

The Correlation of Nature Trails and Crime

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Crime and Trails:

South Fork Conservancy is in the visioning stage of a 26 mile trail system along the South Fork of Peachtree Creek. Currently the board of directors, along with interested community members, is evaluating existing conditions and visioning improvements.

The relationship between trails and crime was researched due to various concerns. Concerns about public safety and quality of life are important to address during this stage of the trail visioning, before trails constructed.

Presented below is a literature review of the correlation between crime, property value, and enclosed nature trails. All trails reviewed are topographically enclosed and are relatable to the South Fork Conservancies purposed trails. Whenever possible crime incidents will be split into two different categories; **property and injury** (including theft, assault) and **quality of life crimes** (littering, noise, dog attacks, drug usage, after-dark activities, bonfires, illegal usage of trails, etc.).

Many papers use property value as measurable variable to discuss quality of life crimes because in many cases these types of crimes go unreported. When property value of land is discussed, unless noted, all numbers are based on surveys given to home owners which may not reflect actual property values.

Summary of papers:

Positive Effects

A heavily cited and trusted paper on the correlation between trails and crime/property value is “**The Effect of Greenways on Property Values and Public Safety**”. This research was done by the Conservation Fund and Colorado State Parks in 1995. The paper “was done to determine what effects the presence of urban trails would have on public safety and on property values of homes located adjacent and one block to the trails. “

The study was conducted due to concerns expressed by several neighborhoods over the proposed construction of new trails. Similar to the South Fork Conservancy project critics, concerns include; lower property value, public safety risk, and increase in traffic through neighborhood.

Three 2-mile long segments of trails that run along natural waterways were studied. All three trails are located in residential neighborhoods, but also cross busy intersections and pass through commercial and retail areas in Denver, Colorado.

The results showed that in most incidences the trails were perceived to be positive to both quality of life and property value.

Single family home residents adjacent to a trail

- 29% believed that the location of the trail would increase selling price
- 7% felt that the trail would make the home easier to sell
 - 57% of these residents lived in their homes prior to construction of the trail
- 29% of those surveyed were positively influenced by the trail in their decision to buy the home

Townhomes, apartments, and condominium residents

- 0% thought the trail would decrease selling price
- 42% thought it would increase the selling price

One resident experienced **quality of life crimes** in connection to the trail. This resident experienced vandalism and damage to their property. After putting up extra lights in dark areas of property, vandalism stopped.

Although not negative, the survey found that 50% of residents interviewed did not use or were not aware of trails.

In a 2003 publication, Kuo, a researcher from University of Illinois found that well-used and designed green spaces might decrease crime. When areas are greened, community members make use of the area and thus discouraging criminal activity. Kuo's findings are consistent with Jane Jacobs argument that places with more "eyes on the street" have more checks on criminal behaviors. Both Kuo and Jacobs articles do not define their researches scope of crimes, but both allude to **property and injury** crimes.

Negative Results

One study that utilizes statistical evaluation is Dr. Netusil's , "**The Effect of Environmental Zoning and Amenities on Property Values: Portland, Oregon.**" This study was conducted in 2003 in Portland, Oregon as part of Portland's citywide River Renaissance planning effort. Dr. Netusil states that this study should be viewed as preliminary, as he is continuing his research for future publication in science journals. He also highlights that the relationship between environmental regulations, environmental amenities and property values are complex and that no clear pattern emerges.

This study uses the Hedonic Price Method. This method allows a researcher to estimate how specific factors (independent variables) affect the price of a good (dependent variable) while holding other key factors constant.

- Parks were estimated to increase property sales price by 1.75%
- Trails and cemeteries in Portland, Oregon within 200 feet of a property were found to have a decrease in property sale by 6.81% and 4.36%, respectively. The report suggests that the negative trail effect might reflect the types of trails included in this study. These were primarily large regional trails, many of which are along rail rights-of-way that are located in or close to industrial areas.
- Specialty parks, urban parks, and golf courses located within 200 feet to ¼ mile from a property, were estimated to effect sales price positively, while the estimated effect of trails and cemeteries remained negative

Inconclusive Effects

On Monmouth County, New Jersey parks website the following question was proposed “How will the trail effect property values?” in reference to the development of trails along the Hudson River.

The website offered this answer “Existing studies of the effect of trails on property values have been statistically varied and inconclusive. For example, individuals opposing and supporting the trail have referenced the same study as proving that trails do and do not adversely affect property values. Few real estate features are universally appealing or repulsive. Prospective homebuyers may find the trail an asset while others may view it as a liability. The corridor is and has been a public right-of-way since the late 1800s with portions of this line active as recently as 1979. A well-managed recreation facility is more likely to be a better neighboring land use than either an abandoned and unkempt property or an active rail line. Part of the Park System's mission is to provide a range of quality regional recreational services, programs, and places that can enhance and enrich the lives of the people in Monmouth County. Trails are an important component of a comprehensive, well-rounded regional park system. Walking, running, hiking, skating, and biking are recreational uses popular with and available to people of all ages, skills and socioeconomic levels. These activities encourage and reinforce healthy lifestyles among our citizens... The Park System has met on request with 21% of the trail neighbors to consider and evaluate individual property situations. Staff is addressing those concerns on an individual basis...”

Results and Conclusions:

Results:

- Majority of studies show that presence of trails either increases property values and ease of sale slightly or has not effect
- Using survey data , majority of neighbors feel quality of their neighborhood has been improved
- There needs to be a distinction between being “near” a trail and “on/abutting” a trail
 - In general negative reported affects were from properties that are bordering/abutting trails
 - Abutted homes have many concerns including decreased privacy, safety and property value
- The reported negative effects of trails include a variety of **quality of life crimes**:
 - litter
 - illegal motor vehicle use
 - disruptive noise
 - unleashed pets
- Most research has been done by paper/online/phone surveys which isn’t a representative method of determining actual property value changes
- There is no hard data on the relationship between dogs, crimes and nature trails

Conclusions:

Monmouth County's inconclusive result is piquant for this debate. There is no substantial data on whether a trail is an amenity or a nuisance. But through experience and empirical data there is a way to vision nature trails that will enhance the community's quality of life and relationship with the environment. The National Park Service stated, "Increases in nearby property values depend upon the ability of developers, planners and greenway proponents to successfully integrate neighborhood development and open space. Designing greenways to minimize potential homeowner/park user conflicts can help avoid decrease in property values of immediately adjacent properties." Here the debate of the affects of the trails can be set aside, and puts management and design of the trails in the forefront.

Below is a list of recommendations on how to address concerns:

- Community involvement and support is necessary for trails to be both utilized and a positive force in the community
- There must be a system in place to promptly address issues and problems experienced by neighbors
- There should be transparency of the visioning process to community members
- A clear plan for maintenance and addressing issues that arise is needed and can solve many of the negative effects including
 - Litter
 - Illegal use of trails
 - Disruptive noise

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