



Safety and Law Enforcement in Cleveland Metroparks

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Any leisure setting, whether that be a park or a bowling alley experiencing crime problems will have a decline in usage. Unlike other settings like work or school that people must attend, no one has to visit parks. If a park is viewed as not safe, many park users will avoid the area. Women are quicker to quit using the parks than men. Once a park is little used, it can quickly become crime-ridden, as several case studies on the role of crime in park usage have painfully documented.

There are three major interrelated approaches to crime prevention and a resulting perception of safety among park users. First, crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) provides small reduction in crimes. For instance, single entrance parking lots are a better design choice than multi-entrance lots as criminals choose sites where they can easily flee an area. They want to be able to leave out one entrance as police come in another after them. Single entrance parking lots give the perception to the criminal that they can be more easily trapped—so they tend to choose other locations.

Informal surveillance is the second technique. This technique is little more than the presence of lots of people in the parks. Busy parks are safe parks, as visitors are likely to see and report problems. Many people using a park also create concern among criminals that their activity will be seen by someone and reported to the police. Informal surveillance sometimes works in conjunction with CPTED. For instance, security lights work well when the area they illuminate at night is within easy view of a steady flow of people. When they are used in an isolated area, the lights do little more than make it easier for a burglar to see, and can actually increase criminal activity.

The third strategy is law enforcement. Cleveland Metroparks deploys 71 law enforcement rangers in the reservations and Zoo. Three police dogs, Radar, Logan and Rocky provide additional assistance. CM properties are patrolled by car, bicycle, mounted unit and on foot. A dive team is also available to help with issues that arise in bodies of water. The CM Rangers address 6,000 to 8,000 incidents a year ranging from crime to responding to injuries. Proactively, the Rangers are also involved in shaping norms of behavior in parks through educational and awareness activities, providing services to over 100,000 citizens each year. These educational services reduce injuries and since park visitors are more aware of rules and regulations, fewer citations need to be issued.

The perception that the reservations are safe is critical to providing sustained service to the tax district. As women tend to abandon parks more quickly than men when safety becomes an issue, one of the common measures of how the public perceives parks is the observed gender ratio of visitors. The in-park survey was composed of 53% women.

Three questions out of a bank of 14 questions in recent surveys were at least somewhat related to safety. These questions measured park users' perceptions of safety and law enforcement. Using a scale from 1 to 5 where 1=very poor and 5=excellent, personal safety had a mean of 4.41 with 95% choosing good or excellent. There was a tiny but statistically significant difference in perception of safety by gender with females having a mean of 4.38/5 and males 4.44/5. This question was correlated with a ten-point overall satisfaction score at $r=.38$. This value means that about 15 percent of the variation in overall satisfaction can be attributed to visitors' perception of personal safety in the reservations.

Two additional questions in the in-park survey addressed perceptions of CM Rangers. Using a scale from 1 to 5 where 1=very poor and 5=excellent, Ranger visibility had a mean of 4.06 with 80 percent of respondents choosing good or excellent. Ranger courtesy had a mean of 4.35 with 91 percent choosing good or excellent.

One question in the Community (telephone) survey asked about reasons that prevent the respondent or family members from using parks, referring to any parks in northeast Ohio, not just Cleveland Metroparks properties. One of the choices in the list of 15 items was fear of crime. About seven percent of respondents choose this as a reason that they did not use parks as often as they wanted. Females ($n=63$) were twice as likely to choose this item as men ($n=31$), but all but four of these 94 people reported visiting parks in northeast Ohio.

Trend Data

Three questions reported above were asked in the same format in the in-park studies conducted in 1991, 2001 and 2010. The data shows a consistent and positive trend in perception of personal safety in the parks and ratings of ranger visibility and courtesy over a 20 year period. See Table 1.

Table 1. Changes in Visitor Perceptions of Personal Safety and Ranger Visibility and Courtesy

In Park Survey Question	Percent 1991	Percent 2001	Percent 2011
Personal safety	76%	93%	95%
Ranger Visibility	56%	63%	80%
Ranger Courtesy	49%	56%	91%

Discussion

The two surveys provide evidence that CM is perceived as safe. Park visitors are sensitive to safety concerns as their perceptions of safety contributes significantly to their overall satisfaction with the reservations. Additionally, Cleveland Metroparks Park Rangers who have the primary responsibility for ensuring visitor safety are perceived by park users as professional and visible. Both policing and educational activities of the Park Rangers contribute to these high ratings. Secondary activities by the Marketing Department and Outdoor Education that keep people returning to the parks help in increasing informal surveillance. Likewise designs and redesigns of park trails and facilities should take into account Crime Prevention through Environmental Design strategies where appropriate.

This is one of a series of "white papers" on a myriad of topics including recreation, visitor awareness/satisfaction and the role of Outdoor Education.

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