

Crime Prevention in Public Spaces

Crime and the fear of crime do not flourish in an environment of high energy and healthy interaction among law-abiding community members — the trail may be one of the safest places in the city.

—Kevin Scully, former chief of police, South Burlington, Vt.

Living and recreating in a safe place is an essential quality of life factor. *Code of Virginia* § 15.2-2283 recognizes this in the purpose of zoning ordinances which states: “Zoning ordinances are for the general purpose of promoting health, safety or general welfare of the public... and to these ends such ordinances shall be designed to give reasonable consideration.... to provide for adequate light and convenience of access and safety from fire, flood, crime and other dangers.”

In addition to promoting the reduction of crime through zoning, all public space planning, design and management should be implemented to reduce or eliminate the opportunity for and incidents of crime as well as ameliorate citizen fears. This can be accomplished through the application of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) techniques and principles.

Crime prevention findings

- No place is completely crime free; the challenge is to understand the real dangers versus the perceived dangers.
- Trails and managed open spaces are safe neighbors.
- Careful design and site management are critical to ensuring safe environments and does not have to cost a lot.
- Fully integrated security measures can create a positive experience in all landscapes.
- Program management is effective in creating physical security in public spaces.
- In the last several years, many of the CPTED principles have been incorporated seamlessly into planning updates and facility design. However, due diligence is still needed to ensure future efforts are as successful.

Crime prevention recommendations

- Local communities and property owners should promote well-designed public spaces that reduce crime in the area around the site.
- Property owners should promote management techniques that promote safe environments.
- Project managers should repair broken or vandalized equipment or facilities immediately to minimize the impression of lack of interest or authority.
- Park managers should establish, publish and enforce park rules and regulations to maximize public enjoyment and safety.

Importance of crime prevention in public spaces

Ultimately, individuals are responsible for their own safety, and crime cannot be eliminated. However, through the application of CPTED and other techniques, safer environments can be designed and result in a reduction in frequency and severity of crime. Using CPTED in public spaces is not new — it has been practiced since the early 1970s. However, its application to park and natural settings is more recent. By implementing CPTED principles for crime prevention, limited public funds may be maximized.

Providers and users of outdoor recreation need to be keenly aware of ways to integrate safety and security into the design of outdoor facilities and programming of outdoor activities. Many social aspects of outdoor recreation are influenced by a person's sense of safety and security. For many, there is a great concern about the safety of public spaces. A community's high quality of life is dependent upon reducing the frequency, severity and fear of crime by making public spaces more comfortable and appealing.

Research continues to be done on the effectiveness of using CPTED principles to create safe, active communities. The [International CPTED Association](#) is one of the most notable sources of research on CPTED issues. Richard Arrington outlines some of the community benefits of greenways and dispenses many of the misconceptions of crime along such corridors in the association's December 2008 [newsletter](#).

Principles of CPTED

Design, maintenance, program scheduling and community support contribute to safe parks and open spaces. Though design alone will not ensure that sites are completely crime-free, it can provide a balance between perceived threats and maintaining a peaceful, natural environment. Applying CPTED principles early in the design process is cost effective at reducing the opportunity for and fear of crime.

The three design principles of CPTED are physical access, visual access and defined ownership. These core principles, along with programming and maintenance, work together to form vibrant and safe environments. Principle applications of CPTED need to be focused on places with high use at access points to pathways, parking areas, trailheads, restrooms, playgrounds and courts. Isolated or problematic areas receiving inappropriate use may also be improved by applying CPTED principles.

CPTED Design Principle 1: Physical access provides control onto or off a site by directing people to and from the site in a specific direction.

Part of access control is "wayfinding." This is the ability to know where you are and where you want to go. A critical aspect is to be able to move easily through a space and feel safe. For safety, users of public spaces need to have clear signage that indicates location, maps, nearby places of interest, contact and support information.

Access must be obvious, especially between high-use areas, like parking and restrooms. Clearly delineated walks and trails protect the environment, as well as provide a sense of direction and security. Direct access needs to be limited in dangerous, problem or environmentally sensitive areas. Cut-throughs should be closed off or opened up and hardened to create a more safe and sustainable environment.

CPTED Design Principle 2: Visual Access

Visual access provides a secure sense of place for users and refers to the ability to see into, out of and through a site, or portion of a site. Though maximum visibility is often sought, especially in urban situations, privacy may be desirable in more rural and natural settings. The determination

for desired visibility is based on an assessment of risk and user expectations, as well as overall public safety.

Strategically placed viewing opportunities, which maintain an awareness of what others are doing, are key to creating a safe environment. Examples include seating near playgrounds, courts, beaches and concession stands, and overlooks at piers and ballfields. Vendors or shared public facilities located near entrances also create more traffic and visibility.

The strategic placement of trees and lighting can support a sense that the environment is safe and comfortable. Excessive trees and shrubs should not be planted in areas where visibility is needed. Vegetation should be pruned to appropriate heights and appropriately spaced next to facilities, paths, walkways, entranceways and parking spaces.

Lighting protects facilities and users; however, lighting in the absence of witnesses should never be equated with safety (McKay, 2006). Lighting should always reflect the intended hours of operation. For example, lighting of playfields or structures in local parks when not in use may actually encourage criminal activities. Motion-sensing lights can perform the double duty of providing light only when needed, thus reducing expenses, and letting trespassers know that they have been seen.

CPTED Design Principle 3: Defined Ownership

Creating a sense of ownership maintains a safer outdoor site. Clearly delineated property boundaries are the most common form of defining ownership. Signage, logos, surface treatment, fencing and gateway treatments are other ways to express ownership. Buildings with front porches, flags, banners and flowers provide the same sense of security and ownership. However, ownership refers not only to the legal owner, but also to friends groups, adjacent property owners and interested citizens.

Ownership is expressed in part by management of the site. Spaces that receive appropriate and timely maintenance demonstrate the presence of an owner. Appropriate maintenance includes timely trash and graffiti removal, quick repairs of broken facilities, up-to-date painting and regularly pruned vegetation. Efficient maintenance and management strategies often deter the occurrence of crime and vandalism.

CPTED Management Principle 1: Programming

Programming is the organization and sponsorship of activities at a site. Thoughtful programming will increase the number of users, thus decreasing the opportunity for criminal activity. This is especially true for sites that have traditionally been vacant or abandoned.

Planned activities and programs attract legitimate users. Programs targeting specific groups, like scouts and school children, encourage users to take ownership of the site. Education should be incorporated into site programming to make citizens more confident with site use. The Trust for Public Land notes that safe parks and recreation centers topped the list for what teens want when school is not in session. It has also been found that after-school programs for teens are a cost-effective way to reduce many minor crimes of convenience.

CPTED Management Principle 2: Maintenance

Proper maintenance is essential for safe public spaces. Proper maintenance of a site, especially the landscape, also supports accessibility, visual access and defined ownership. Clean, well-maintained sites and trails create a sense of community ownership and pride, as well as reduce criminal activity.

The inclusion of liability and security experts in the planning and management of a site also provides an extra assurance of security. Creating a strategic plan for crime prevention management and problem resolution will cultivate an anti-crime culture. The plan should include familiarizing crime-prevention and emergency personnel with site layouts to facilitate quicker, more effective responses, and keeping up-to-date data on site crimes.

Research shows that clean and well-maintained trail corridors will reduce the incidents of minor crimes ([Tracey and Morris](#), 1998). In addition, if site problems are not repaired or maintained adequately and in a timely fashion, the sites are perceived as abandoned and quickly become a magnet for additional damage. By performing regular security and safety assessments, immediate maintenance can be applied to reduce vandalism, graffiti and invasive landscape maintenance. Additional information on Safe Trails is available at the American Trails [website](#).

Partnerships with business and community organizations promote an anti-crime culture and create safer outdoor environments. Crime watch groups composed of community volunteer organizations provide help and contribute to the maintenance of the site, reducing litter and preventing vandalism. A good example is the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries' [Wildlife Crime Watch Program](#).

Web resources

[Green Cities: Good Health](#)

[Henrico County Police Department CPTED](#) program

[International CPTED Association](#)

[National Crime Prevention Council](#)

[Virginia Crime Prevention Association](#)

[Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries Crime Wildlife Crime Watch](#)

Articles

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