

**The National Park Service  
Comprehensive Survey of the  
American Public**

**Ethnic and Racial Diversity  
of National Park System Visitors  
and Non-Visitors  
Technical Report**

Frederic I. Solop, Ph.D.  
Kristi K. Hagen, M.A., M.A.  
David Ostergren, Ph.D.  
Northern Arizona University

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is the third in a series of four topical reports prepared by Northern Arizona University's Social Research Laboratory based on the 2000 *National Park Service Comprehensive Survey of the American Public*. The purpose of this report is to describe racial and ethnic patterns in use and non-use of the National Park System.

Between February 21, 2000 and May 21, 2000 the Social Research Laboratory interviewed adult members of 3,515 households in the United States. The sample represented all seven regions of the National Park System.

Major findings include:

- Thirty-two percent of respondents reported visiting a National Park System unit within the previous two years. Thirty-six percent of white non-Hispanics, 33 percent of American Indians, 29 percent of Asians, and 27 percent of Hispanic Americans reported visiting an NPS unit within the previous two years. The visitation rate for African Americans was 13 percent.
- Fifty-nine percent of respondents said they were either very likely or somewhat likely to visit a National Park System unit within the next 12 months. There were no significant differences in responses to this question by race and ethnicity. However, this projection of future behavior should be considered against the pattern of past behavior showing lower visitation rates by African Americans.
- When provided with a list of barriers to visitation, a majority of all respondents believed that overall costs (hotel, food, and other items), lack of information about what to do inside parks, and the travel distance to a unit were important barriers. However, Hispanic Americans and African Americans were more likely to list these as barriers than whites.
- Almost one-half of both white non-Hispanic respondents and Hispanic Americans felt that crowded parks were a deterrent to visitation.
- Hispanic Americans expressed significantly greater concern about reservations having to be made too far in advance, and they were more than twice as likely as whites and African Americans to be concerned about safety in National Park System units.
- African Americans were more than three times as likely as whites to believe that park employees gave poor service to visitors, and that parks were uncomfortable places to be for people similar to themselves.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. Preface

The National Park Service (NPS) commissioned the Social Research Laboratory at Northern Arizona University to conduct the *2000 National Park Service Comprehensive Survey of the American Public*. The significance of this survey lies in the inclusion of both visitors and non-visitors to the National Park System.

Survey data were obtained through telephone interviews with adult members of 3,515 households in the United States, providing representative data for all geographic regions. Data collection was completed between February 21, 2000 and May 21, 2000. (Refer to the appendix for a complete description of the methodology.)

For purposes of the survey, a visitor was defined as an individual who had entered a National Park System unit within the 24 months prior to being contacted for the survey and who was able to accurately identify the unit entered. All respondents who had not visited a unit within the previous 24 months, or who could not accurately name a unit they visited, were categorized as non-visitors. Overall, 32 percent of the respondents visited a unit within the 24 months preceding the survey and could accurately name the park they visited.

Findings described in previous reports detailed the demographic characteristics of National Park System visitors and non-visitors, contrasted differences in motivation, interest, and attitudes held by these two groups toward the National Park Service and the National Park System, and provided a detailed understanding of the trips visitors make to National Park System units.

This topical report addresses racial and ethnic diversity in the National Park System by comparing visitors and non-visitors in three groups: African Americans, Hispanic Americans, and white non-Hispanics. The report is meant to be used in conjunction with the survey data presented in the *National Park Service Comprehensive Survey of the American Public National Technical Report* (June 2001, <http://www.nps.gov/socialscience/waso/products.htm#TA>).

This report is the third in a series of four topical reports prepared by Northern Arizona University's Social Research Laboratory. The series of four reports are:

- 1) Seven regional technical reports;
- 2) Attitudes towards fees and the Recreation Fee Demonstration Project;
- 3) Analysis of visitor and non-visitor diversity; and
- 4) Public opinion toward management of non-native plants and animals in NPS units.

## B. Background

Diversity is a broad issue that presents itself in several aspects of NPS affairs: employment, visitor access, and visitor services. While there are many dimensions of diversity (gender, ethnicity, race, religion, age, physical ability), this report focuses on racial and ethnic diversity. For our purposes, the reader should note the definitions used by Floyd (1999). Race is a social classification based primarily on differences in real or perceived physical characteristics. In contrast, ethnicity is defined in terms of national origin or such cultural characteristics as language and religion. Thus, “African American” is a racial category while “Hispanic American” is an ethnic category. People of Hispanic ethnicity may be of any race. The *2000 National Park Service Comprehensive Survey of the American Public* employed the US Census Bureau classification system for race and ethnicity. Respondents were first asked to identify themselves as either Hispanic or non-Hispanic (an ethnic classification). In a subsequent question, they then identified their race as either “white,” “Black or African American,” “Asian,” “American Indian or Alaska Native,” or “Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander.”

Diversity has been recognized as an issue for outdoor recreation and park managers since the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission reported that, in general, African Americans engaged in outdoor recreation less frequently than whites (Mueller and Gurin, 1962). Research through the 1980s indicated that that generalization continued to hold true. In the 1990s, researchers began to investigate a wider ethnic spectrum, and a differences were revealed when comparing whites with Hispanic Americans, although in this case the contrasts were not so much in participation rates as in styles of recreational use (e.g., group size, preferred activities and facilities, language spoken). (For a more extensive review of the race and ethnicity literature as it relates to recreation see Floyd 1999 and Gramann 1996.)

Hutchison (2000) reports that, although growing, there is a continued lack of research that addresses ethnic differences in recreation behavior and recognizes the breadth of ethnic groups. Compared to the parent field of race and ethnicity, the recreation literature is behind (Hutchison 2000). However, this survey and a recent special issue of *Leisure Sciences* (Sasidharan and Kerstetter 2002) indicate that the field is growing, and agencies realize the significance of racial and ethnic diversity to their missions.

For its part, the NPS recognizes in its 1997 strategic plan that many parks do not offer experiences meaningful to visitors of all ethnic backgrounds. As the United States becomes more diverse in the 21st century, the NPS will need to respond (Gramann 1996; Floyd 1999; Hutchison 2000; Sasidharan 2002). The NPS response may take many forms, such as additional themes for National Park System interpretive programs that convey the diversity of the American experience and changes in how the NPS communicates information about its many activities and resources across the nation. This analysis provides some of the information that planners and policy-makers will need to effectively serve an increasingly diverse America.

### C. Report Goal

The goal of this report is to answer the question, “Why do members of some ethnic and racial groups visit National Park System units less frequently than white non- Hispanic Americans?” This question is analyzed from several angles, including perceptions of the National Park System by visitors and non- visitors, public attitudes towards entrance fees and other costs of visits, opinions about the safety and comfort of parks, and levels of knowledge regarding the activities, services, and opportunities available within the National Park System.

## II. RESULTS

### A. Racial and Ethnic Diversity

The 2000 National Park Service Comprehensive Survey of the American Public identified the proportion of US residents who had visited a National Park System unit within the previous two years. Findings from this survey indicated that 32 percent of residents had been to a unit they could accurately name. However, there were differences in the percentage of people from different racial or ethnic groups visiting the National Park System. More than one- third of white non- Hispanic respondents (36%) had visited a unit within the previous two years, compared to 33 percent of American Indians and 29 percent of Asians (Table 1). A smaller percentage of Hispanic Americans (27%), African Americans (13%), and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (11%) had visited a park during the same period. Differing rates of visitation warrant additional investigation. This report provides an in- depth look at the attitudes and behaviors of white non- Hispanics, African Americans, and Hispanic Americans concerning barriers to national park visits. Asians, American Indians, and Native Hawaiians are excluded from further analysis because their representation within the sample was too small to make reliable generalizations to their respective sub- populations.

	Rate	Sample
Total	32%	3506
White non-Hispanic	36%	2478
American Indian	33%	21
Asian	29%	85
Hispanic American	27%	379
African American	13%	368
Native Hawaiian/ Pacific Islander	11%	18

### B. Barriers to Visitation

Approximately two- thirds of all survey respondents had not visited a National Park System unit within the previous two years or could not name the unit they visited. Respondents classified as non- visitors were first asked in an open- ended format why they had not visited a park. Respondents were allowed to provide more than one answer to this question.

Table 2 shows that the two most-cited reasons by respondents for not visiting were that they were too busy (38%), and that the distance to travel was too far (37%). In addition, 15 percent of non-visitors said they lacked information about the types of activities offered in units. Eleven percent said they simply were not interested in visiting parks. Eleven percent also cited the overall cost of traveling to parks as too expensive. Seven percent said entrance fees were too high. Four percent of non-visitors replied that they had not visited National Park System units recently because the units were not handicap-accessible, and another four percent believed the parks were unsafe. Finally, one percent of non-visitors felt that National Park System units were not welcoming places.

	Total	White Non-Hispanic	Hispanic American	African American
Too busy	38%	36%	42%	44%
Distance	37%	37%	37%	42%
Lack information	15%	11%	21%	26%
Lack interest	11%	11%	11%	11%
Overall costs too expensive	11%	11%	10%	17%
Entrance fees too expensive	7%	7%	5%	9%
Units are not accessible	4%	4%	2%	8%
Units are unsafe	4%	4%	7%	5%
Don't feel welcome there	1%	1%	<1%	2%

Two findings stand out in Table 2. First, the ranking of reasons for not visiting National Park System units is generally consistent across whites, Hispanic Americans, and African Americans. Especially striking is that over one-third of all three non-visitor groups said they were too busy and that travel distances to parks were too great, far outweighing other reasons for non-visitation. (These two explanations may be interrelated in that one reason people may not have enough time to visit a park is because it is too far away.) Second, Hispanic Americans and African Americans were significantly more likely than whites to say that they did not visit due to lack of information about parks.

In addition to the open-ended question asking non-visitors why they didn't visit National Park System units, a series of 13 closed-ended questions about this topic was presented to all respondents, including visitors. The 13 items offered potential reasons why people may not visit National Park System units "more often." Respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed that these reasons applied to them. The results are shown in Table 3.

Of the 13 reasons for not visiting more often, three were identified as barriers by more than one-half of all survey respondents. These included: hotels, food, and other costs (not including entrance fees or fees for additional services) being too expensive; not knowing much about National Park System units; and National Park System units being too far from home. In addition, almost one-half of all respondents said they did not visit more often because parks were too crowded and reservations had to be made too far in advance. Fewer respondents said they did not visit more frequently because it was difficult to park their vehicles, they lacked information about what to do once inside parks, entrance and service fees were too high, units were not handicap-accessible, or parks were unsafe. Fewer than one in ten people did not visit more frequently because NPS employees gave poor service to visitors and units were uncomfortable places to be for people similar to them in race, ethnicity, or gender.

**Table 3:  
Closed-ended Responses for Not Visiting NPS Units More Often,  
by Race and Ethnicity (All Respondents)**

	Total	White Non-Hispanic	Hispanic American	African American
Hotel/food/other costs too expensive	62%	59%	74%	70%
Don't know much about the parks	61%	57%	71%	75%
Distance	54%	52%	67%	63%
Units are too crowded	49%	49%	49%	32%
Reservations needed too far in advance	48%	47%	58%	45%
Parking difficulties	42%	40%	50%	46%
Lack information once inside parks	27%	24%	40%	40%
Entrance fees are too high	27%	25%	38%	33%
Service fees are too high	24%	21%	36%	29%
Units are not accessible	24%	22%	26%	31%
Units are not safe	11%	9%	24%	9%
Employees give poor service	8%	6%	14%	18%
Units are uncomfortable places to be	7%	5%	9%	18%

To summarize, the majority of respondents in all three racial/ethnic groups agreed that hotel, food, and other costs, not knowing much about parks, and travel distances were barriers to more frequent visitation. Furthermore, at least one-half of Hispanic Americans also agreed that other barriers to more frequent visits included “reservations must be made too far in advance” and that there were parking difficulties in National Park System units.

Turning to differences between the three groups, African Americans and Hispanic Americans were significantly more likely than white non-Hispanic respondents to agree that barriers to more frequent visits included: high hotel, food, and other costs; not knowing much about parks; the distance of units from home; and lack of information about what to do once inside a park. Additionally, Hispanic Americans were significantly more likely than other groups to agree that having to make reservations too far in advance and units not being safe were significant barriers to visiting more often.



When responses to these closed- ended items are compared with the open- ended responses, distance, lack of information about units and what they have to offer, and concern for some costs emerge as more significant barriers to park visitation among Hispanic Americans and African Americans.

The previous section presents the responses of the total sample to the close- ended questions about reasons for not visiting parks more often. However, non- visitors may have somewhat different perspectives than visitors about which of these concerns pose real barriers to more frequent visitation. This analysis is shown in Table 4.

More than two- thirds of non- visitors (70%) believed that not knowing much about National Park System units was one reason for not visiting more. Sixty- five percent agreed that high hotel and food costs were another barrier. The travel distance to National Park System units was cited by 63 percent of non- visitors, and 52 percent stated that reservations must be made too far in advance. Even so, there were few statistically significant differences in the comparison between the three non- visitor groups. Of those that existed, Hispanic Americans were significantly more likely than whites to express concern about hotel, food, and other costs being a barrier. This group was also more likely to agree that advance- reservation requirements limited visits. African Americans were significantly less likely than either whites or Hispanic Americans to believe that parks were too crowded. Both Hispanic and African Americans were more likely to think that lack of information on what to do in parks was a barrier to more frequent use.

**Table 4:  
Closed-ended Reasons for Not Visiting NPS Units More Often,  
by Race and Ethnicity (Non-visitors Only)**

	Total	White Non-Hispanic	Hispanic American	African American
Don't know much about the parks	70%	68%	74%	78%
Hotel/food/other costs too expensive	65%	62%	76%	71%
Distance	63%	61%	75%	67%
Reservations needed too far in advance	52%	51%	63%	49%
Units are too crowded	47%	48%	47%	34%
Parking difficulties	40%	39%	46%	40%
Lack information once inside parks	34%	29%	49%	46%
Entrance fees are too high	29%	27%	37%	34%
Service fees are too high	25%	23%	33%	29%
Units are not accessible	24%	21%	25%	29%
Units are not safe	13%	11%	25%	9%
Employees give poor service	9%	6%	15%	20%
Units are uncomfortable places to be	9%	6%	7%	21%

Finally, although the overall percentage of non- visitors citing these as barriers was lower, Hispanic Americans were more likely than whites to agree that high entrance and service fees, safety, and poor service from employees were reasons for not visiting parks more often. African American non- visitors shared the concerns about service and were three times more likely than the other two groups to think that parks were uncomfortable places to be for people like themselves.

**C. Likelihood of Visiting a National Park System Unit in the Next 12 Months**

All survey respondents were asked about their likelihood of visiting a National Park System unit within the next 12 months. These projections are especially interesting when compared to actual visitation rates among different racial and ethnic groups over the previous two years.

Table 5 shows that 59 percent of all respondents said that they were either “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to visit a National Park System unit within the next 12 months. In contrast, 39 percent said they did not expect to visit within that period (combining “not very likely” and “not at all likely”). Looking only at those who said it was very likely that they would visit within the next year, the proportion was remarkably similar to patterns of actual visitation during the previous two years. The percentage very likely to visit fell within one point of the percentage classified as previous visitors during the past two years.

A comparison of intentions among the three racial/ethnic groups revealed no statistically significant differences in visit plans over the next 12 months. Sixty- one percent of white non- Hispanics, 58 percent of Hispanic Americans, and 54 percent of African Americans said they were “very likely” or “somewhat likely” to visit within a year.

<b>Table 5: Likelihood of Visiting Unit Within Next 12 Months, by Race and Ethnicity (All Respondents)</b>				
	Total	White Non-Hispanic	Hispanic American	African American
Very/Somewhat likely	59%	61%	58%	54%
Not very/Not at all likely	39%	38%	40%	46%
Don't know	2%	2%	3%	1%

**D. Conclusion**

The goal of this analysis was to determine why some racial or ethnic groups report lower rates of visitation to the National Park System than white non- Hispanic Americans. The answers to this question are found in the triangulation of findings across several indicators. All three groups pointed

to being too busy and having to travel too far as important reasons for non- visitation. These were also important reasons for not visiting parks more often. Hispanic Americans and African Americans also felt that they lacked information about what to do inside a park, and that the costs of hotels and food were too high. Finally, Hispanic Americans were consistently concerned about having to make reservations too far in advance and about safety in parks.

The finding that people are unaware of what to do once inside a park is within the ability of the NPS to correct. An educational campaign designed to appeal to Hispanic American and African American communities may go far to reverse this lack of awareness. Inclusion, where possible, of Hispanic- American and African- American culture and history as part of the parks' interpretive themes would enhance the relevance of parks and may also increase visits. As noted in other studies, many activities that are of interest to specific racial and ethnic groups could be promoted specifically to that group. For example, Snow (1989) found that Hispanic Americans were generally more interested in ranger-led activities, picnicking, and camping where site amenities (such as toilets, water, and fire rings) were located than were white non- Hispanic visitors. Hispanic Americans were also more likely to visit in larger groups than white non- Hispanic visitors and tended to prefer settings that allowed for extended- and multiple- family activities.

Many studies cite the lack of public or personal transportation as a barrier to more frequent park use by African Americans (West, 1989; Scott and Munson, 1994). This survey found that travel distance was an issue for all three racial/ethnic groups, but especially African Americans and Hispanic Americans. Lack of transportation may be one reason why distances are perceived as too far. Information from the NPS on location and distances to park units, as well as transportation options, could assist those who wish to visit a unit, but are unsure of the distance and transportation options that exist.

Economic barriers to visitation, such as hotel and food costs, may be less of an issue at day- use parks and parks in urban areas. Proactive outreach programs, incorporating culturally relevant interpretive themes and accommodating a diversity of recreational styles, would seem to hold particular promise at promoting the relevance of the National Park System and increasing visitation by under- served populations to these types of units.

## APPENDIX

### A. Overview

The National Park Service commissioned the Social Research Laboratory at Northern Arizona University to conduct the agency's first comprehensive survey of the American public. Findings from this survey are reported in the *2000 National Park Service Comprehensive Survey of the American Public Technical Report*. Survey data were collected from a random sample of respondents to provide a national perspective on people's relationship with the National Park Service and National Park System units. Two datasets were developed from the collected information. These include a national set reflecting attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of the adult population of the United States and a regional dataset that allows for comparisons of information across the seven National Park System regions. For purposes of this research, a National Park System visitor was defined as an individual who had entered a unit of the system within the 24 months previous to being contacted for this survey and was able to accurately identify the unit entered. Unit names were verified against a list provided by the NPS. National Park Service employees and members of their immediate family were screened out of the survey.

Survey data were obtained by interviewing adult members of 3,515 households in the United States. Respondents were randomly selected within the households using the most-recent-birthday method of respondent selection. The original sample frame was purchased from Genesys Marketing Systems of Fort Washington, Pennsylvania. The sample frame was constructed using standard Random Digit Dialing (RDD) procedures and purged for nonworking telephones and business lines. Data collection was completed between February 21, 2000, and May 21, 2000.

### B. Survey Limitations

All survey research statistics are subject to sampling error, as well as non-sampling error such as survey design flaws, reporting errors, data processing mistakes, and under-coverage of particular populations (e.g., households without telephones). The Social Research Laboratory has taken steps to minimize errors by implementing quality control and editing procedures to reduce errors made by respondents, interviewers, and coders. Ratio-estimation to independent age-gender-race-ethnicity population controls partially corrects for bias attributable to survey under-coverage. However, biases in the estimates are unavoidable when missed people have characteristics different from those of interviewed people in the same age-gender-race-ethnicity group.

Table A-1 reports completion rates for the survey in each of the seven National Park System regions. Completion rates ranged from 73 percent to 95 percent. These figures are substantial for a survey of this scope and magnitude and suggest high reliability of survey results. Tables A-2 and A-3 report the number of un-weighted and weighted surveys completed for each dataset. Weighted survey totals are derived after the ratio-estimation model is applied to the data. Because different ratio-estimation models have been applied to the national and regional datasets, the total number of weighted cases varies between the two datasets.

	NCR	NER	SER	MWR	IMR	PWR	AKR	Average
Completion Rates	73%	85%	90%	86%	90%	95%	95%	88%

	National
Unweighted	3515
Weighted	3515

	NCR	NER	SER	MWR	IMR	PWR	AKR
Unweighted	500	501	501	501	502	502	508
Weighted	511	485	510	505	517	503	509

The margin of error associated with national-level data in this study is +/- 1.7 percent at a 95 percent confidence level. The margin of error associated with data from each of the National Park System regions is +/- 4.5 percent at a 95 percent confidence level. “Margin of error” is a statistical term that describes the probable difference between interviewing everyone in a given population and interviewing a sample drawn from that population. The percentages obtained in telephone surveys are estimates of what the percentage would be if the entire population had been surveyed. Thus, if 50 percent of those in the sample are found to agree with a particular statement and the associated margin of error is +/- 4.5 percent, the actual percentage of agreement in the population from which the sample is drawn would be between 45.5 percent and 54.5 percent (50% +/- 4.5%). The 95 percent confidence level means that this +/- 4.5 percent “margin of error” would occur in 95 out of 100 samples of this size drawn. Sampling error increases as sample size is reduced. This must be kept in mind when comparing the responses of subgroups within the sample (e.g., men vs. women). Smaller numbers of respondents on any question translate into higher margins of error.

For this survey, a comprehensive list of National Park System units was provided by the NPS and used to verify that respondents actually had visited a National Park System unit within the past two years. Fourteen system units were inadvertently omitted from this list. After thorough review, these missing units were determined to be low-visitation units. The impact of their omission is insignificant to the larger goal of determining the proportion of the American public that had visited a National Park System unit within the previous two years. In addition, a small number of units listed by respondents were later determined to be park headquarters or offices. Thirteen respondents out of 3,515 named these units as the location of their last visit. The impact of their classification as visitors is also insignificant to the larger goals of the research project.

One final limitation is that this survey does not include the viewpoints of international tourists, who make up a relatively large proportion of visitors to some National Park System units.

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## **About the NPS Social Science Program**

The role and functions of the NPS Social Science Program are to: provide leadership and direction to the social science activities of the NPS; coordinate social science activities with other programs of the NPS; act as liaison with the USGS Biological Resources Division and other federal agencies on social science activities; provide technical support to parks, park clusters, support offices, and regional offices; and support a program of applied social science research related to national research needs of the NPS.

*For more information, contact:*

Dr. Jim Gramann

Visiting Chief Social Scientist

National Park Service

1849 C Street, NW (2300)

Washington, DC 20240

Telephone: (202) 513-7189

Email: [James\\_Gramann@partner.nps.gov](mailto:James_Gramann@partner.nps.gov)

Web Site: <http://www.nps.gov/socialscience/>

