

# Putting the "Safe" In Safe Routes to Parks: Improving Personal Safety from Crime and Violence to Promote Park Access



Sometimes neighborhoods have nearby parks, but community members do not use them because they view the park or the walk to the park as dangerous. Threats to personal safety, whether real or perceived, strongly discourage outdoor activities like walking, bicycling, and spending time in parks.

This fact sheet highlights the importance of improving personal safety from crime and violence in order to promote park access. It shares examples of how community groups, park agencies, law enforcement, and community-based organizations have addressed real or perceived violence and crime to increase safe access to and within parks.

## Why Safe Routes to Parks?

Research shows that after distance, safety most influences the decision to participate in physical activity and walk or bike,<sup>2</sup> and children are less likely to walk when they feel unsafe.<sup>3</sup> Safety is broader than making sure that traffic moves at a slow speed, well-maintained sidewalks are present, and crosswalks are well-marked. Real and perceived crime can interfere with a person's sense of security and create a barrier to accessing parks.<sup>4</sup> Street harassment and assault, robbery, gang activity, police harassment, graffiti, stray dogs, abandoned houses, and fear of violence and crime are also barriers to safely accessing destinations, including parks. With this broad definition of safety, improving safe access to parks requires the collaborative efforts of community residents, park agencies, law enforcement, and community-based organizations. Each of these types of organizations has a role to play to improve park safety and access.

## What is Safe Routes to Parks?

Improving park accessibility helps increase use of parks and plays a critical role in ensuring that communities have access to places to be physically active. The Safe Routes to Parks concept provides advocates with the language to champion safe access during consideration of park siting, community engagement, allocation of funds, planning, and implementation of traffic and public safety initiatives, as well as park improvements. Safe Routes to Parks efforts improve accessibility to parks via multiple modes of transportation for people of all ages and abilities that are safe from traffic and personal danger. These routes lead to well-maintained, well-programmed parks that are conveniently located within approximately one half mile, roughly a 10 minute walk, from where people live.<sup>1</sup>

## Communities at the Forefront of Creating Safer Access to and at Parks

Community residents are essential partners and leaders in the work of safe access to parks. When working to improve safe access to and within parks, it is imperative to understand the nuances of why community residents feel unsafe. Otherwise, efforts to improve safety may miss the mark entirely. Some of the most effective, sustainable efforts are those led by community residents, in which community members organize, lead, and implement their selected strategies. Community participation can lead to community ownership of efforts and continued support over the long term.<sup>5</sup> Residents know the history of their communities and can build upon neighborhood assets to address the specific challenges their community faces. Community groups, such as neighborhood associations and neighborhood watch groups, can play an integral role in assessing the problem and developing and implementing strategies.

Community residents have successfully used a variety of approaches to improve safety at parks and on park routes. Here are a few examples:

**Assessment, Mapping, and Non-Arrest Strategies:** From 2013 through 2016, more than 100 community members from Rainier Beach in Seattle, Washington assembled in task forces in five juvenile crime hot spots.<sup>6</sup> Each task force analyzed crime data, collected data on physical environmental characteristics and activity patterns, used the information to map out crime occurrences with the unique characteristics of the location, and developed non-arrest strategies and creative partnerships to reduce crime. Since 2016, findings have shown that violent crime decreased more in the hot spots compared to other areas in Rainier Beach, and community perceptions of social cohesion and feelings of safety were improving.<sup>7</sup> Examples of their non-arrest strategies and creative partnerships included:

- Working with school administrators to stagger the dismissal times at three schools to reduce after-school fights and disturbances.
- Working with Seattle Public Schools to provide youth with necessary services and reinforce positive behavior.<sup>8</sup>
- Developing a Safe Passage program, led by the Boys and Girls Club of King County, that ensured that young people were safely able to walk to their next destination when leaving school, as well as providing encouragement and relationships.<sup>9</sup>
- Establishing corner greeter events to activate areas people identified as places they feel unsafe. Youth-led these events that offered food, information on neighborhood crime, and generally "brought to life" areas that people identified as feeling unsafe in.<sup>10</sup>



**Programming:** In 2017, after a shooting claimed a life in Skiddy Park in Syracuse, New York, the park gained notoriety as a crime haven. Residents of all ages vowed to fight negative perceptions of the park. In less than a month, residents and members of the Syracuse Healthy Neighborhoods partnership began to draw people to the park by hosting multiple events, including a youth softball clinic, a free drop-in summer camp, and weekly live music.<sup>11</sup> They also restarted the Summer at Skiddy Softball League.<sup>12</sup> The league helped to strengthen social support and developed a collective sense of community pride among families.



## Park Safety a Focal Point for Park Agencies

Parks and recreation departments are the government agencies tasked with providing high quality safe parks and programming at parks. They work to cultivate an environment that enhances health and wellness, social connections, human enjoyment, and recreation through high-quality, activated parks and recreation centers and programming. These agencies have the opportunity to work collaboratively with community groups, land use and transportation planners, law enforcement, and other entities to increase park safety through programming and Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) techniques, such as improving lighting, park maintenance, and surveillance.

Park agencies across the country are incorporating strategies to create safe access to and at parks and reduce crime:

**Lighting and Programming:** As a program partner with the Mayor's Office for Gang Reduction and Youth Development, Los Angeles, California's Recreation and Parks Department hosts "Summer Night Lights" in 32 parks as a means to prevent gang-related violent crimes. Summer Night Lights extends nighttime hours in parks, keeping the lights on until midnight and hosting nighttime movies and family-oriented activities four nights a week. In 2017, 30 out of 32 participating parks saw a decrease or no change in gang-related crimes.<sup>13</sup> From 2016 to 2017, there was a 43 percent decrease in gang crimes during Summer Night Lights.<sup>14</sup>

**Park Beautification and Improvements and Surveillance:** In Macon, Georgia, the parks and recreation department beautified the Village Green Park and added picnic shelters, tables, grills, a playground unit, and new basketball courts, which increased park use by more than 25 percent.<sup>10</sup> The park agency also partnered with the police athletic league to sponsor athletic programs at the park.



Photos: Los Angeles Harvard Park

## Partnering with Law Enforcement to Improve Safe Access to and at Parks

Law enforcement agencies are responsible for ensuring the safety of residents by enforcing laws and monitoring safety of neighborhood areas, including parks. Decades of mistreatment of people of color and low-income individuals have fostered mistrust of law enforcement. Solely adding more law enforcement or surveillance is not the answer and can actually lead to people feeling less safe. Police and community residents can work together to improve park safety with communities at the forefront. Inviting law enforcement to attend community meetings can be an important first step to building relationships and trust. Community-police partnerships can help to prevent crime, leverage resources for community building, educate police, and formulate approaches that strengthen community ties through alternatives to criminal justice-oriented solutions.<sup>11</sup>

Here are examples of how law enforcement is working with community residents to reduce crime and improve safe access to and at parks:

**Community-Police Relations:** In September 2017, the Community Safety Partnership expanded into Jackie Tatum Harvard Park in Los Angeles, California. Previously used in public housing developments, the Community Safety Partnership was expanded into Harvard Park, rather than a public housing development, as Harvard Park is the hub of the community it serves. The partnership involves assigning 10 police officers from the Los Angeles Police Department to work directly in the Harvard Park and its surrounding community. It uses relationship-based strategies to foster trust, implement sustainable programs, prevent crime, and address quality of life issues to create healthier communities.<sup>12</sup> In the first year of operation in the Watts and Boyle Heights neighborhoods, this community policing model was effective at reducing violent crime and arrests by 50 percent in three Los Angeles public housing developments.<sup>13</sup>

**Programming and Community-Police Relations:** In September 2017, the American Heart Association launched the “Community Strategic Dialogue That’s Empowered by Public Safety” initiative in the Harvard Park neighborhood. Community residents and police officers walk together in the park and around the neighborhood, which provides time to discuss issues in the community and collaboratively develop potential solutions while being physically active.<sup>14</sup>

## Community-based Organizations: Conveners for Improving Safe Access to and at Parks

Community-based organizations (CBOs), such as nonprofits, provide services to meet the needs of communities. CBOs are often equipped to address local needs such as safe access to parks due to their understanding of community context, investment in community planning, and ability to mobilize residents. Community-based organizations can build relationships with and convene community residents and groups, government agencies, and other organizations in order to move planning and implementation of safe access to parks forward.

Here is an example of how a nonprofit is working with a community group and law enforcement to reduce crime and improve safe access to and within parks:

**Programming and Park Beautification:** Since June 2018, the Youngstown Neighborhood Development Corporation (YNDC) has coordinated with the I-C-U Neighborhood Block Watch group and local law enforcement to implement a summer series of weekly pop-up parks in areas that lack access to parks. Through hundreds of door-to-door interviews, residents identified a need for more opportunities and activities for youth as one of the most desired improvements for their neighborhood.<sup>15</sup> The first two pop-up parks were well attended, with 150 youth and adults participating. These events foster improved relationships between residents and police through physical activities, such as playing catch and dancing. Before the events, YNDC cleans up overgrown vegetation on sidewalks and removes glass and litter around the area to create a clean, safe, and welcoming environment for participants.



Photo: Youngstown Community Development Corporation

## Conclusion

Personal safety and fear of violence and crime influence access to and use of parks. In order to promote equitable park access, collaborative efforts among community groups, park agencies, law enforcement, and community-based organizations should work to deter and prevent crime. Community residents should be at the center of these efforts to ensure the design and implementation of strategies align with their neighborhood's unique needs.

## Resources

Learn more about creating safe, equitable access to and within parks through these resources:

- [Safe Routes to Parks Action Framework](#)
- [Taking Steps Toward Equitable, Safe Park Access: A Toolkit for Planning and Conducting a Safe Routes to Parks Walk Audit](#)
- [Beyond Confrontation: Community-Centered Policing Tools - Engaging Communities as Partners: Strategies for Problem Solving](#)
- [Beyond Confrontation: Community-Centered Policing Tools – Values, Leadership, and Sustainability: Institutionalizing Community-Centered Policing](#)
- [Community Safety: A Building Block for Healthy Communities](#)
- [Creating Safe Park Environments to Enhance Community Wellness](#)

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