



NRPA's mission is to advance parks, recreation, and environmental conservation efforts that enhance the quality of life for all people.

*"So-called 'undesirables' are not the problem. It is the measures taken to combat them that is the problem... The best way to handle the problem of undesirables is to make the place attractive to everyone else."  
— William H. Whyte*

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# Creating Safe Park Environments to Enhance Community Wellness

## INTRODUCTION

People seek out parks because they provide contact with the natural environment and a social environment which offers opportunities for meeting with friends, watching others and being seen – all of which help to establish a feeling of comfort and security.

Well-designed and well-used parks and recreation areas are a great asset for local communities. But that

asset can quickly become a liability when parks become unsafe and as a result, lose their value and benefit to the community. Keeping park and recreation facilities safe is a key to community wellness and has a direct relationship to their usage rate.

Research by The Citizens' Taskforce on the Use and Security of Central Park found that there was a direct relationship between the level of park use and the perception of security: the larger the number of visitors involved in positive activities, the more likely that anti-social behavior was deterred. The taskforce linked recreational programs with improved security by suggesting that an emphasis on expanded recreation initiatives will encourage greater use and ultimately create a safer park environment.

### The Solution to Park Safety: More than Design

Addressing the issue of safety in parks and open space is a complex task. The problem cannot be solved by design alone or by any one single action. What is required to create and maintain safer park spaces is an integrative strategy involving design, programming, maintenance and citizen involvement. The key finding in park safety research shows that there is a connection between park and recreation use and safety: where people use parks in a positive way and in substantial numbers, all people feel more secure.

The factors that explain these findings emphasize the importance of greenery in improving community and personal wellness. Time spent in natural surroundings relieves mental fatigue, which in turn relieves



inattentiveness, irritability, and impulsivity, recognized by psychologists as precursors to violence. Green spaces also support frequent, casual contact among neighbors.

### Evaluating Park Safety: The Safety Audit Process

How is a park judged to be safe? Many look to crime statistics, but these can be misleading. Many crimes, particularly sexual assault, go unreported; and low crime statistics may in fact be influenced by people's avoidance of areas they perceive to be high risk. Thus, when evaluating whether a space is safe or not, perceptions may be more important than crime statistics.

Park managers frequently employ an audit in order to determine the relative safety of a given park or recreation area. The safety audit method was first developed in Canada by METRAC (the Metro Action Committee on Public Violence against Women and Children), and has been successfully used across North America to evaluate perceived risk in the urban environment.

The safety audit process is based on participation and feedback from users of a given space. It allows for an evaluation of the physical environment in terms of fear of crime and perceptions of safety. When users become involved in identifying their safety concerns, they become an integral part of the solution. The findings from community based safety audits are an important starting point for creating and implementing strategies for enhancing personal safety. Audits also provide an inventory of design, operational and programming solutions to make parks safer. *continued >*

## Factors to Consider in Creating Safe Parks

The design of a park or recreation area can have a direct impact on people's perceptions of safety and their willingness to use a space. Designing a park for safety is based on what is generally considered to be good design: it meets the needs of its users; it is diverse and interesting; it connects people with place; and it provides people with a positive image and experience. While good design can create the preconditions for effective control the following are areas to consider when evaluating the safety and perception of safety of a park or recreation facility:

- Locate programmed activities near the park perimeter, beside an entrance or along a main pedestrian path
- Locate food concessions at the park edge that serves both the street and the park
- Make sure that activities in the park include a human presence from early morning to evening
- Create programming and physical design of the park to encourage use of the park during the evenings
- Develop activities beyond those for organized sports facilities and playgrounds
- Offer a variety of tours or events that will encourage more widespread use of parks and increase positive uses

Designers, operations, recreation staff and citizens all have a vital role to play in creating safer park environments. The key factors to consider when dealing with park safety issues are summarized below:

- Perceptions that a park is unsafe are as important as actual safety

- Involve users in the design or redesign of park spaces
- Clear and understandable signage helps enhance the feeling of safety because it allows people to orient themselves
- Formal/informal surveillance or the extent to which activities in parks can be observed by other people, is important for reducing vandalism, inappropriate activities, and feelings of isolation
- Lighting to enhance perceptions of safety, although this may not reduce actual crime rates. Improved lighting and increased legitimate activity allow for greater night time surveillance
- Clear sightlines which give the perception of actual safety because people can see what is ahead and around them and if other people are visible
- Physical access should be maximized by providing users with a choice of legible routes to and from park areas
- Good maintenance is crucial to maintain perceptions that areas are low risk. Vandalism can contribute to perceptions of fear because litter, graffiti and broken furniture all suggest a place is uncared for and possibly unsafe
- Diversity can attract a higher intensity of use. Variety in the form, color, and texture of landscape elements as well as a range of activities contributes to an interesting environment that attracts users
- Signage in the form of maps and descriptive text promotes a greater sense of safety because people feel safer when they know where they are and how to get to where they want to go

## CASE STUDIES

### RECLAIMING BRYANT PARK

**Location:** New York, New York

**Description:** Since its restoration in the 1980s, Bryant Park, originally built a hundred years earlier, has become one of the best "new" urban parks in America. Its overall design and elements support a range of activities and uses for people who work, shop, or live nearby, as well as those who are just visiting.

**Challenges:** Bryant Park's chief asset has always been its superb location in midtown Manhattan but hardly anyone went inside. The park was poorly maintained, people were dealing drugs in the park and several design problems attributed to the park's downfall. The main problem was that those who ventured inside found little to do there.

**Outcomes:** In the late 1990's, Bryant Park Restoration Corporation (BPRC) was created to manage the park and create a master plan. As a result of the plan, park entrances were opened up removing

the visual barriers along the park's periphery, new amenities were added that included food and beverage kiosks, a stand for buying theater tickets was created, and a restaurant which spawned more public activity crowding out the dealers and other undesirables. A seven-year push funded by public and private resources combined supplementary park maintenance, temporary kiosks, and public events ranging from historical park tours to concerts, reduced crime by 92 percent and doubled the number of annual park visitors.

**Lessons Learned:** As new development within the park worked to attract more park users and more people ventured into the park, the drug dealing increased as well. It was clear that it would take more than a redesign to draw citizens back to Bryant Park. Today, Bryant Park enjoys perhaps the highest use and best maintenance of any urban park in America, due to a combination of design changes, and an innovative and flexible management program.



### SUMMER NIGHT LIGHTS

- Access to telephones and park staff can provide a greater sense of well-being and safety.
- Citizen involvement fosters a sense of ownership and pride and builds a constituency of users with an interest in keeping parks safe
- Enforcement of rules concerning inappropriate activities need to be maintained to prevent a cycle of withdrawal and hence a reduction in positive use

#### CONCLUSION

Increasing numbers of people are expressing concern for their personal safety in urban, suburban and even rural settings. This fear of violence and the perception that an environment is unsafe is, in effect, a barrier to many people's use and enjoyment of public space.

*The need to gather, to share stories, to celebrate, protest and grieve in a common place is a basic, human, and universal right.*

Fear of "undesirables" causes park after park to be remodeled without seating, shade, vendors, or other amenities that might encourage the positive public activity that discourages crime and disruption. Time and again these lessons are forgotten or abused, to the extreme detriment of quality of life.

We need to prevent ending up with downtowns and "edge cities" that are alienating and dull. Our park and recreation system is part of the glue that binds communities together. It is only through smart, well thought out planning and maintenance of parks that consumers can feel safe in utilizing these wonderful resources.

The public's need for gathering places is evident, now more than ever. The need to gather, to share stories, to celebrate, protest and grieve in a common place is a basic, human, and universal right. We must continue to allow and encourage the diversity, culture and commerce of all our communities to thrive in healthy, livable cities, markets, parks and neighborhoods.



#### Location:

Los Angeles, California

#### Description:

California has the largest gang presence of any state, and L.A. is at the top of the state's list for gang-related violent crime. Park and recreation areas in poor neighborhoods are a frequent site of gang clashes

and violence typically spikes during the warm summer months. Park and community leaders adopted Summer Night Lights (SNL) as a local strategy to ensure children and families are safe from violence in their homes and neighborhoods.

**Challenges:** L.A.'s traditional approach to gang violence put heavy emphasis on policing and physical separation of rival gangs and while these approaches met with some success, they were expensive and took a great deal of valuable police time. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and the Gang Reduction and Youth Development office implemented a new approach to fighting gang violence: parks programming.

**Outcomes:** The Summer Night Lights program extended nighttime hours in eight parks in troubled neighborhoods, keeping lights on until midnight, and sponsoring nighttime movies and family-oriented activities four nights a week. While the program was running in 2008, there was only one gang-related homicide in the areas surrounding those parks, compared with seven over the same period in 2007. Since 2008, SNL has expanded from 8 parks to 24 citywide, leading to a 57% reduction in gang-related homicides in SNL neighborhoods.

**Lessons Learned:** Buoyed by the positive results, the city doubled the size of the program in 2009. The budget nearly tripled, and the city hired a total of 160 young people to help staff the program. Once again, crime rates around the parks tumbled. The program cost roughly \$5.4 million, with half of the budget provided by private donors and half from public sources. By empowering communities and targeting the traditionally most-violent summer months, Summer Night Lights has become a national model for violence reduction.



## CASE STUDIES

### VILLAGE GREEN PARK



**Location:** Macon, Georgia

**Description:** Built in the 1960's and 1970's, the community of Village Green is a lower-income, mixed ethnic community within the city of Macon. When the housing was constructed, two areas totaling a little less than two acres were set aside for parks and recreation. The parks were intended to provide recreation for the entire community of Village Green.

**Challenges:** The community has been challenged by abandoned buildings, crime, drugs, and gang activity. Unfortunately the park locations were not ideal and access to the parks was limited to narrow easements next to houses that surround the parks, causing the parks to be quite underutilized.

**Outcomes:** The recent addition of a picnic shelter, tables, and grills, a new playground unit, new basketball courts, and park beautification efforts have increased park use by more than 25 percent. In addition, the park and recreation department, along with the police athletic league, are sponsoring athletic programs in the park. Neighborhood watch groups are coordinating programs with the police precinct assigned to Village Green, and citizens are volunteering their time at the precinct to answer phones and do other needed tasks.

**Lessons Learned:** Critical in any effort to reduce crime and increase safety in a local park is that the community needs to be included in planning and programming of the open space. In the case of Macon, Georgia, the community, government and nonprofit organizations worked together to use a City Parks Forum grant to revive the Village Green Park as a crime prevention activity. Citizens now care more about their neighborhood, and incidents of crime or violence have dropped by more than 50 percent.

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