

# NEW DATA UNDERSCORES NEED FOR SAFE PLACES TO WALK AND BIKE CLOSE TO HOME

*Findings of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy Survey Show Americans Turning to Outdoors to Reduce Stress Brought on by the COVID-19 Pandemic*

**WASHINGTON**—As summer gets into full swing in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, trail use continues to surge nationwide and guidelines about what activities are safest and where people should visit continue to evolve. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) today released new data about how people are using the outdoors and trails during the pandemic, with findings reinforcing an overwhelming demand for safe places to walk and bike nationwide.

Nearly half of people (46%) indicated that having access to open spaces has reduced their stress levels during the pandemic and that the majority of people are getting outside about the same or more than they were before the pandemic (66%). Over half (52%) are exercising outdoors in their immediate neighborhoods and local trails. Across the country, trail count data shows surging trail use, with numbers of people out on trails spiking to levels more than 200% higher than last year at the same time. Since March, trails nationwide have seen an average surge of trail use that is 79% higher than last year.

“We continue to see evidence that access to nature and the outdoors is a critical component of our well-being—especially during times of heightened and chronic stress like this,” said Torsha Bhattacharya, PhD, research director at RTC. “That’s why we’re seeing sustained surges in trail use and more people turning to outdoor activity and trails right now. With that, comes an increase in awareness and support for trails as vital

community assets and a need to continue to find ways to create more space close-to-home for people to walk, bike and be active that is separated from vehicle traffic.”

Recent studies indicate exercise and [time spent in nature may be even better for mental health](#) than exercising indoors—data which is being reinforced by the demand for trails right now. Additional findings from questions fielded to a subgroup of respondents (1,240) include:

- 75% believe that trails contribute significantly to the well-being of a community.
- 46% say they now consider trails and open spaces to be important, whereas 37% considered trails to be important before the pandemic.
- 78% said it is very important to have access to places to walk and bike that are completely separated from vehicle traffic.

Demand for places to walk and bike that are separated from vehicle traffic, juxtaposed with surging trail use and the challenges many communities experience accessing outdoor space that is close-to-home, led RTC [to call for local officials to repurpose streets](#) and other public space for physical activity. Nearly 10,000 people have signed RTC’s petition and more than 67 U.S. cities and towns have taken action, making over 380 miles of streets available for people to walk, bike and be active.

“Being active has profound mental health benefits, and enhancing psychological health is especially critical in times of stress, which this certainly is,” said James F. Sallis, PhD, distinguished professor emeritus of family medicine and public health at the University of California, San Diego, and an RTC board member in an [interview about safe ways to be physically active during the pandemic](#). “Each session of physical activity boosts mood and reduces anxiety, so making sure you get activity every day can be a partial antidote to worrisome news reports.”

The national survey was conducted via SurveyMonkey between May 2 and May 22, 2020 and fielded among 1,980 respondents including 740 RTC members and 1,240 respondents from the general public, representing an oversample of 31% Latinx, 33% Black and 36% White. The margin of error is  $\pm 5\%$  at 95% confidence level.

RTC has media assets as well as resources to help people find trails and recreate responsibly during the pandemic at [railstotrails.org/COVID19](https://railstotrails.org/COVID19), including [TrailLink.com](https://TrailLink.com)—a free resource provided by RTC that provides trail maps, walking and biking directions to local trails, contact information for local trail managers, and status updates about trail facilities for more than 38,000 miles of trails nationwide. RTC is also a member of the [Recreate Responsibly Coalition](#), a diverse community of over 500 businesses, government agencies, nonprofits, outdoor media and influencers working to share best practices and guidance to help people get outside safely and help keep the nation’s parks, trails and public lands open during the pandemic.

*Rails-to-Trails Conservancy is the nation’s largest trails organization— with a grassroots community more than 1 million strong—dedicated to connecting people and communities by creating a nationwide network of public trails, many from former rail lines. Connect with RTC at [railstotrails.org](https://railstotrails.org) and [@railstotrails](#) on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).*