwin, Nora Lewis, and Alejandra Díaz-Pizarro.

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Putting the “Rec” Back in NYC Parks & Recreation

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Introduction

NEW YORK CITY HAS LONG BEEN A PLACE WHERE MOVEMENT IS BUILT INTO DAILY LIFE—FROM WALKING MILES of crowded blocks to playing pickup sports in schoolyards and spending summer days at neighborhood pools. But today, New Yorkers are moving less, spending more time indoors, and feeling more isolated. More than half of residents are overweight or obese;¹ 40 percent live with at least one chronic disease; and 41 percent report feeling frequently lonely.² These challenges are disproportionately concentrated in low-income neighborhoods, where access to free, low-cost recreation is already limited and demand is high.

At the very moment when public recreation should be central to the city’s health strategy, it has steadily fallen down the list of priorities. In 2011, the NYC Department of Parks & Recreation shortened its public-facing name to NYC Parks as part of a broader brand overhaul—but the deeper shift away from recreation as a central priority had been underway for decades. Recreation once accounted for nearly one-third of the NYC Parks budget; today it represents around 5.3 percent. Full-time recreation staff have fallen from almost 2,000 to 659. And many core recreation assets—pools, rec centers, field houses, courts, and fields—are in need of urgent repairs or closed entirely, with more than \$400 million in known capital needs for major facilities alone, and likely hundreds of millions more yet to be identified.³

The system is struggling to match the needs of the city it serves. Pool attendance is down 43 percent since before the pandemic. Fewer than 2 percent of New Yorkers are members of a recreation center. Participation in many core programs has fallen by 40 percent or more, driven by fewer offerings, limited staffing, and aging facilities. Access is very uneven: neighborhoods like Ozone Park, Midwood, and Mount Hope are “rec deserts,” with each public athletic facility serving more than 4,300 residents—triple the citywide average. And across the five boroughs, waitlists for fitness classes, swim lessons, and youth programs stretch longer each year, even as many communities have none at all. NYC Parks continues to do what it can with limited resources, but the gap between demand and capacity keeps widening.⁴

The city has taken important steps—renovating recreation centers, modernizing pools, and focusing on programs like swim instruction and Saturday Night Lights—but the scale of the challenge far exceeds current efforts and the resources available to NYC Parks. Other major cities are pulling ahead: Philadelphia, Chicago, San Francisco, and Minneapolis now spend between five and fifteen times more per capita on recreation than New York. Most U.S. cities serve fewer than 50,000 residents per recreation center; New York serves more than 200,000.⁵ Meanwhile, demand here keeps rising—Asphalt Green turns away 1,000 young athletes annually because field space is so limited, and record numbers of New Yorkers are applying for marathons, tournaments, and free parks programs.

Restoring recreation as a citywide priority—and expanding it far beyond parks alone—is one of the most powerful strategies available to improve health, reduce disparities, and rebuild social connection. Cities around the world show what’s possible, from Bogotá’s car-free Sundays and Paris’s reclaimed waterfronts to Philadelphia’s walking clubs, San Francisco’s “nature prescriptions,” and Atlanta’s transit-station soccer fields. New York has the scale and the need to lead again. To meet this moment, it’s time to put the “rec” back into Parks and Recreation—and to reimagine parks, streets, schoolyards, libraries, transit hubs, senior centers, NYCHA campuses, and waterfronts as places where every New Yorker can move, play, and belong.

This report, supported by a grant from The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust, explores the importance of public recreation in New York City, the challenges of expanding recreation, and solutions for meeting that demand. Along with analysis of data shared by NYC Parks, the Center for an Urban Future interviewed more than 75 leaders of parks alliances, nonprofit recreation providers, and community organizations in all five boroughs, as well as visitors to recreation centers, athletic facilities, and community programs.

The problem is clear: New Yorkers are more sedentary, and they are more socially isolated than ever before. Together, these challenges are having a tremendous effect on physical and mental health. And that impact is particularly outsized in low-income neighborhoods, where access to free, low-cost recreation is minimal but demand is high.

“Years ago the city invested in all kinds of recreational programs. It was amazing. I would have a packed gym with all these kids playing ball, hanging out with each other. Why don’t those programs exist anymore? Why can’t we do this and why isn’t there more of it?” says Robin Redmond, executive director of the Flatbush Development Corporation, which provides free after-school and summer programs, including dance, soccer, and basketball to over 1,000 children and teens in Brooklyn. “To me there are endless possibilities of what we can do. There’s so much usable space. We just need to use it effectively.”

Studies show that more frequent use of public recreation spaces improves physical activity and mental health.⁶ Yet for many New Yorkers—especially in lower-income communities—these opportunities are scarce. Decades of underinvestment have left the city with an uneven landscape of free and low-cost recreation, even as other major cities have moved in the opposite direction. To create a stronger, more equitable, and healthier city, this will need to change.

New York City has been underinvesting in recreation for decades.

It wasn’t until 2011 that the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation shortened its official name to NYC Parks as part of a major brand overhaul—striking “recreation” in the process. But the erosion of recreation from the agency’s core mission had been decades in the making—even as NYC Parks continues to be the city’s largest and most frequented provider of recreational facilities and programs. Before the 1970s fiscal crisis, recreational facilities and programming historically accounted for about a third of the overall parks budget.

But by 1984, following a decade of immense fiscal challenges, rec’s share had slid down to just 8.4 percent.

Today, recreation makes up an even slimmer share of the agency’s budget, at 5.3 percent in 2025, or about \$32.8 million out of a roughly \$618 million budget. Adjusting for inflation, the decline is even steeper—down from \$129.8 million in 1964, a 75 percent decline.

The most visible effect is a steep decline in staffing and a reduction in programming—changes that have hampered the city’s ability to attract and introduce more New Yorkers to the power of recreation at exactly the time when it is needed more than ever. In 1964, the NYC Parks’ recreation division had 1,949 workers. In 2025, there were only 659, a 66 percent decline.⁷

Attendance at recreation facilities has declined.

Prior to the pandemic, visitation at the city’s public recreation facilities had already been declining, from 4.2 million in 2016 to just over 3 million in 2019. But since the pandemic, attendance has hit record lows and has not come close to recovering. Overall attendance is down from the 2.4 million New Yorkers who visited their local recreation centers in 1974, even though New York City is home to about a million more people now than in the 1970s. And while rec center visitors in 2024 rebounded to the highest level since 2019—1.9 million—that’s still 38 percent lower than 2019.⁸

It’s not only rec centers where visitation is down. Attendance at the city’s 65 public pools—a major source of recreation for countless New Yorkers—averaged 1.64 million attendees a year, from 2009 to 2019. But after the pandemic, the average has dropped to 929,475, or a 43 percent decrease. Attendance in programming that occurs outside of recreation centers also dropped in that time period, from over 1 million in 2017 to just over 600,000 in 2024—a 40 percent decline.

To be clear, some of the decline reflects sites closing for much-needed renovations. And when sites come back online, attendance typically soars—for instance, the reopening of the Astoria pool in 2024 more than doubled the borough’s annual pool attendance figures.⁹

But overall, the data presents a concerning reality: the city’s flagship public recreation facilities are serving fewer New Yorkers today than they were 50 years ago. Experts say that turning around this concerning trend will require a major expansion of free public programming—whether provided directly by the city or through nonprofit partners—so that more New Yorkers have support, encouragement, and guidance in taking advantage of the recreational facilities that already exist.

City-run recreational programming has fallen since the pandemic—even as New Yorkers need these opportunities more than ever.

While the presence of public athletic facilities is a boon for local residents, research shows that nothing increases park use and physical activity as much as programming—organized activities that help people make use of the space. In a study of 174 parks, researchers found each additional supervised activity led to a 48 percent increase in park use and a 37 percent increase in physical activity among park users.¹⁰

In a city grappling with an affordability crisis, free and low-cost recreation programming offered by NYC Parks is more important than ever to keeping communities healthy. In 2024, NYC Parks’ Recreation unit served nearly 50,000 different New Yorkers directly through 2,724 distinct programs, with options ranging from Latin dance and adaptive fitness to yoga and birding. Altogether, parks employees hosted 44,443 program sessions in 2024, totaling nearly a million visits including programs held both inside and outside the rec centers.

But this type of programming is not nearly at the levels it was before the pandemic. In 2019, NYC Parks offered nearly double the amount of programming as in 2024. On Staten Island and in the Bronx, programming is down over 60 percent since then. The decline cuts across programming types as well: yoga classes, for example, have dropped 89.4 percent; basketball, 70.9 percent.

Shape Up NYC classes were offered 519 times and served 5,701 in 2019, but 490 times to 4,150 people in 2024—a decrease of about 27 percent. That drop is also seen in attendance: total attendance at recreation programs is down 19.6 percent since 2019.¹¹

Our analysis also finds disparities in who has access to that programming and what’s available to New Yorkers. Even though it’s the third most populous borough, Manhattan had the greatest variety of programming in 2024, with 927 different kinds of classes or workshops to attend, followed by Queens (702) and Brooklyn (642). The Bronx and Staten Island lagged far behind, with only 299 and 165 different types of recreational programming available, respectively. The total number of actual program sessions is unevenly distributed: Manhattan has the most, by far, at 15,300 unique sessions, followed by Brooklyn (10,967) and Queens (10,200), far outpacing the Bronx (4,465) and Staten Island (2,792).

What’s being offered varies greatly. For example, Manhattan and Brooklyn were home to the most strength training classes in 2024, with 1,625 and 1,577 respectively, while the Bronx hosted fewer than 10. Zumba was offered just twice on Staten Island, but 142 times in Brooklyn. Meanwhile, residents on Staten Island and the Bronx had no spin classes available to them at all in 2024—and it was offered 56 times in Queens, 50 times in Brooklyn, and 42 times in Manhattan. Similarly, Shape Up NYC adult fitness programming was offered 251 times in Manhattan in 2024—but less than 100 times in the other four boroughs, including just three times on Staten Island.

NYC Parks recreational programming offerings have declined since 2019

Borough	2017	2018	2019	2024	Change 2019 to 2024 (%)
Bronx	9,193	12,312	11,734	4,465	-62
Brooklyn	19,409	16,498	13,532	10,967	-19
Manhattan	20,859	28,977	37,972	15,300	-60
Queens	12,682	9,427	9,604	10,200	6
Staten Island	6,050	6,979	7,573	2,792	-63
NYC	68,193	74,193	80,415	44,443	-45

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from NYC Parks. Created with Datawrapper

In interviews, parks staffers told us that the diversity and frequency of programming that a recreation center, park, or athletic facility offers is limited both by available staffing and physical capacity. In 2024, large, popular facilities like Al Oerter Recreation Center, in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park, and the Chelsea Recreation Center hosted programming 3,225 and 2,773 times, respectively. But Lyons Recreation Center, in Tompkinsville, hosted programming just 185 times and J. Hood Wright Recreation Center, in Washington Heights, 380 times.¹²

New York City is lagging behind other cities.

When it comes to public recreation, New York City is an outlier. The city spends far less per capita than other major U.S. cities, including San Francisco, Chicago, Minneapolis, and Philadelphia. Comparatively, recreation also makes up a much smaller slice of the overall parks budget here than it does elsewhere. While budget categories vary across cities, available data consistently show New York spending far less per capita on recreation—and operating fewer recreation centers and athletic facilities relative to population—than its peers.

Los Angeles has 137 recreation centers for 3.9 million people—or 28,500 people per center. Chicago has 300, and Philadelphia over 150, even with populations less than a third that of New York’s. Practically every major city in the U.S. has one recreation center per 50,000 residents or fewer; meanwhile, the ratio in New York City is more than 200,000 to 1.¹³

Several neighborhoods are effectively “recreation deserts.”

Access to athletic facilities varies enormously across the five boroughs. In some neighborhoods, public fields and courts are abundant; in others, they’re almost nonexistent—leaving entire communities without a single place to play popular sports.

While the average New York City community district has about 150 athletic facilities, some are far better served. Queens CB12 (covering Jamaica, Hollis, and St. Albans) has 294 athletic facilities, Brooklyn CB18 (Canarsie, Marine Park, and Flatlands) has 279, and Manhattan CB11 (East Harlem) has 240. But in several districts, the numbers drop precipitously—below 50 total facilities for tens of thousands of residents. These are New York’s athletic facility deserts:

- Bronx CB5 (Fordham, University Heights, Morris Heights, Bathgate, Mount Hope) — Only 27 athletic facilities—one for every 4,930 residents—and none with lights. The district lacks *any* public fields or courts for baseball, tennis, regulation soccer, cricket, bocce, netball, pickleball, hockey, lacrosse, volleyball, or frisbee.
- Brooklyn CB12 (Borough Park, Kensington, Ocean Parkway, Midwood) — Just 41 athletic facilities, compared with 279 in nearby CB18. CB12 has *no* baseball diamonds, cricket pitches, bocce or netball courts, or pickleball areas.

New York City is lagging behind other cities in recreation spending

	San Francisco	Chicago	Minneapolis	Philadelphia	NYC
Population	827,526	2,721,308	428,579	1,573,916	8,478,072
Recreational Services	\$26,576,400	\$149,628,096	\$30,852,543	\$33,990,480	\$32,720,000
Spending per capita	\$32.12	\$54.98	\$71.99	\$21.60	\$3.86
Share of overall budget (%)	29.2%	25.0%	28.38%	37.3%	5.3%
Total budget	\$91,169,995	\$598,512,384	\$108,706,976	\$91,245,214	\$618,051,000

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the Parks and Recreation Departments from San Francisco, Chicago, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, and New York City. Created with Datawrapper

- Queens CB9 (Richmond Hill, Woodhaven, Ozone Park, Kew Gardens) — 41 facilities, versus more than 200 in neighboring Queens districts like CB7 (Flushing) and CB8 (Fresh Meadows). CB9 has *no* fields or courts for cricket, soccer, tennis, volleyball, bocce, netball, pickleball, football, hockey, lacrosse, or rugby—and not a single lighted field. Despite large South Asian and Caribbean communities where cricket is beloved, and Latino communities where volleyball is popular, residents have nowhere to play either sport.
- Brooklyn CB9 (Crown Heights, Prospect Lefferts Gardens, Wingate) — 48 total facilities, but missing any courts or fields for regulation soccer, bocce, pickleball, hockey, volleyball, or baseball.
- Bronx CB6 (Belmont, Bathgate, West Farms, East Tremont) — 48 facilities, with *no* courts or fields for pickleball, hockey, volleyball, cricket, lacrosse, rugby, tennis, or netball.

Together, these five districts are home to more than 600,000 New Yorkers but have just 205 athletic facilities combined—fewer than a single well-equipped district elsewhere in the city.¹⁴

Community organizations report increasingly unmet demand for affordable recreation among low-income New Yorkers, while facing several growing challenges.

As public resources for recreation have dwindled, the city’s recreation system increasingly relies on nonprofits and volunteer groups to connect New Yorkers to recreation. While hundreds of thousands of residents belong to gyms or pay for classes, those options are often out of reach for lower-income households. As Emily Stutts, co-founder of Bergen Bike Bus, notes, “They’re often not in your local neighborhood, and they’re not accessible by public transportation and often cost money, which creates an inherent barrier.”

Yet the most accessible, affordable programs are now struggling to keep up with demand. Nonprofit providers consistently report long waitlists and limited ability to expand—not because of lack of interest, but because of structural barriers. Most organizations surveyed for this report cite waitlists for at least one program—often with 100 or more people waiting—and many say they have turned away requests to serve additional neighbor-

hoods or boroughs. Nonprofits cite nearly all of the same pervasive challenges, including unstable funding for programming, limited access to indoor and outdoor facilities, rising costs for insurance and equipment, and intense competition for permits—including with for-profit leagues that compete to use public space. (In November 2024, NYC Parks added a not-for-profit youth category and instituted a fee waiver, lowering costs for some nonprofits.)

“The minute we open up any kind of recreation class, whether it’s for young people or seniors, it’s filled,” says Michelle Neugebauer, executive director of the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation in Brooklyn. “It’s filled and there’s consistent attendance. The problem for freestanding community centers like the one we have, is that you don’t have guaranteed expense money. We have a beautiful facility, but there’s no ongoing funding source for recreation.”

New York Junior Tennis & Learning (NYJTL) illustrates both the scale of demand and the mismatch between community interest and available infrastructure. The organization’s free community tennis program serves roughly 12,000 children each year—most from low-income families and communities of color—yet its Cary Leeds Center for Tennis & Learning site in the South Bronx is the only one of the city’s 136 Saturday Night Lights locations to offer tennis.

“Who would think that adolescent kids in the South Bronx on a Saturday night would want to play tennis? We did. We have 50 kids now coming to that program,” says NYJTL CEO Udai Tambar. “Communities will adopt certain sports as long as they have access to it. The question is, ‘Who has the access and who has the opportunity?’”

These constraints extend beyond youth sports. Organizations serving older adults, people with disabilities, and newly arrived immigrants report similarly high unmet demand—but face additional hurdles securing appropriate space. For Fast Feet, which provides low-cost track and field programming for children with physical and developmental disabilities, crowded parks and limited access to quieter facilities make expansion difficult. As founder Suzie Clinchy explains, fee-for-service alternatives often cost “\$100 an hour, \$150 an hour,” while public and nonprofit options lack the indoor, year-round space and staffing needed to grow.

Demand is also rising for culturally relevant recreation—but facilities have not kept pace with the city’s changing population. Cricket—the world’s second most popular sport—has grown steadily in New York, driven by immigration from South Asia, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. In 2019, more than 3,100 permitted cricket matches took place in city parks, with interest surging further after the 2024 Cricket World Cup. But suitable

facilities remain scarce. Cricket requires short, well-maintained grass, and even designated fields often fall short, forcing teams to travel outside the city to train. “There’s just not enough facilities available to accommodate the amount of people that want to play,” says Sufiyan Junaid of Gotham Cricket Club.

The city has made progress in upgrading recreational infrastructure and connecting low-income New Yorkers to programs—but even more is needed.

In recent years, the Adams administration made a historic investment in recreation. In FY 2025, \$471 million in active capital renovation work was underway at recreation centers, with major projects at Brownsville Recreation Center (over \$160 million) in Brooklyn and Roy Wilkins Recreation Center (\$147 million) in southeast Queens. After years of temporary fixes, the Olympic-sized Astoria Park Pool, built in the 1930s, reopened after a \$19 million renovation.

Additionally, the city has committed another half a billion dollars to build five new recreation centers. Two of those will include pools—the most significant effort of its kind in years. That includes the \$141 million Shirley Chisholm Recreation Center, in East Flatbush, as well as the \$62 million Arverne East Aquatic Center, the first public pool for residents on the Rockaway Peninsula.

NYC Parks has gotten creative with how it delivers recreation to New Yorkers who may not live near a recreation center. The Shape Up NYC program sends paid and volunteer instructors to parks, libraries, senior centers and other community spaces for pop-up programming. Kids in Motion offers free drop-in programming at playgrounds across the city—an evolution of the agency’s Playground Associate program. Saturday Night Lights keeps recreation centers open later on Saturdays. And NYC Parks is partnering with the Department of Education to program more pools in schools—part of Let’s Swim NYC, a \$1 billion, five-year effort to invest in updating and building pools, teaching water-safety skills, and addressing the city’s chronic lifeguard shortage.

This effort is beginning to show signs of progress. A

particular bright spot has been the rebound in recreation center membership. In FY 2025, the Parks Department reported 156,000 total members, surpassing the pre-pandemic level for the first time.¹⁵

Putting the “rec” back into “Parks & Rec.”

Despite these positive steps, New York City is facing a widening gap between the need for public recreation and the system built to deliver it. Demand for affordable, accessible ways to move, play, and connect is rising across the city, yet decades of underinvestment have steadily pushed recreation to the margins of public policy. Today, recreation accounts for just 5 percent of NYC Parks’ budget, leaving too many neighborhoods without the facilities, staffing, or programming needed to meet growing demand. Without decisive action, the city risks deepening health inequities, worsening social isolation, and continuing to underuse some of its most valuable public assets.

Meeting this challenge will require restoring recreation as a core civic priority—and doing so at a scale that matches New York’s needs. That means committing to a long-term shift in funding that moves recreation toward 20 percent of the Parks budget, paired with a citywide recreation master plan to guide capital, staffing, and programming decisions across all five boroughs. It also means lowering barriers and meeting New Yorkers where they are: initiatives like Rec Pass, which would use the city’s library system to unlock free recreation, and RecRx, which would allow healthcare providers to prescribe recreation as a preventive health tool, point the way toward a more integrated, people-centered system.

This report lays out a practical agenda to rebuild public recreation in New York City for the decades ahead. It calls for reinvesting in aging facilities, rebuilding the recreation workforce through initiatives like RecCorps, and harnessing private and philanthropic dollars through a Recreation Investment Fund to expand programming where public resources are stretched. At the same time, it urges the city to activate underused public infrastructure—from schoolyards and NYCHA campuses to waterfronts and transit hubs—so that recreation is woven into daily life across the five boroughs.

To Tackle Growing Physical and Mental Health Challenges, New Yorkers Need More Recreation Than They Are Getting Today

New Yorkers are getting less physical activity than a decade ago.

People who regularly exercise—from brisk walking to playing tennis to doing yoga to training for a race—lower their risk for chronic disease, lower their risk for injury, and often reduce their stress and improve their mental wellbeing. And yet, nearly 30 percent of New York City said that they did not participate in any physical activity, including walking for exercise, over the past 30 days, which is almost a 10 percent increase from a decade ago.¹⁶

Rates of physical activity vary tremendously by borough. In the Bronx, 65.5 percent of people reported physical activity in the past 30 days. But in Manhattan, that figure is 81.7 percent. The disparities are even more notable at the neighborhood level: in Manhattan, East Harlem reports the lowest levels of physical activity in the city, with 55 percent of people having exercised in the past 30 days, while the Upper West Side, just a jog away, reports the highest percentage, at 93 percent.¹⁷

Neighborhoods with the lowest levels of physical activity include those that are further from public transportation and more car dependent including northern Flushing (58.9 percent), East New York (58.9 percent), Bensonhurst/Bay Ridge (59.3 percent), the Rockaways (62.8 percent), Pelham/Throgs Neck (63.5 percent), and the northeast Bronx (63.5 percent). Meanwhile, the neighborhoods with some of the highest levels of physical activity also tend to boast higher incomes, including Chelsea/West Village (88.9 percent), the Upper East Side (88.1 percent), Long Island City/Astoria (87.3 percent), and Greenpoint (82.9 percent).¹⁸

Many nonprofit leaders say that with additional investment and coordination, they could do even more to help the city tackle these public health challenges through free and low-cost recreation.

“Every day at the Y, we see how access to quality recreation and community programs helps combat social isolation, supports healthier lifestyles, and strengthens mental well-being,” says Sharon Greenberger, president

& CEO, YMCA of Greater New York. “Right now, roughly two in three New Yorkers are overweight or obese, placing enormous strain on individuals and our health systems, and about one in three adults nationwide reports feeling lonely. With the right resources, we can ensure every New Yorker has a safe, welcoming space to be active, to learn, and to build relationships.”

New York City faces growing rates of obesity, diabetes, and chronic disease.

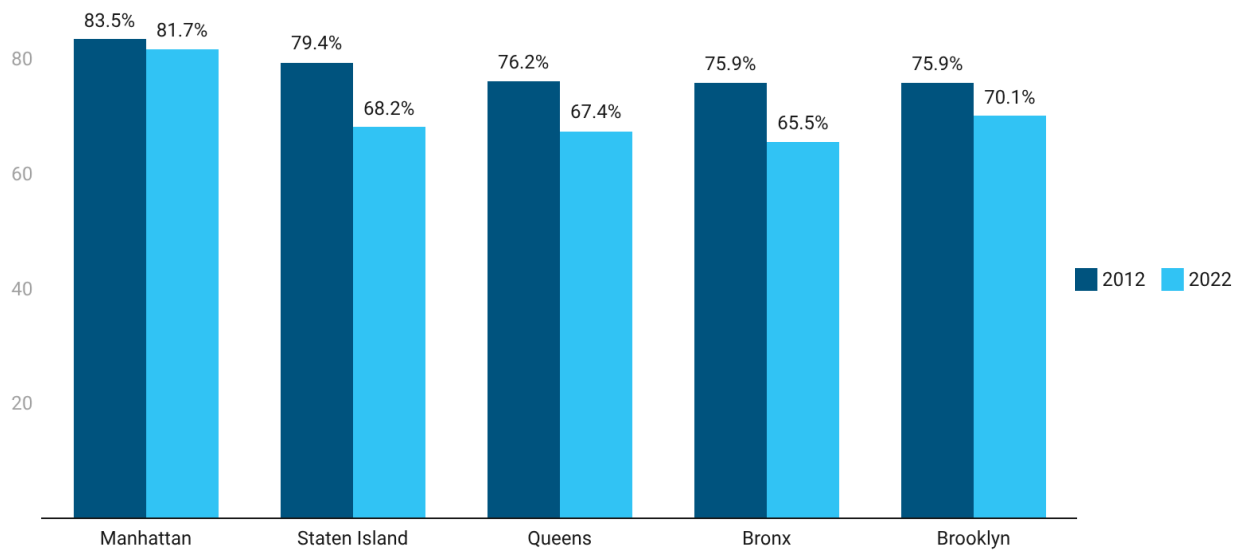
This lack of physical activity, coupled with a growing dependence on ultra-processed food, increased levels of stress, and a lack of access to preventative health care, has led to a city in ill health, mirroring national trends.

Today, Type 2 diabetes is one of the leading causes of preventable death in New York City. More than one million New Yorkers have diabetes—or about 13 percent of the population—which is double the total nearly two decades ago.¹⁹ Major disparities by race, income, and neighborhood persist. Although 13 percent of New Yorkers have diabetes overall, prevalence is significantly higher among communities of color—16.4 percent among Black New Yorkers, 16.0 percent among Latino New Yorkers, and 14.6 percent among Asian or Pacific Islander New Yorkers—compared with 7.6 percent among White New Yorkers.

The neighborhood with the highest percentage of people who are overweight and obese—East New York (77.4 percent) in Brooklyn—also has one of the highest rates of poverty and lowest levels of regular physical activity in the city. The Bronx as a whole, the borough with the lowest median income, has the highest obesity and overweight rate of any borough at 71.3 percent.²⁰ And while many factors contribute to the inequitable persistence of these public health challenges, one key factor has flown largely under the radar: the lack of access to—and participation in—public recreational activities.

Fewer New Yorkers are exercising today than a decade ago

Share of New Yorkers who reported physical activity in the last 30 days in 2012 and 2022



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of New York City Community Health Survey data, 2012 to 2022.

Created with Datawrapper

New York City is facing a mental health and social isolation crisis in all neighborhoods.

Physical activity and social connection—two key benefits of recreation—are both on the decline, despite their proven power as antidotes to deteriorating mental health. In addition to reduced physical activity, New Yorkers are also spending less time outside of their homes: less time socializing, shopping, and volunteering, in addition to less time exercising. A national study found that people are spending 1 hour and 39 minutes more at home than pre-pandemic, with the greatest reduction in time spent outside of the home found among teens and young adults.²¹

Reflective of the national “loneliness epidemic” declared by the U.S. Surgeon General, New Yorkers are also more socially isolated than ever before. About 41 percent of New Yorkers expressed feeling loneliness “sometimes,” “usually” or “always,” with youth and older adults reporting the highest rates of loneliness. Loneliness and social isolation increase the risk for premature death by 26 percent and 29 percent respectively, or as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day.²²

Even beyond the alarming rise in loneliness, mental health in New York City has worsened over the past

decade, which has tremendous ripple effects on families, communities, schools, workplaces, and the health care system. Nearly 14 percent of New York City residents reported having poor mental health for at least half of the past month. Depression, a key indicator of mental health, is on the rise, too: about 874,000 people, or 13.1 percent of the city, experience diagnosed depression, up about 38 percent since 2018. The neighborhoods with the highest rates of depression are in Queens and the Bronx, including 18.7 percent of people in Fresh Meadows and 17.6 percent of people in Pelham/Throgs Neck.²³

“Stress is a huge issue for many individuals and families we know and serve in the Bronx, worried about their housing, their neighborhoods, their children, having enough money to cover everything. I feel it too,” says Kerry A. McLean, vice president of community development at WHEDco, a nonprofit that serves more than 20,000 people in the Bronx and across NYC annually. “In addition to health disparities from years of disinvestment and unequal access to health resources, the added layers of stress, working two or three jobs to do the best you can for your family, conspire to make us more unhealthy. Having well-designed, maintained and programmed public spaces in our communities would be a welcome respite from the worry.”

Addressing the Challenges Keeping New York City from Reaching Its Recreation Potential

THE DIVIDE IN ACCESS TO NEW YORK CITY’S PUBLIC recreation didn’t appear overnight. The city’s parks infrastructure is aging, which hinders what’s possible at recreation centers, public pools, and more. And NYC Parks has an insufficient number of facilities to meet the growing demand—and even with the ones it does have, it lacks the resources to properly program and promote them. Beyond that, the city is changing, with new demands arising amongst populations of different ethnicities, ages, and abilities that must be met. And the private nonprofit organizations that the city relies on, and at times loosely partners with, to deliver recreation to these diverse communities face an uphill battle.

At South Bronx United, co-founder Andrew So and his team leverage soccer as a means to uplift local residents. But his organization struggles to meet demand: “There are over 700,000 people in the South Bronx. There’s a high need, and we’re only addressing a small portion of that,” So says. “Schools try to do what they can, but I think there are challenges in that. There are all of these different players, so how can everyone continue to work together to ensure every youth has access? There’s definitely a huge gap.”

Too many of New York City’s recreational facilities are in a chronic state of disrepair—and more facilities are needed to close gaps.

New York City’s recreation infrastructure is aging. The average recreation center is 64 years old, with most built during the Great Depression or postwar era, when recreation was viewed as a vital public health investment. In 1936, Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia and Parks Commissioner Robert Moses opened 11 public pools from Astoria to Brownsville—symbols of a time when access to recreation was considered a civic right.

Today, those facilities are reaching the end of their useful lives. The city’s 36 recreation centers, 10 field houses, and 12 nature and visitor centers face hundreds

of millions of dollars in unmet capital needs—and likely hundreds of millions more that have yet to be identified. Thousands of athletic fields and courts also require resurfacing, lighting, or replacement. Even that approximately \$1 billion-plus backlog fails to capture missed opportunities to convert underused blacktop into sports courts or to add new facilities like ice rinks, cricket pitches, ecuavoley courts, and boathouses.

The Adams administration began to reverse decades of underinvestment in capital needs, committing nearly \$500 million for recreation centers and additional funds to upgrade aging pools. Yet 41 percent of facilities haven’t received a major renovation in decades, and new sites are urgently needed. When Williamsburg’s Metropolitan Recreation Center closed for repairs, it left Brooklyn—with 2.6 million residents—with just one public indoor pool.

Conditions in many centers are deteriorating. At the St. James Recreation Center in Fordham, sewage backs up through floor drains. The Hunts Point Recreation Center, in the Bronx, has faulty roofs that regularly leak, disrupting activities and workouts. The Jackie Robinson Recreation Center in Hamilton Heights faces water infiltration, damaged concrete, and corroded fixtures. A one-day visit to eight centers revealed similar issues. At the Roy Wilkins Recreation Center in St. Albans, Queens, a sign informed visitors that the indoor pool and men’s locker room were closed “for the foreseeable future” due to mechanical failure—directing swimmers an hour away by bus to the Flushing Meadows Corona Park Aquatics Center, where the lap and diving sections also close early all summer because of “insufficient lighting” and limited staffing.

Failing infrastructure drives down use and limits programming. When a recreation center suddenly shuts for emergency repairs, visitors often don’t return. Outdated layouts further constrain what’s possible. Summer camps, for example, can no longer be held at the Tony Dapolito Recreation Center in the West Village, closed for deteriorating conditions, or at St. John’s Recreation Center in Crown Heights, where the elevator failed inspection.

A backlog of maintenance work compounds the problem. The Center for an Urban Future’s previous



Access to recreation centers can play a meaningful role in addressing the mental health crisis, reducing crime and gun violence, and improving physical health. However, the impact extends beyond getting a young person off the street.”

KAITLIN KRAUSE, FOUNDER, RISING TIDE EFFECT

research found that NYC Parks relies heavily on a seasonal, unspecialized maintenance workforce, leading to high turnover and deferred fixes. “City fields [and centers] don’t get the operations and maintenance that we do,” says one parks official. “They just get beat up more quickly.”

At St. John’s Recreation Center, regular user John Enoch Desarme says the weight-room equipment breaks frequently. “They’re just older machines,” he says. Another visitor added, “The place is antiquated, but we make it work.”

For nonprofit partners, deteriorating conditions make it difficult to sustain programs even when funding is available. Sunnyside Community Services’ Center for Active Older Adults, which offers fitness classes through NYC Parks’ Shape Up NYC program, is one example. “Some of our clients are not able to sit on the floor. Some cannot sit in those hard metal benches because their bodies are fragile,” says Asia Piña-Smith, the program director. “As simple as it sounds, it’s important to have clean bathrooms and accessible seating.”

Altogether, the city’s athletic facilities face roughly \$400 million in known state-of-good-repair needs, most tied to recreation centers—but that’s almost certainly a major underestimate. Nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of these facilities have never undergone a critical needs assessment—a comprehensive analysis of repair costs. Deferred maintenance often conceals far greater issues: a \$20 million roof project at the Brownsville Recreation Center uncovered deep structural deficiencies, halting work until \$160 million could be committed for a full rebuild. “We don’t know what we don’t know,” said one NYC Parks official. “Because we haven’t done a proper assessment of our buildings.”²⁴

The backlog also constrains what the city can do next. NYC Parks operates 10 field houses, most built between the 1930s and 1960s. Only one is open daily; the rest operate on limited hours or only for specific programs. One, in Flatbush, has been closed for decades. According to NYC Parks, each needs at least \$3 million in capital repairs just to stabilize—and likely tens of millions

more to modernize. Other sites highlight how the system inherited structures that were not designed for current needs: the Lost Battalion Hall Recreation Center in Rego Park, for instance, used to have a shooting range in the basement. “A lot of our other buildings are just not tailor-made for recreation,” said one agency staffer.

Where public athletic facilities do exist, they’re unevenly distributed across the city. Entire neighborhoods lack a single indoor recreation facility. Queens, home to nearly 2.4 million residents, has just five city-run recreation centers, and the Bronx—despite some of the city’s highest rates of childhood poverty and lowest rates of physical activity—has only six. Many community districts in Brooklyn and Staten Island have none at all. “Recreational facilities were never intended to serve high-income areas,” says Adrian Benepe, a former NYC Parks commissioner. “But now many are mismatched with their neighborhoods.”

Each year, the organization Rising Tide Effect teaches hundreds of young people across all boroughs, many of whom live in NYCHA properties, how to swim. Its founder, former collegiate swimmer Kaitlin Krause, says the programming’s benefits are widespread—at least when they’re easily accessible to those who could benefit.

“Access to recreation centers can play a meaningful role in addressing the mental health crisis, reducing crime and gun violence, and improving physical health. However, the impact extends beyond getting a young person off the street,” Krause says. “It is about creating a broader culture of self-care that supports entire families. These outcomes are only possible when access exists, and access is not only about affordability but also about whether the amenity exists at all. Recreation centers, particularly in the communities we serve, are vital assets that significantly enrich quality of life. [Right now], these facilities are not broadly accessible across New York City.”

There is a markedly uneven landscape of free or low-cost spaces and programming available for New Yorkers to get active, due in large part to a longstanding

underinvestment of public dollars in recreation—a trend that has been reversed elsewhere. While the city has made substantial progress, much more can be done to close these gaps.

New York City does not have enough staff to run programs and fulfill the city’s growing recreational demand.

Improving conditions in city-run athletic facilities is essential to expanding access to free recreation. But to truly boost participation, capital investments must be paired with expense dollars for maintenance and especially program staffing.

“Parks are great by themselves, but even better when they’re programmed. That’s how we ensure that all New Yorkers benefit from what they have to offer,” says a

senior parks official, who requested anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly. “Staffing is the biggest issue and barrier to doing more.”

The number of personnel dedicated to recreation has fallen 15 percent over the last 15 years. In 2025, just 659 total staff members covered 41 sites—in a system serving 8.5 million people. The shortage creates a domino effect: fewer staff means fewer classes, less programming, and lower usage. Many centers lack enough employees to staff the front desk, fitness rooms, and programs simultaneously. With limited capacity and equipment, popular classes like aquatics and cycling fill up fast, and attendees often arrive early to secure a spot.

NYC Parks uses a lottery system for swim classes due to limited pool time availability. A continuing life-guard shortage has kept both indoor and outdoor pools from returning to pre-pandemic staffing levels, forcing shorter hours and canceled programs. In 2024, only nine of the city’s 65 public outdoor pools offered aquatics programming at all.

New York City has fewer recreation centers for its residents than all other large U.S. cities

City	Population	Residents per rec center	# of centers
New York City	8,478,072	235,502	36
Los Angeles	3,878,704	28,312	137
Chicago	2,721,308	9,071	300 (231 field houses and 69 fitness centers)
Houston	2,390,125	39,835	60
Phoenix	1,673,164	50,702	33
Philadelphia	1,573,916	9,899	159
San Antonio	1,526,656	47,708	32 community centers, fitness centers and clubhouses
San Diego	1,404,452	23,408	60
Dallas	1,326,087	31,574	42

Source: Population data is from the U.S. Census (July 2024); Number of centers was obtained in January 2026 from each city's parks department website. Created with Datawrapper

More people share fewer tennis courts in New York City than in Boston, Chicago, or Philadelphia

City	Population	Residents per court	# of tennis courts
New York City	8,478,072	15,585	544
Boston	673,458	11,224	60
Chicago	2,721,308	6,605	412
Philadelphia	1,573,916	2,378	662

Source: Population data from the U.S. Census; Tennis court data analysis from each city's parks department website.
Created with Datawrapper

New York City has fewer public ice rinks for its residents than other large U.S. cities

City	Population	Residents per ice rink	# of public ice rinks
New York City	8,478,072	1,059,759	8
Chicago	2,721,308	340,164	8
Philadelphia	1,573,916	314,783	5
Boston	673,458	84,182	8

Source: Population data is from the U.S. Census (July 2024); Number of ice rinks was obtained from city and state parks department websites. Created with Datawrapper

Even with resources stretched, demand remains immense. Saturday Night Lights drew 33,700 visitors in 2023, serving 1,000 free meals, yet operated in only 14 of 36 recreation centers. Learn to Swim reached 6,000 participants across five locations, and Senior Splash served 3,000 older adults at six sites, down from more than a dozen pools before the pandemic. Six recreation centers with pools now host up to three classes a week, serving 1,500 people annually. Another 16,000 visitors joined programs like Adaptive Aquatics through the fall, winter, and spring.²⁵

But those programs still reach only a fraction of New Yorkers. NYC Parks' summer day camps, a lifeline for

families in lower-income communities, cost \$575 for a full summer of full-day programming—but employ only about 100 seasonal staff. As a result, these camps serve fewer than 600 children citywide. Space constraints add to the challenge: when camps are in session, entire recreation centers often close to the public for most of the day, even as other spaces like field houses go unused.

Swim for Life, which teaches second-graders a potentially life-saving skill, enrolled 7,000 students in 2024. A \$5.5 million city investment will expand the program to eight additional sites, reaching another 4,800 students. Meanwhile, the City Council has supported Wave Makers, with additional funding from the Gray Foundation,

to provide swimming lessons to an additional 2,000 second graders. Despite this important progress, that’s still less than one-quarter of the city’s 75,000 second graders.²⁶

The Kids in Motion program, which brings free drop-in sports and games to playgrounds, reached nearly 300,000 children in 2024, a small share of the city’s 1.7 million children under 18. Staffing again limits scale: just 55 employees on six-month shifts and 17 on three-month shifts oversee programming across hundreds of playgrounds. Other citywide programs are even thinner—NYC Parks’ Mobile Unit has only 14 employees (not including Movies Under the Stars), and Summer Sports Experience operates with just 10.

Shape Up NYC, which offers free fitness classes in a variety of settings, averaged 100 classes a week across 84 locations in 2023, drawing 33,000 in-person visits and 1,650 online. Yet capacity constraints and long instructor trainings have capped growth. It now reaches only half its pre-pandemic participation levels.²⁷

Still, those who use the city’s recreation centers express deep appreciation for the staff who keep them running. “Every parks staff member is friendly and helpful—they’re just in need of more resources,” said one regular visitor. Outside the Al Oerter Recreation Center in Flushing, which boasts one of the city’s highest membership rates, another member, Tina, summed it up: “Where else can you find a public building that’s open from 6 a.m. to 10 p.m.? I just wish it was open on Sunday, when lots of folks could use it.”

Nonprofits fill vital programming needs, but face barriers to partnership and competition for scarce resources.

Nonprofit organizations play an essential role in connecting New Yorkers to recreation, especially for youth, older adults, immigrants, and people with disabilities. Their programs bring people into parks, build community, and turn open space into active space. Yet most lack a dedicated facility of their own and depend on NYC Parks sites to host activities.

The City Parks Foundation plays a vital role in expanding access to free, high-quality recreation across New York City, helping to make up—at least in part—for the decline in programming offered directly by NYC Parks while tapping private-sector resources and partnerships. Through CityParks Play, the organization reaches thousands of children, teens, and seniors each year with sports, fitness, and wellness programming

in local parks. But even with this critical support, philanthropic partnerships alone cannot close the city’s pervasive recreation gaps or meet the scale of unmet need across neighborhoods.

In interviews, nonprofit leaders described a common set of challenges that limit their reach: too few facilities, high rental costs for private venues, competition and delays for permits, and rising prices for supplies and insurance.

As for-profit athletic programming in public parks has expanded, competition for permits has intensified. Registered 501(c)(3) nonprofits are currently eligible for fee waivers, while for-profit entities pay standard permit fees. Even so, permit rates remain well below private market alternatives, with youth fees typically ranging from \$5 to \$15 per hour and adult fees from \$20 to \$41 per hour. By comparison, private facilities typically charge \$100 to \$160 per hour or more. And competition can be fierce: for instance, Astoria Park alone issued 321 permits in the month of September 2025.²⁸

“There are folks that are using these spaces that are charging families money,” says Chiené Jones, founder of Grow Our Game, a nonprofit girls’ basketball program. “How is it possible that you’re using a New York City park so that you’re charging families astronomical rates for admission to play in a public park?”

At Asphalt Green, a nonprofit dedicated to providing access to sports and recreation for New Yorkers of all ages, growing competition for field space is causing the organization to turn away participants. “We turn away about 1,000 kids a year from our higher-level competitive programs because field space is so limited,” says David Ludwig, senior director of community programs at Asphalt Green.

Many organizations face similarly steep logistical hurdles. Figure Skating in Harlem (FSH) has long struggled to secure ice time, since most public rinks are outdoors and fully booked. The city has only eight public ice rinks—less than one per million residents. By comparison, Boston has the same number of public rinks but only 1/12th of New York City’s population.²⁹ As a result, FSH spends about \$100,000 a year transporting students between boroughs and renting private facilities. “These outdoor rinks are really not viable most of the year,” says Sharon Cohen, the group’s founder and CEO. “I think another indoor facility would make a huge difference.”

For Fast Feet, which provides running programs for children with disabilities, busy parks can be overwhelming. “You go to McCarren Park or Astoria Park, these are extremely busy areas . . . it’s amazing,” says Suzie Clinchy the organization’s founder. “But for our kids who can get over-stimulated, it can be a lot. So space and high-traffic areas are tough.” Even when quieter facilities exist, securing them can be difficult: Fast Feet has struggled to

secure less-busy tracks in the past, even when requests have been submitted months in advance.

Nonprofits say the shortage of indoor and year-round facilities is one of their greatest constraints—made worse by climate change, as flooding, heat waves, and extreme weather disrupt outdoor programs. Seasonal limitations hit tennis programs especially hard. New York Junior Tennis & Learning, for example, must rent costly private courts during winter, since only 21 percent of the city’s public tennis courts are indoors. The Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan each have two public indoor facilities; Brooklyn has three, and Staten Island has none.

The same pattern holds across other recreation types. NYC Parks’ outdoor pools are open just two months a year, limiting swimming lessons to a small number of indoor pools.

Recreation needs to evolve to meet the changing needs of New Yorkers.

To serve millions of residents with diverse interests and abilities, the city needs to continually rethink how it delivers recreation—adapting to shifting demographics, cultural preferences, and neighborhood needs.

Immigrants are reshaping how and where New Yorkers play.

Immigrants make up more than 40 percent of New York City’s population, shaping everything from food to recreation. Between 2022 and 2024, more than 210,000 migrants arrived, many from Venezuela, Mexico, Haiti, Cuba, Senegal, and Mauritania. The recreational traditions of these countries—soccer, volleyball, and wrestling—are reshaping demand for culturally responsive and affordable athletic spaces across the five boroughs.

The most striking example is at Flushing Meadows Corona Park in Queens. The 897-acre green space serves as a vital hub where loosely organized soccer leagues, often built around national identity, provide a sense of belonging for newly arrived New Yorkers. (A recent addition, La Vinotinto, is made up entirely of Venezuelan players.) Demand is so great that fields are highly contested; on weekends, volleyball and ecuavoley—a South American variant with a higher net—spill into unpaved dirt patches for lack of dedicated space. “Every scrap of park is in use on summer weekends,” says Anthony Sama, executive director of the Alliance for Flushing Meadows Corona Park. “Come winter, these groups have nowhere to go.”

The city’s booming older adult population are seeking more opportunities for recreation.

New York City is also getting older. There are now 1.43 million adults aged 65 and over—an all-time high and a 53 percent increase since 2000.³⁰ Older adults are as diverse as the city itself: many jog, play tennis, and practice tai chi well into their 80s, while others are homebound without support. Parks are increasingly filled with older adults walking dogs or joining free fitness programs like Shape Up NYC, which has developed a devoted following in libraries, senior centers, and public housing. Even unconventional programs—like NYC Parks’ new senior dodgeball league—have found unexpected success.

Across the city, the Department for the Aging (DFTA) operates about 300 older adult centers and affiliated sites, offering meals, activities, and fitness programs to hundreds of thousands of residents. But most of these centers operate entirely indoors due to barriers to accessing parks and open spaces. That’s where partnerships with NYC Parks can make a difference.

At Sunnyside Community Services, the Shape Up NYC partnership has been a hit. “Using outdoor spaces to congregate around fitness is more in demand—and we should demand it if we’re going to be an age-friendly city,” says Shyvonne Noboa, associate executive director of older adult services. “We would love to be able to take our older adults to the garden and have access to outdoor space that we don’t currently have. I’d love to see intergenerational activities, too. Imagine NYC Parks bringing and bridging together generations to offer mixed audience programming like intergenerational yoga or basketball. There are limitless ideas here.”

People with disabilities still face barriers to full inclusion.

Roughly one million New Yorkers live with a disability, including physical, intellectual, visual, and hearing impairments. NYC Parks has made real progress on accessibility—installing ADA-compliant bathrooms, ramps, and gates at sports courts, adding sensory play zones and quiet areas to playgrounds, and designating an “adaptive hub” recreation center in each borough.

Still, most recreational opportunities are not designed to be fully inclusive. Transportation itself can be a barrier, notes Kristi Eaton, executive director of KEEN New York, a nonprofit that helps youth with disabilities experience physical activities: “If it takes families an hour to reach a program using Access-A-Ride, the athlete may already be agitated by the time they arrive.” Michael DeGrottolo, chief operating officer of Community Resources Staten Island, an organization serving people with intellectual and

“I grew up in the Flatlands. There’s not a lot of programming for kids. I wanted to provide kids and their families with programming that not only taught those [leadership] values but also connected families to very tangible ways to achieve their full potential.

NZINGHA PRESCOD, FOUNDER,
PRESCOD INSTITUTE FOR SPORT, TEAMWORK AND EDUCATION

developmental disabilities, added that even community events like “Music at the Park” are rarely accessible for people with disabilities. His organization has worked to improve access at Staten Island’s Wolfe’s Pond Park, advocating for basic infrastructure like ramps, smooth walking surfaces, and scenic promenades.

“These measures,” DeGrottale explains, “would improve access for people using motorized wheelchairs.” He also emphasized the need for sensory-friendly spaces—quiet zones with comfortable seating for individuals, particularly those on the autism spectrum—to feel safe while still engaging in community life. Adaptive playground features are also in short supply. One major gap, DeGrottale says, is swimming: “Water play is really popular with people on the spectrum. But deep pools aren’t designed with their needs in mind.” He proposes adding waist-high swimming or wading areas to make water play safer and more accessible. Eaton agrees: “Swimming is our biggest waitlist.”

Too few New Yorkers are aware of the recreational programs available.

Free and low-cost recreation can play a vital role in building a healthier, more resilient city—but only if New Yorkers know these opportunities exist. Many residents remain unaware of what’s available at their local recreation center or park, a problem evident in lagging attendance and program participation. As several interviewees noted, even excellent programming fails to reach its potential audience when few people know it’s there.

In FY 2024, NYC Parks had no dedicated marketing budget to promote its vast array of programs. Public awareness is minimal: New Yorkers rarely see information about local fitness classes or community activities on subways, buses, or LinkNYC screens. Instead, most people must actively seek information through the NYC Parks website—which interviewees described as difficult to navigate—or by visiting recreation centers in person. That can deter residents who are curious but not yet members.

With little centralized programming, the responsibility for developing and promoting programs often falls to nonprofit partners—many of which lack the resources of a city agency. Half of the specialized nonprofits interviewed for this report said they have no formal partnership with NYC Parks and receive no marketing assistance, despite using city facilities to deliver programs that align with public goals.

One example is the Prescod Institute for Sport, Teamwork and Education (PISTE), founded in 2020 by two-time Olympian Nzingha Prescod to provide affordable fencing programs for Black youth in central and southeast Brooklyn. Its Fencing in the Park program, a free summer initiative introducing children to fencing at NYC Parks sites, draws more than 300 applicants each year but operates with limited space and funding.

“I grew up in the Flatlands. There’s not a lot of programming for kids,” says Prescod. “I wanted to provide kids and their families with programming that not only taught those [leadership] values but also connected families to very tangible ways to achieve their full potential. We need help with bandwidth more than anything. We have kids that are interested, but it’s a courting process—you need to educate the kids and their families. That takes time, energy, and money.”

Maximizing Opportunities to Expand Recreation Outside of Park Facilities

ON A RECENT SITE VISIT TO MIDWOOD AND FLATBUSH, David Burney, former commissioner of the Department of Design and Construction and a director at Pratt Institute, was struck by what he saw. “There just isn’t enough public space of any kind,” he says. That shortage, he adds, cuts off large swaths of New Yorkers from the many physical and social benefits of recreation. “With public space, you have social interactions with people who you wouldn’t otherwise interact with. It’s great for both physical and mental health.”

But parks aren’t the only answer. To meaningfully expand recreation access, city leaders will need to look beyond traditional facilities for creative, community-based solutions.

“We have these spaces in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods that could be used for recreation—and have been used for recreation—but not consistently,” says Michelle Neugebauer, executive director of the Cypress Hills Local Development Corporation, pointing to everything from public housing community spaces to church basements. “They’re not fully utilized because they don’t have the public or private support for programming.”

Too much of NYCHA’s property is shut off from recreational usage.

Serving more than half a million residents, the New York City Housing Authority is the largest public housing system in North America. Its 335 developments cover 2,400 acres of land, making NYCHA the city’s second-largest landowner. Yet 88 percent of that land is fenced off or otherwise inaccessible. Persistent maintenance problems leave many play spaces derelict or dirty, while community centers—once vital hubs for free programs—have steadily declined. There are now 87 fewer open community centers and facilities in NYCHA developments than in 2013, the result of years of disinvestment and disrepair.³¹

Recent advocacy has begun to yield progress. In 2021, NYCHA released its Open Space Masterplan, outlining new design standards and a vision to modernize the authority’s vast portfolio of land. The following year, the Design Trust for Public Space, the Public Housing Community Fund, and NYCHA launched Green Space

Connections, supported by a grant from The Leona M. and Harry B. Helmsley Charitable Trust. The initiative is partnering with four NYCHA properties in the Bronx and Brooklyn to create community-designed open spaces and develop a guidebook to help nonprofits and private groups activate them, with another four planned in the months ahead. In 2025, NYC Parks completed six park and open space renovations on NYCHA campuses, representing \$23 million in new investment.

These efforts also seek to better match spaces to residents’ needs. Most NYCHA play areas are built for young children, even though 75 percent of residents are adults. Opportunities for teens, working-age adults, and older adults to stay active or participate in on-site programming remain scarce.³²

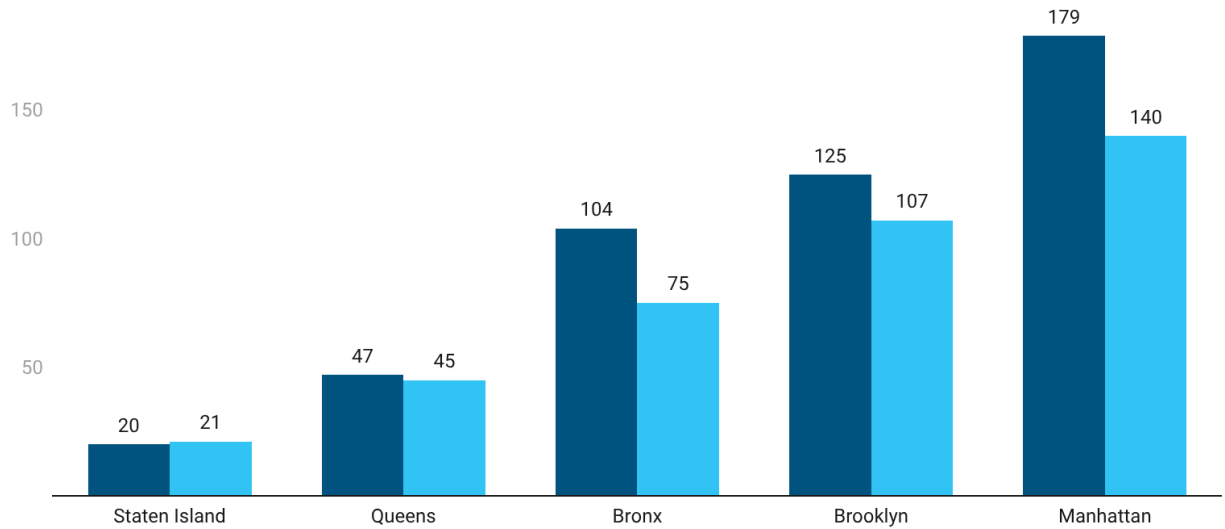
The potential to go further is immense. Expanding accessible, affordable recreation across NYCHA campuses could have an outsized impact—particularly for residents living in poverty or facing health disparities. The NYCHA population is largely low-income and people of color; nearly one-quarter are older adults, and another 23 percent are children.

As demand surges, too few city streets are designed for bikes.

Cycling has become one of the most important ways New Yorkers experience free public recreation. On an average day, more than 600,000 bike trips are taken—likely an undercount—and nearly one million residents say they ride regularly. Citi Bike continues to break ridership records, averaging at least 165,000 daily rides this past June across the four boroughs where it operates, with ridership more than doubling from 2022 to 2025. For many New Yorkers, cycling is not just transportation—it’s one of the city’s most accessible forms of exercise and outdoor activity.

Yet even as ridership continues to grow, significant barriers still prevent too many New Yorkers from accessing this crucial form of recreation—most notably, concerns about safety. Many predominantly lower-income neighborhoods still lack protected bike lanes—from South Jamaica and Richmond Hill to Canarsie and Gravesend—and the rapid rise of faster e-bikes and

Fewer NYCHA community facilities are open today than over a decade ago



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the Directory of NYCHA Community Facilities.
Created with Datawrapper

scooters has created new conflicts on streets where basic infrastructure is already insufficient. Safe bike parking is also limited in many areas, where theft is common and secure storage options are scarce.

These conditions shape who rides. Ridership data and survey research suggest that New Yorkers of color and lower-income New Yorkers are underrepresented among cycling commuters not because they don't want to bike, but because safety concerns and uneven access to cycling infrastructure remain significant barriers in many communities. Despite more than a decade of impressive growth, Citi Bike is still not available in wide swaths of the city, from southeastern Queens to Flushing to East New York to Coney Island.

The disparities are clear. Black New Yorkers make up 22.5 percent of the city but only 6.8 percent of cycling commuters. Asian New Yorkers represent 14.7 percent of the city but just 10.4 percent of bike commuters. And although cycling should be one of the most affordable recreational activities available, it currently skews toward higher-income riders: the median cycling commuter earns \$59,000, about \$9,000 higher than the citywide median. Nearly 61 percent of cycling commuters hold a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 41 percent of adults citywide.

Geographic inequities tell a similar story. Cycling has surged in some communities—up 224 percent in

Bedford-Stuyvesant and 112 percent in Ridgewood, Maspeth, and Middle Village—but declined in neighborhoods like Crown Heights (North) and Jackson Heights and East Elmhurst, where bike infrastructure remains inconsistent or incomplete.

The Adams administration made some progress, including almost 31 miles of new protected bike lanes in 2024, many in neighborhoods with significant health disparities. But if policymakers want to expand the health, mobility, and recreation benefits of cycling to more New Yorkers, they will need to accelerate efforts to fill infrastructure gaps, improve safety, and expand secure bike storage—especially in the communities that have been left behind in bike infrastructure.

Early experiences are also key. Introducing young people to safe, joyful cycling helps normalize active movement and build lifelong comfort on city streets. At P.S. 372 in Brooklyn, teacher Emily Stutts helps lead the weekly Bergen Bike Bus, where children ride to school together with parents and chaperones. The initiative models both safety and joy. “We need to normalize play through the built environment, by making it safer and more joyful for children to move around when they need to,” Stutts says. “Instead of relegating it to just one space, recreation and play should be for everybody, everywhere, when you want it. And right now, there's a clear gap in infrastructure that's inclusive for all ages and abilities.”

The waterfront is largely inaccessible in the neighborhoods that need access the most.

New York is a coastal city with more than 520 miles of shoreline, and about three million residents live within a half-mile walk of the water. More New Yorkers than ever are taking up activities like dragon boating, kayaking, and open-water swimming. Yet most of the city's waterfront remains inaccessible to the people who live closest to it—particularly in low-income communities of color. City data shows that of the 2.9 million New Yorkers who live within walking distance of the waterfront, nearly one million cannot reach it through a park or open space. Access rates vary widely by borough: just 45 percent in the Bronx, 50 percent on Staten Island, 65 percent in Brooklyn, and 70 percent in Queens. Manhattan is the only borough where most waterside neighborhoods have access, at 90 percent.

Our analysis found that 33 of the city's 51 Council districts include some portion of waterfront—home to 5.7 million people, or roughly 70 percent of the city. But fewer than half of these districts (41 percent) have actual waterfront access, and only 21 have boat ramps or launches that allow residents to use the water for recreation.

Despite being a port city, much of New York's shoreline is neither swimmable nor usable. Only 14 of the city's 520 miles of waterfront are public beaches—just 2.6 percent. Among the 44 natural areas with waterfront access, only 19 have canoe or kayak launch sites, 16 permit fishing, seven allow swimming, six have other boat launches, and just four offer paddleboats. And the limited places where New Yorkers can get into the water are concentrated in wealthier neighborhoods, restricting countless residents' access to a major source of physical activity.

Demand is unmistakably strong. The Downtown Boathouse at Pier 26, which runs the world's largest free kayaking program, has brought more than 600,000 people onto the Hudson River over the last 30 years without charge. Each summer, up to 30,000 New Yorkers participate, alongside dozens of school groups, nonprofits, people with special needs, veterans, and visually impaired paddlers. The group has since helped seed community boathouses in all five boroughs, as well as Hoboken.

"This is an island city, and a lot of people don't see it that way," says Martin Sweeney, its president. "People are always amazed when they go for the first time. 'Oh, I can do this?'"

Improved water quality, new parks, and updated zoning codes have drawn more residents back to the city's rivers, bays, and coastline. In 2025, the state announced \$43 million for the Harlem River Greenway, reconnecting New Yorkers to a waterway that was once one of the country's most popular boating destinations. The state has also recommended that portions of the Harlem River be considered "swimmable," opening the door to more recreational use.

But too many New Yorkers still cannot even touch—let alone enjoy—the water they live beside. At Rocking the Boat, which teaches about 1,000 young people each summer to build and sail boats on the Bronx River, the former manager of public programs and special events Robert Buchanan describes the citywide shortage of public launch points.

"You don't want people launching who don't know what they're doing," he says. "But that's where community boathouses can help. They already exist in well-resourced places, but in so many city parks, there's just much less of that." Even Rocking the Boat's own launch in Hunts Point is compromised; the dock is in disrepair and does not always extend far enough into the water. "At low tide, it's sitting in the mud."

Schools are underutilized for recreation when school is not in session.

Schools are among New York City's most underutilized recreation assets when class is not in session. The city has more than 1,500 public schools housed in 945 buildings—together supporting the largest organized recreation program in New York through physical education classes and sports teams for more than 900,000 students. But outside school hours, this vast real estate footprint remains a largely untapped resource for students, families, and surrounding communities.

The Schoolyards to Playgrounds initiative has made important progress by opening and improving previously locked schoolyards after school, on weekends, and during the summer at 313 sites. Yet two-thirds of schoolyards remain closed. In July 2025, the City Council required the city to open 15 additional school playgrounds each year in low-income communities with little access to green space. It's a step forward—but at that pace, fewer than half of schoolyards will be open a decade from now. The Council also directed city agencies to study opening indoor school gyms and basketball courts to the public during inclement weather—but this effort is unlikely to succeed without leadership from the mayor.

“People do come when we have activities. It’s yoga class, line dancing classes. It’s popular, it’s affordable, and it’s easy to access.”

ALLA PLISS, SENIOR DIRECTOR OF JASA’S
12 NATURALLY OCCURRING RETIREMENT COMMUNITIES

“Some of the local schools have fields that are open to the public. [PS]217, they have a large football field, they have some basketball courts. Those are really popular and really well-utilized,” says Robin Redmond, executive director of Flatbush Development Corporation. “But that’s not enough. Everything gets crowded. And there’s no places for teens. The basketball courts, but outside of basketball courts or in bad weather then no. Where can they go?”

CUNY campuses represent another major opportunity. While some of the university system’s 25 campuses have little open space, others—such as Kingsborough Community College and the College of Staten Island—sit on dozens of acres of lawns, fields, and waterfront. Yet these spaces are largely closed to neighborhood residents and rarely programmed for public use, despite being publicly owned and serving communities with limited access to recreational space.

Senior centers are bustling with older adults but recreation offerings are infrequent.

Senior centers are bustling hubs for older adults, but recreational offerings remain limited. New York City operates more than 300 older adult centers—far more than peer cities like Chicago or Philadelphia, which have only a few dozen. These centers provide vital opportunities for older New Yorkers to socialize, share meals, receive services, and participate in activities. Yet the funding model constrains what they can offer: most

support comes from the Older Americans Act and is dedicated primarily to meals and services. To provide fitness classes, social gatherings, group games, or outings—programming that older adults consistently request—organizations must raise additional funds on their own, limiting offerings for a population that would benefit enormously from free recreational opportunities.

But senior centers reach only a small share of the older adult population. Roughly one in eight older New Yorkers use them. For the vast majority, recreation happens elsewhere—inside residential buildings, in parks, and in community spaces close to home. Expanding access to free, age-friendly recreation will require bringing more programming directly to where older adults actually live, including Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities, NYCHA developments, and neighborhood parks.

“I wish there were more financial opportunity for us to offer more weekly activities, monthly lectures and theme parties, and group trips, but we use what we have to do what we can,” says Alla Pliss, senior director of JASA’s 12 Naturally Occurring Retirement Communities across Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and the Bronx. “People do come when we have activities. It’s yoga class, line dancing classes. It’s popular, it’s affordable, and it’s easy to access—you just have to come downstairs to the community room. To see familiar faces and the instructor who knows you so well, the staff and volunteers. But we need more of it.”

Adopting Best Practices From Other Cities

EVEN WITH ITS DENSITY, TRANSIT SYSTEM, AND proximity to parks, New York City still has major gaps in equitable recreation access. Other cities are experimenting with new ways to design, fund, and deliver recreation—and several offer clear ideas New York can adapt.

Align recreation programming and facilities with community needs



INNOVATION: Equity criteria for recreation spending (Minneapolis, MN)

Minneapolis redesigned how it allocates funding and programs its recreation centers by tying core offerings at each site to the demographics within a 15-minute walk. Under the policy, data on local age groups, health indicators, vehicle access, SNAP enrollment, and other factors dictate what programming must be offered—and how resources are distributed. The idea is to ensure that each recreation center is meeting the needs of those living nearby: if 30 percent of the population is over the age of 55, then 30 percent of programming should be geared toward that population. Minneapolis reports that recreation center attendance now exceeds pre-pandemic levels and continues to grow.

NYC takeaway: As New York's neighborhood demographics shift, applying data-driven equity criteria would help NYC Parks better match programming to the people who live near each center.



INNOVATION: Joy Evans Therapeutic Recreation Center (Washington, DC)

Washington, DC, opened the Joy Evans Therapeutic Recreation Center in 2024—the city's first facility designed entirely for children with physical and developmental disabilities. The 37,000-square-foot building includes sensory rooms, adaptive equipment, accessible outdoor spaces, and guided therapeutic programming. Families travel from across the city because it is one of the few places that fully accommodates neurodiverse children and children with disabilities.³³

NYC takeaway: As New York upgrades its aging recreation centers, the city should incorporate fully accessible and sensory-friendly spaces—and build the city's first recreation facility designed from the ground up for neurodiverse users and people with disabilities.

Remove barriers to staffing through public-private partnerships



INNOVATION: Junior Lifeguard Program (San Antonio, TX)

Faced with persistent lifeguard shortages, San Antonio launched an ambitious recruitment and training strategy featuring bilingual ads across the city, higher wages, a uniform stipend, and financial incentives to return the following year. The city also partnered with the University of Texas to create a college-credited lifeguard certification course—lowering training barriers and boosting the job's appeal. As a result, the city opened 23 out of 24 pools last summer.³⁴

NYC takeaway: With lifeguard shortages sharply limiting pool hours and programming, New York could replicate San Antonio's approach, including partnerships with CUNY to offer accredited, lower-cost pathways into lifeguard roles.

Bring recreation directly to underserved communities



INNOVATION: We Walk PHL (Philadelphia, PA)

Philadelphia launched a simple but powerful idea: free, regularly scheduled group walks in parks across the city, led by trained community volunteers. The program has expanded from 3 to 28 locations, attracting more than 2,600 participants annually—especially older adults seeking low-barrier social and physical activity. Most participants report improved mental and physical health, along with stronger neighborhood connections.³⁵

NYC takeaway: A citywide walking program, particularly in parks underutilized due to safety concerns or lack of programming, could boost physical activity and social ties across New York’s lowest-income neighborhoods.



**INNOVATION: Social prescriptions
(San Francisco; New Jersey;
Massachusetts; Georgia).**

Social prescribing links patients to non-clinical activities—such as park walks, dance classes, or creative programs—through a doctor’s referral. Across the country, health systems and insurers now cover arts and recreation programming as preventive care. In San Francisco, children are prescribed guided park visits. In New Jersey, Blue Cross Blue Shield covers six months of arts and culture activities. Massachusetts and Georgia have launched similar prescriptions for cultural outings and creative therapies.

NYC takeaway: By partnering with major hospital systems, NYC could pilot social-prescription programs that connect more New Yorkers—especially those managing chronic conditions—to free and low-cost recreation.

Create more flexible and adaptable public recreation spaces.



INNOVATION: Ciclovía (Bogotá, Colombia)

Bogotá pioneered the Ciclovía model more than 50 years ago, closing major streets to cars every Sunday and holiday to create miles of open space for walking, biking, and fitness classes. Today, over 100 kilometers of streets go car-free weekly, drawing roughly two million people—about a quarter of the city’s population.

NYC takeaway: Expanding regular, predictable car-free corridors connecting major parks could turn city streets into a weekly recreation network for New Yorkers of all ages.



INNOVATION: Paris Plages (Paris, France)

Each summer, Paris transforms the banks of the Seine into temporary beaches, complete with sand, chairs, umbrellas, and pop-up recreation. The program attracts more than four million visitors each year and has helped catalyze major water-quality improvements—including the first legal swimming in the Seine in a century.

NYC takeaway: Seasonal “pop-up beaches” and water-oriented recreation zones along the East River, Harlem River, and Newtown Creek could bring active recreation to places where waterfront access remains limited.

Build recreation into new infrastructure projects



INNOVATION: Station Soccer (Atlanta, GA)

Atlanta created the world’s first soccer field inside a transit station, turning vacant land next to rail stops into high-demand youth and adult programming sites. Supported by research showing that cross-class interactions boost economic mobility, the initiative has expanded to six stations, with plans for ten more.

NYC takeaway: As the city advances major transit expansions like the Interborough Express (IBX), New York has a rare opportunity to integrate recreation—from mini-pitches to fitness areas—directly into new transit hubs and rights-of-way.

Set citywide goals to expand recreation access and participation



**INNOVATION: PlayLA + Girls Play LA
(Los Angeles, CA)**

Los Angeles launched a major expansion of youth sports in advance of the 2028 Olympics, creating more than 40 low-cost programs for children ages 5–17 at recreation centers and pools across the city. A \$160 million public-private partnership funds the program, which offers \$10 fees, income-based waivers, free transportation, and adaptive sports. A companion initiative, Girls Play LA, tackles gender inequity in youth recreation and has grown girls’ participation from 22 percent to 45 percent.³⁶

NYC takeaway: With the 2026 FIFA World Cup coming to New York and New Jersey, the city could leverage global attention—and philanthropic interest—to dramatically expand youth soccer, subsidized programming, and gender-equity initiatives across NYC Parks and schools.

Recommendations

11 Ideas for Creating a Happier, Healthier New York City by Expanding Public Recreation

NEW YORK CITY HAS ALL THE INGREDIENTS FOR A robust, inclusive recreation ecosystem: dense neighborhoods, a vast network of parks and open spaces, hundreds of schoolyards, an extensive transit system, and world-class public institutions. Yet too many New Yorkers still struggle to find affordable, accessible places to be active—especially in low-income communities, where aging facilities, limited programming, and unsafe streets make recreation far harder than it should be.

Reversing this trend will require a bold new commitment from the Mamdani administration to put the “rec” back in Parks & Rec and treat recreation as essential civic infrastructure. The following 11 ideas outline a practical, achievable roadmap for building a happier, healthier city—one where every New Yorker, in every neighborhood, can walk out their door and find ways to move, play, and connect. Together, they form the backbone of a citywide recreation strategy worthy of New York.

1. MAKE A LONG-TERM COMMITMENT TO RESTORING RECREATION AS A CITYWIDE PRIORITY—STARTING WITH A RECREATION MASTER PLAN. For decades, recreation has become an afterthought in the city’s parks system: in the 1970s, recreational services made up nearly one-third of NYC Parks’ budget; today, it is just 5.3 percent. Attendance at recreation centers has fallen sharply even as the city has grown by more than a million residents. The mayor should commit to achieving his pledge of allocating 1 percent of the city budget to parks during his administration and restore recreation as a core mission of the agency—reversing years of disinvestment and truly putting the “rec” back in Parks & Rec.

As part of this commitment, the city should set a goal of allocating 20 percent of an expanded parks budget to recreation, and fund and develop a recreation master plan for the 21st century, mapping current assets, identifying gaps, aligning programming with population needs, and launching a citywide recreation marketing campaign. Other cities have shown this is achievable: Boston and Minneapolis have both taken citywide, data-driven approaches to recreation planning, and Los Angeles has pushed to market recreational offerings widely. A five-borough strategy would give New York the blueprint it lacks today—one that ties capital, operating, and programming choices together and ensures recreation becomes a sustained civic priority.

2. ACTIVATE MORE OF THE CITY’S EXISTING PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE FOR RECREATION—LEVERAGING THE UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY OF THE 2026 WORLD CUP TO LAUNCH THIS CITYWIDE EFFORT. New York has far more recreation potential than the formal Parks system alone—it simply isn’t being activated. Schools run the city’s largest organized recreation system, yet most buildings sit locked after 5 p.m. and on weekends. NYCHA manages 2,400 acres of land, the majority of which is fenced off or inaccessible, with too few functioning play spaces or community centers. The waterfront spans 520 miles, but only a fraction is accessible, swimmable, or set up for boating. And streets across the city—still dominated by cars—remain a vastly underutilized public asset for play, movement, and community life.

The Mamdani administration should leverage the historic opportunity presented by the 2026 World Cup to launch a coordinated, cross-agency strategy to open up these assets for recreation. That should start with expanding Schoolyards to Playgrounds and opening more school gyms and fields after hours, especially in neighborhoods with little open space. At NYCHA, the city should support and scale initiatives like Green Space Connections—which is already activating open spaces with deep resident input in eight developments—to reach dozens more campuses.

Along the waterfront, NYC Parks and state partners should expand modular kayak launches, create more safe swimming access points, and deploy simple storage solutions so communities can run boating programs close to where residents live.

Streets should also play a much larger role. Summer Streets should expand beyond five weekends and into more neighborhoods; the city should pilot recreation-forward street redesigns near schools to create “safe routes to play”; and revive its Weekend Walks program, which ended in 2019.

The MTA and NYC Parks should explore transforming key nodes along the coming IBX into recreation hubs inspired by Atlanta’s Station Soccer—where transit stations host sports programming and cross-class community activity.

And in partnership with NYC Aging, the city should bring more group programming, walking clubs, and tours directly to senior centers and older adult housing, ensuring older New Yorkers have consistent opportunities to stay active close to home.

Together, these actions would knit a much broader recreation network across the five boroughs—opening the school gym down the block, the NYCHA courtyard next door, the waterfront across the street, and even the local train station as places where every New Yorker can move, play, and connect.

3. COMMIT TO A 10-YEAR CAPITAL CAMPAIGN TO SHORE UP AGING FACILITIES—AND BUILD NEW ONES. Half the city’s recreation centers were built before 1950; roughly 40 percent of pools date back to the 1930s. Many have not seen major renovation in decades. Chronic leaks, HVAC failures, and outdated mechanical systems push New Yorkers away and depress usage. Although the Adams administration began to chip away at the more than \$400 million state-of-good-repair backlog, the scale of need is far larger.

The Mamdani administration should launch a multi-year capital campaign to modernize every major recreation facility—with a focus on air conditioning, roofs, locker rooms, safer pools, and multi-purpose spaces. The effort should be paired with a citywide facilities assessment to ensure capital dollars are targeted where they will deliver the most benefit—including schools, CUNY colleges, and other publicly owned facilities. And the city should seize opportunities to build entirely new facilities—such as field houses, multiuse courts, and aquatic centers—especially in neighborhoods where recreation options are scarce and where major transit or land-use changes, like the upcoming IBX, will reshape community needs. To encourage development of these facilities, the city can also develop zoning tools, like exempting recreation facilities from floor area ratio (FAR) limits, enabling sports fields to become “green roofs” by combining the footprint of small buildings, and by encouraging subsurface space to be used to create new pools, by eliminating parking requirements. As part of this effort, the city should work proactively with nonprofit partners who can deliver free programming—from tennis to field hockey and beyond—to ensure that communities have access to recreational opportunities that might otherwise never be made available locally.

4. LAUNCH REC PASS, A NEW PARTNERSHIP WITH THE CITY’S PUBLIC LIBRARIES TO UNLOCK FREE RECREATION CITYWIDE. The city’s 217 library branches reach every neighborhood and serve over 40 million visitors a year. With the right partnership, they can become powerful gateways to free and low-cost recreation. Modeled on Culture Pass, Rec Pass would allow library cardholders to access a set number of free classes or activities at recreation centers, pools, and partner nonprofits each month.

Rec Pass would help promote NYC Parks programming to a far wider audience, especially in low-income communities where awareness remains low. (Today, NYC Parks offers a discount to IDNYC holders to help boost membership, but the city should go further to build awareness of recreational offerings and serve more New Yorkers.) Rec Pass would also introduce first-time users to classes, workshops, or activities they might never otherwise try—from yoga and strength training to pickleball or family recreation nights. By lowering barriers to entry and meeting people where they are, Rec Pass would help thousands of New Yorkers get active.

5. SCALE UP NYC PARKS’ SUMMER DAY CAMPS TO SERVE AT LEAST 5,000 CHILDREN. For hundreds of thousands of New York City families, the summer break creates a major childcare and affordability challenge, with full-day camps often filling months in advance and costing \$500 to \$1,000 per week. NYC Parks’ Summer Day Camp is one of the city’s most effective and affordable options—offering a full day of outdoor recreation, sports, arts, and nature programming

for just \$500–\$575 for the entire summer—yet it currently serves only a few hundred children each year across a limited number of sites. City leaders should significantly scale up this proven program to reach at least 5,000 campers annually by expanding it to more recreation centers and park facilities. Doing so would save families thousands of dollars per child each summer, generate meaningful fee revenue for Parks, and provide thousands more children with healthy, outdoor-focused recreation at a relatively modest public cost—while making better use of the city’s existing park and recreation infrastructure.

6. CREATE RECRX, A MULTI-AGENCY EFFORT TO TIE HEALTH SPENDING DIRECTLY TO RECREATION. The benefits of physical activity to mental and physical health are overwhelming. Yet the health system rarely invests in recreation as a preventive tool. RecRx would change that by enabling healthcare providers, insurers, and city agencies to prescribe recreation to patients—whether free classes at a recreation center, guided park visits, or memberships at participating gyms.

Cities and states across the country offer models: pediatricians in the East Bay prescribe park visits; New Jersey’s Blue Cross Blue Shield covers six months of dance and cultural programming; Massachusetts’ CultureRx subsidizes arts and recreation activities; and Georgia’s Art Pharmacy provides “doses” of creative outings to improve mental health. A New York City adaptation could start with partnerships across the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Health + Hospitals, NYC Parks, and major insurers, offering a scalable way to expand access for New Yorkers who would benefit most. For example, major insurers could fund recreation programs, like making rec center memberships free, as a preventative care strategy and to reduce long-term healthcare expenditures.

7. BUILD A RECREATION INVESTMENT FUND TO HARNESS PRIVATE DOLLARS FOR PROGRAMMING AND FACILITIES. The city cannot meet its recreation needs on public funding alone—especially in an uncertain fiscal environment. A Recreation Investment Fund would create a structured mechanism to receive and direct private dollars for programming, equipment, and facility upgrades in the neighborhoods that need them most. Professional sports teams already offer precedent: the Amazin’ Mets Foundation has funded field renovations in Flushing Meadows Corona Park, and New York City Football Club has partnered with parks across the city to build free soccer pitches through the Adopt-A-Park program. But these public-private partnerships have significant room to grow. A dedicated fund—potentially developed in partnership with the New York City Economic Development Corporation—would make these collaborations easier to initiate, finance, and sustain. This could also include new recreational concessions that incorporate free public access as part of their agreements with NYC Parks, expanding on some existing agreements that provide free access to golf, ice skating, tennis lessons, and other opportunities. A Recreation Investment Fund would also allow the city to pursue expanded corporate, philanthropic, and anchor-institution partnerships to support programming where public resources remain stretched.

8. REVERSE STAFFING CUTS AND ADD FULL-TIME STAFF TO OPEN MORE ATHLETIC FACILITIES SEVEN DAYS A WEEK AND EXPAND PROGRAMMING. Only about one-third of recreation centers are open seven days a week. Staffing shortages also limit class offerings, outreach, and the ability to run consistent programming year-round. Policymakers should baseline funding to restore the 77 programming positions cut in recent budget reductions and add another 75 staff per year over the next four years to expand offerings.

Reliable, full-week access would dramatically increase usage, especially for working families, teens, and older adults. An expanded staff would allow centers to build stronger community relationships, offer more age-appropriate classes, and support the new partnerships and programming outlined in this report.

9. PILOT RECCORPS, A WORKFORCE PIPELINE INTO RECREATION CAREERS THROUGH CUNY, CTE HIGH SCHOOLS, AND SYEP. NYC Parks faces persistent hiring and retention challenges—especially in aquatics, youth programs, coaching, and public-facing roles. RecCorps would build a structured workforce pipeline by linking CUNY campuses, Career and Technical Education high schools, and the Summer Youth Employment Program. (NYC Parks currently develops a small number of SYEP participants through an Aquatics Career Prep program—this should be expanded to dozens of other roles across the system.) Students could earn stipends or wages while working in lifeguarding, recreation programming, youth sports, outdoor education, and maintenance.

This strategy would create high-quality entry points into professions like sports medicine, coaching, physical education, aquatics, and youth development. It would also help fill chronic staffing gaps across recreation centers, pools, courts, and nonprofit providers—benefiting both young workers and the New Yorkers they serve.

10. CREATE A “TRUSTED PARTNER” PROGRAM FOR NONPROFITS PROVIDING REGULAR RECREATION SERVICES.

Nonprofit organizations fill essential gaps in the city’s recreation ecosystem, offering programs from yoga and dance to youth sports and martial arts. Yet these groups often face barriers: complicated permitting, inconsistent access to indoor and outdoor space, no storage, and little to no marketing support.

A trusted partner program—modeled on programs that support Business Improvement Districts—would allow for multi-year permits to give nonprofits an advantage in the competition for space and to fundraise and market with more long-term certainty, would streamline access to equipment, set aside rooms or courts for high-performing partners, and provide basic marketing assistance and access to programmatic city funding. This should build on—and go beyond—the current, highly effective partnership between NYC Parks and the City Parks Foundation. This approach would ensure that nonprofits offering high-quality, community-rooted programming can reliably reach more New Yorkers.

11. MAKE IT EASIER TO RECREATE IN PARKS THROUGH MOBILE AND MODULAR AMENITIES.

Parks near many New Yorkers’ homes lack even the simplest amenities—balls, paddles, portable nets, or equipment for kids. The city’s Play Mobile fleet and playground associates provide some support but it is far too small for a city of 8.5 million. Policymakers should think creatively about bringing recreation directly to more neighborhoods through vending machines stocked with handballs or jump ropes, pop-up kiosks offering tennis rackets or scooters, and mobile concessions that rent paddleboards, roller skates, or other equipment.

These low-cost, high-reach strategies can transform passive open spaces into hubs of activity and make recreation easier for families who cannot afford equipment or do not live near a recreation center.

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