

THE CRIMINAL CAREER OF PARK AND RECREATIONAL HOTSPOTS

By

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It is a favorite hang out for the locals. During the day the famous "East Beach" is used by moms, kids and young adults, but by 4:30 p.m. the families leave and the trouble begins. As we wind our way through the crowded area we pass two men who are passed out drunk amidst an array of "empties". On the trail in the wooded area we find plastic baggies and syringes, the indication of an evening cocaine session. The damaged car in the parking lot is left over from last night's fight when a guy got drunk and started hitting people and cars until several guys dispensed some "local justice". All evidence to the contrary "East Beach" is better now since the rangers "took it back". All agree that two years ago it was a really tough place where people would not go alone for fear of being beat up. "East Beach", once a dead park, is now an area in transition.

While the "East Beach" case is inconsistent with the prevailing view of parks as pristine and fun experiences, it describes a social phenomena. The concentration of crime and disorder in specific areas of park and recreational settings, termed *crime hotspots*, is consistently a problem for park managers. The absence of a park specific model, combined with few opportunities for professional development, in the area of crime and enforcement, force managers to react rather than anticipate and stop the rise of crime hotspots. How then, do crime hotspots develop in our parks and what are the management implications of the recreational hotspot phenomenon?

Studying Recreational Hotspots

For the last six years we have studied crime and enforcement in park and recreational settings in both the United States and Canada. These settings include both remote and highly developed recreational places. Early in the research, data from extensive observations/interviews with park professionals and users revealed the existence of crime hotspots. This data combined with an extensive literature review are the basis of our analysis below.

The Criminal Career of Recreational Hotspots

All of the settings observed in our study had recreational hot spots, yet these hotspots differed in patterned ways. For example participants often recalled when these areas were crime free or in transition out of heavy criminality. Additionally, some areas were beginning to show the signs of crime while others were already defined as dangerous places, as in the case of "East Beach". These observations were also consistent with the park crime literature which indicates either the perceived or actual concentration of disorderly and criminal behavior in specific parks such as Central Park in New York, MacArthur Park in Los Angeles, Warden Park in Toronto, and Balboa Park in San Diego. All parks mentioned, however, were in differing phases of a process to reclaim the parks from criminals, suggesting a stage or life cycle phenomenon.

Pattern analysis of our data and the literature reveal four developmental stages, which form a hotspot life cycle, or criminal career of a park or recreational setting.

Stage I

Onset: The Threat of Disorder and the Rise of Fear

The beginning of the criminal career of a park hotspot is generally a gradual process. In the majority of cases we observed, onset was always accompanied by visible signs of depreciative behavior. Crimes and violations of disorder, such as graffiti, vandalism, and littering were often associated with the arrival of differing user groups and accompanying changes in user/ recreational behaviors. For example, in one campground in a historically a low crime area, the carving of occult signs and symbols on tables, trees and spray painted on building walls was noticed shortly before the beginning of several car break-ins and other thefts. Soon after, new groups of users were discovered performing a “religious ritual”, which included starting a prohibited fire and a number of other regulatory violations.

The depreciative behaviors and crimes of disorder detailed above are often viewed as “soft crime” because of the relatively minor or non-serious nature of the offense, Yet, if unchecked, these *gateway offenses* lead to a spiral of more serious crime and disorder by causing discomfort, even fear, in legitimate park users. Offenses of this nature are particularly unnerving in a park setting which is commonly viewed as a safe and relaxed place of enjoyment. The outcome of public fear or discomfort is to erode the social control over the space, making it more vulnerable to criminal invasion. If signs of disorder go unchecked they become visual cues that there is no control in the park and that the space is unsafe, causing good people to leave or not

enter these areas, while potential offenders feel increasingly comfortable escalating their criminal activity. Cues of social and physical disorder begin to advertise the selected areas as free zones for crime.

Onset: Implications for Managers. The onset of criminality in a park is most frequently defined by subtle visual/audio changes. Recognition of these early warning cues require an intimate understanding of the parks visual status. Park personnel who are both regularly in physical contact with the park and trained to assess its physical profile are essential to early recognition. An onset assessment/response should include three components:

1. Environmental assessment - A regular evaluation and recording (date/ time/ nature) of the physical status of park buildings, equipment and grounds. Special attention should be directed to recording the nature of depreciative behaviors such as vandalism, excessive litter, natural environment damage and other property damage/defacement. Recognition of subtle changes provides the best opportunity for early responses.
2. Visual Cue Management - An immediate repair or restoration of damage is important to send the message to both legitimate and illegitimate users that the park is monitored and actively managed. Failure to respond immediately sends the message that the park is not controlled. An active park maintenance program is the first line of defense as a poor maintenance program facilitates onset.
3. User Assessment and Program Management - The arrival of a new group of park users warrants recognition and behavioral evaluation. While legitimate use should be encouraged, illegitimate use must be controlled. Recognize how park programming creates predictable types of users and predictable user routines which can create a convergence between legitimate and illegitimate

users. Events that appeal to both types of users create opportunities for victimization. An aggressive programming effort targeting legitimate user groups during the onset phase may neutralize criminal opportunity by lessening the criminogenic potential of the space.

Stage II

Diversification and Escalation: Whose Park Is It Anyway?

The invasion of potential offenders creates convergence routines between legitimate users and those that have crime or disorder on their agenda. The type and frequency of conflict between users begins to define the hotspot. Some hotspots were primarily known for property crimes such as car clouts or crimes of violence like rape and robbery. In these cases, crimes were dependent upon the convergence between legitimate users (victims) and criminal users (offenders) in the absence of enforcement authority. In contrast, other hotspots were characterized by drug abuse and other “victimless” crimes as they only required the presence of a motivated offender. These hotspots were generally isolated from normal user routes, which prevented visual monitoring of criminal activity.

It is during the second stage that the conflicts between criminal users and legitimate users can become public debates facing park administrators. Park managers must focus on conflicts between users and/or complaints from users, as they can be clear signals that ownership of the park along with visitation habits are in the process of changing.

It is also during the second stage of the parks criminal career that crime frequency increases and legitimate park use declines, making it a good place for

criminal activity. It is important for professionals to recognize these patterns as indicators of the impending “hotspot” status of the park, as early intervention is still possible.

In the absence of effective intervention, the second stage generally ends with a high profile incident that becomes public and formally defines the park as dangerous. In virtually all the crime hotspots observed in our research, there was at least one highly publicized and controversial death such as the well known 1990 murder of the jogger in Central Park, the 1993 homicides in Balboa Park in San Diego, the 1996 slaying of the two women hikers on the Appalachian Trail in Shenandoah National Park and the 1998-99 homicides in Yosemite National Park.

Escalation: Implications for Managers. The escalation stage should be viewed as a challenge over both the control and image of the park. Rather than simply reacting to individual crime events, managers should employ a more comprehensive strategy by focusing on increasing legitimate use, reducing illegitimate access, and improving guardianship. The Escalation stage response should include the following four elements:

1. Support Legitimate User Demands. When legitimate users become victims and/or complain employ active listening techniques and visibly respond. Victims should be recognized as important constituents that can help secure the resources required to address a growing crime problem. Encourage users to become involved in planning a strategy for addressing crime in the park. Keep legitimate users coming to the park.

2. Criminality Assessment. Conduct a comprehensive assessment of the types and frequency of crime to identify underlying conditions causing the problem. Professional assistance should be solicited sooner than later.

3. Assertive Space Management. Crime prevention through environmental design should be considered. Affected areas of the park should be evaluated for assertive maintenance and grounds modification. Environmental features may need to be altered to create natural view corridors or modified access.

4. Enhance Guardianship. Visible action should be taken to place recognized symbols of authority and legitimate use in the park. Uniformed park personnel and if necessary police should be visible in the park. It should be noted however that some users may interpret a highly visible police presence as a signal that the park is dangerous. Saturation by police officers is not recommended. Rather passive security measures such as video cameras, etc. should be focused around access and use routines in the park to encourage legitimate visitors.

Stage III

Risk and Danger: The Shared Meaning of a Park Hotspot

One of the most significant effects of high profile crime events is the assignment of the “dangerous” label to the park. With this label comes a shared view that the park is “owned” by illegitimate users. In one recreational area observed in Canada, several enforcement personnel easily pointed out which campgrounds to avoid, noting that “you *don't* want to take your family there”.

Although these “dangerous” areas are places of criminal activity, the perception of fear often exceeds the actual level of crime and risk. The dangerous view of Central park is a classic example, where crime rates were much lower than

other parks which did not have the negative reputation. These perceptions of crime and the associated fear not only prevents people from using parks but the "dangerous" label accelerates abandonment.

Dangerous Parks: Implications for Managers. Park officials are sometimes forced to abandon parks. Lack of resources, failed attempts to control the park, or the lack of demand for intervention can combine to suspend a park as a defined hotspot for crime. In Eugene, Oregon park hotspots have been completely fenced off preventing access to the park by anyone. During this stage, management efforts should focus on protection of personnel and users through the management of access as stage III assumes abandonment.

1. Protection of Park Personnel. Every effort should be extended to protect park employees who work in or around hotspots. These efforts may include but not be limited to formally prohibiting employees from accessing the park, requiring that employees work in pairs or groups, providing police escorts and/or providing training in self protection.

2. Protection of Users. Park users should be warned, discouraged and/or prohibited from accessing hotspot parks. Media notices, warning signs, and the use of fencing to prohibit entry should be evaluated for use. Formal programming should be suspended. It should be noted that the longer a park is formally defined as a hotspot for crime the more difficult it will be to reclaim the park and encourage legitimate users to return. If however, park managers wish to reverse the "dangerous" definition of the park, Stage IV, discussed below, presents the implications of such an effort.

Stage IV

Assuming Guardianship: Taking Back The Park

One of the most common themes in the park crime literature is the taking back of park hotspots from illegitimate users. Case studies on “how to” reclaim the tough areas were virtually all in response to a long and accumulating history of criminal activity. Although there exist different mechanisms for 'taking back" a hotspot, the central features involve reestablishing guardianship, and recruiting a return of the legitimate user group to make the location less vulnerable to crime.

Passive efforts focused on blocking access to the park or removing the physical elements necessary for criminal behavior. In other cases, drug use areas were opened up to natural surveillance through landscape management techniques.

Active techniques always involved direct intervention by motivated people such as legitimate users and/or park personnel who organized the “take back” effort. Numerous examples of citizen take back initiatives are found in the literature like the take back of MacArthur Park in Los Angeles by the Save MacArthur Park Committee, as well as the Noble Neighbors citizen group which organized to stop drug dealing in a Chicago park.

In our research, “sending in” uniformed personnel to confront illegitimate users was universally the most common tactic used to take back a hotspot. In the case of “East Beach”, park rangers patrolled the area in mass using saturation techniques to confront violators in highly visible arrest and control actions. Physical confrontations were common in the early phases of the take back stage, creating stories that were shared among users that the cops were cracking down. The reclamation of Central Park in New York also involved the development of Park Enforcement Patrols (PEP)

and an Urban Park Ranger program to both confront crime and disorder and to establish the highly visible symbols of police uniforms.

Successfully taking back a park was ultimately measured by the reversal of a spiral of disorder and the increase in use by legitimate visitors. The park is effectively returned to service as a secure recreational venue.

Taking Back The Park: Implications for Managers. A strategy for re-claiming a dangerous park should include the following elements:

1. Aggressive Removal of the Physical Signs of Disorder. A park "clean-up" effort should be implemented to eliminate the visible signs of crime and disorder. Litter patrols, grounds maintenance, and other highly visible efforts to establish the appearance of care and order should be considered.
2. Community Mobilization. Community members should be involved in the planning and implementing of the take back strategy. Park monitoring using citizen patrols, and park programming are two areas that create opportunities for effective community involvement.
3. Police Action and Presence. Unlike other stages where highly visible police presence may signal trouble and may discourage legitimate users, once a park is defined as dangerous the police become an essential ingredient to change. Highly visible police presence and confrontation may be unavoidable if not desirable to communicate a change in the definition and use of the park. After initial confrontations, a continued police presence through patrols or installation of a police storefront office can be effective. In addition, uniformed park personnel should be assigned to the park to further indicate the presence of authority.
4. Phase-In of Park Programming. As the take back of the park proceeds, and it becomes safe for legitimate users park programs and events should be

implemented. These events should be accompanied by community oriented police/park personnel to further communicate control and management of the park.

Conclusion

The literature and training upon which park managers rely does not provide a comprehensive directive for understanding and managing crime in parks. Our research reveals that park and recreational crime follows a life cycle that can be understood as a criminal career of a park or area within a park. While one recreational venue may be consumed by criminal activity another may be only in the beginning stages. In each of the stages of a park's criminal career solutions that managers should employ are vastly different.

Our park specific model of park criminal careers provides practitioners with a means of evaluating a parks development, thereby allowing for specific interventions. Through this model, park managers can recognize the early warning signs of park decay, the underlying conditions of the problem, and the most effective means of intervention for the stage of a parks criminal career. Without a park specific model of crime and enforcement managers are left to conventional beliefs about crime, criminals and cops which, in our experience, often miss the mark.