

SAFETY PROVIDING ROLE OF URBAN PARKS – A CASE STUDY OF CENTRAL PARK (NEW YORK, USA)

Paulina Polko^{1,3}, Kinga Kimic^{2,3}

¹ Faculty of Applied Sciences, WSB University, Cieplaka Street 1C, 41-300 Dabrowa Gornicza, Poland

² Department of Landscape Architecture, Institute of Environmental Engineering, Warsaw University of Life Sciences – SGGW, Nowoursynowska Street 159, 02-776 Warsaw, Poland

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Abstract

Urban parks are widely recognized as extremely valuable areas for city dwellers thanks to providing green places for rest and leisure for different types of users. Among the limitations to their use, the literature often mentions safety concerns - a security perception among users depending on the time of day, weather, lighting, and park maintenance, but also on the behavior of other park users. The case study of Central Park (NY, USA) based on the data collected by the New York Police Department shows that this huge park visited by hundreds of people each day is significantly safer than the surrounding precincts. In particular, it is interesting that in the park there are fewer cases of crime such as *rape* and *felony assault*, as well as *grand larceny*, which are the most common in green urban areas. The results prove that urban green areas can play an important role in increasing the safety related to recreational activities in the city, which should be taken into account in modern placemaking initiatives.

Keywords: urban green spaces, placemaking, public safety, sustainable society, sustainable city

Introduction

A safe urban park is defined as ‘a dynamic place where the design, maintenance, and policing of the park work together so that the general public perceives the park as a safe place, wants to go to the park regularly, and spends their optional time in the park engaged in valued activities.’ (Hilborn, 2009). Achieving such a state depends on many objective factors and their subjective perception by users. On the one hand, the security of a park is influenced by its overall attractiveness and location, as well as design (Park, 2017), the presence of ‘security infrastructure’ (Zavadskas et al., 2019) or the way it is managed (Wilson, Kelling, 2010), including its maintenance (Lorenc et al., 2013). On the other hand, the perception of a facility is determined by the profile of its users (Mak, Jim, 2018), gender (Jorgensen et al., 2013; Polko, Kimic, 2022), age (Kimic, Polko, 2021, 2022), physical fitness (Cunningham et al., 2020) and expectations towards the park resulting from its use as a place for rest (Zhu et al., 2020), physical activity, or a playground for children (Bai et al., 2013).

Central Park is an urban park between the Upper West Side and Upper East Side neighbourhoods of Manhattan in New York City that was the first landscaped park in the United States. It is the sixth-largest park in the city, covering 341 ha, and the most visited urban park in the United States, with an estimated 42 million visitors annually as of 2016. Visitors might gaze upon nearly 50 fountains, monuments, and sculptures or admire its 36 bridges and arches. Sports facilities include pots to skate, pedal, row, dribble, or climb, as well as 21 playgrounds. The biologically diverse ecosystem has several hundred species of flora and fauna. The park is open every day from 6 AM to 1 AM (Central Park Conservancy, 2024).

Taking into account the importance and use of the park by various users indicated above, safety in this area becomes one of the key issues determining its accessibility and attractiveness, especially for tourists. For this reason, Central Park is patrolled by both the New York City Parks Enforcement Patrol and the New York Police Department (NYPD), and there is a local police station within it. Moreover, in several locations throughout the facility, in addition to 31 video monitoring cameras supervised by the police, special boxes were installed to quickly call for help or report a threat. This applies not only to crime but also to medical problems: medical support is provided by the Central Park Medical Unit, made up of 150 volunteers and three ambulances. The Unit is funded from private donations, and the medical services are free of charge. Moreover, for safety reasons, since 2018, cars are not allowed to enter the park: roads are reserved for runners, walkers, cyclists, skaters, scooters, pedicabs, and horse carriages. Cyclists must ride in a counterclockwise direction. Runners are encouraged to go counterclockwise, but technically both directions are allowed (Regulations & Safety, 2024).

Another solution that ensures a sense of security and encourages people to use the park is the designation of 8 ‘Quiet Zones’ to relax and enjoy the surroundings. In these parts of the park, no music

is allowed. Running, rollerblading, riding a bike, or participating in any organized sports are forbidden, as well as feeding birds or other wildlife. Dogs must always be leashed and on the pathway. In other parts of the park, they are allowed, but they must be on-leash 9:00 AM to 9:00 PM. Apart from these general rules, dogs are never allowed at some locations such as all ballfields, recreational courts, playgrounds, bodies of water, streams, and fountains (Regulations & Safety, 2024).

The sense of security and meeting social expectations regarding its increase are key to improving accessibility and ensuring the comfort of recreation in urban green areas. In this context, safety maps are now becoming a helpful tool both for assessing the real situation and taking preventive actions (Polko, Kimic, 2024; Šerý et al., 2024).

Material and methods

Taking into account the applicable procedures and security measures, as well as the number of users of Central Park in New York (USA), the study aimed to analyze crime occurring in the park compared to its surroundings. The study used city crime data for the fourth quarter of 2023, made publicly available by the New York Police Department. The number and types of crime occurring in Central Park and adjacent precincts were analyzed: no. 19 (Upper East Side, Lenox Hill), no. 20 (Lincoln Square, Upper West Side), no. 24 (Manhattan Valley), no. 23 and no. 28 (East Harlem), and MNT (Manhattan) (Figure 1).

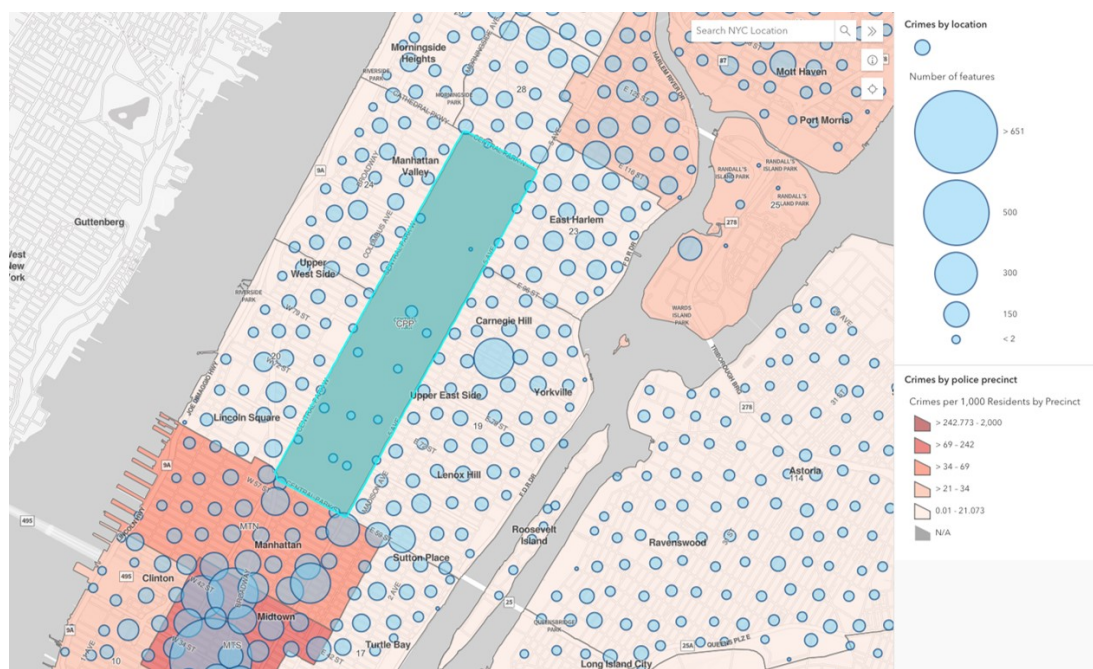


Fig. 1: Crime statistics for New York City provided by the NYPD (NYC Crime Map, 2023).

Results

The data analysis shows that Central Park is the safest precinct in the surveyed Manhattan area. In the park, despite a large number of users, only 1.11% of all cases of crime in the discussed area are committed, which is a negligible number. The scale of the differences is shown by the total number of cases of crime, the number of which, in general terms, is from 11 times (precinct no. 28) to as much as 29 times (precinct no. 19) higher in individual zones surrounding Central Park. Importantly, some types of crime do not occur in the park or their number is small, e.g. *burglary*, which involves entering closed rooms (houses or apartments) or *grand larceny of a motor vehicle*, which is difficult to commit in a place with a ban on driving. This also applies to crimes more 'typical' for urban green areas such as *rapes*, *robbery* or *felony assault*. In the last quarter of 2023, no *murders* were recorded in the park, although generally murders in green areas are not uncommon (Table 1, Figure 1).

Discussion and Conclusions

The results regarding the statistics of selected categories of crime in Central Park are consistent with the theory that urban green areas play a violence prevention role as confirmed by other studies (Kuo, Sullivan, 2001). However, this is not a constant trend, and the situation depends on the safety policies implemented in the park, the availability of the facility and the maintenance of its infrastructure

(McCord, Houser, 2017). Neglected and unmonitored green areas will increase urban crime statistics not only for the area they occupy but also for their surroundings.

Solutions used in Central Park, such as a ban on motor vehicles, clear rules for travelling by other means of transport, rules for using the park by various user groups, video monitoring and a system of rapid communication with police and medical services, as well as good condition of infrastructure and maintenance of green areas make the facility safe despite being open late at night. This provides users with better conditions to spend time there. Recognising that a park as a place important for recreation and tourism should be treated uniquely, for example by creating a separate police station and medical services for it, is one of the key good practices recommended for use in other urban green areas to increase their safety.

Tab. 1: Characteristics of crime in Central Park and adjacent precincts (NYC Crime Map, 2023).

Precinct	Central Park	20	24	28	23	19	MNT
Type of crime							
Burglary	5	111	168	106	142	251	130
Felony Assault	9	110	182	235	424	184	184
Grand Larceny	48	744	511	388	432	1728	1979
Grand Larceny of a Motor Vehicle	0	95	97	88	89	151	83
Murder	0	4	3	4	6	2	3
Rape	3	10	12	7	14	14	9
Robbery	23	102	141	179	209	221	137
Total	88	1176	1114	985	1316	2552	2525

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Souhrn

Městské parky jsou všeobecně uznávány jako mimořádně cenné oblasti pro obyvatele měst, protože poskytují zelená místa pro odpočinek a volný čas různým typům uživatelů. Mezi omezeními jejich využívání se v literatuře často zmiňují obavy o bezpečnost - vnímání bezpečnosti mezi uživateli v závislosti na denní době, počasí, osvětlení a údržbě parku, ale také na chování ostatních uživatelů parku. Případová studie Central Parku (NY, USA) založená na údajích shromážděných newyorským policejním oddělením ukazuje, že tento obrovský park, který denně navštíví stovky lidí, je výrazně bezpečnější než okolní okrsky. Zajímavé je zejména to, že v parku dochází k menšímu počtu případů trestné činnosti, jako je znásilnění a trestný čin ublížení na zdraví, a také velkých krádeží, které jsou v zelených městských oblastech nejčastější. Výsledky dokazují, že městská zeleň může hrát důležitou roli při zvyšování bezpečnosti související s rekreačními aktivitami ve městě, což by mělo být zohledněno v moderních placemakingových iniciativách.

Contact:

dr. hab. Paulina Polko, prof. AWSB
E-mail: ppolko@wsb.edu.pl

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