

Urban Greenspace and Crime

https://depts.washington.edu/hhwb/Thm_Crime.html

There are conflicting public attitudes about city trees and vegetation. On one hand, experiences in natural settings are believed to promote healing and renewal. Yet in urban settings the presence of vegetation is often implicated as a screen for criminal activity. This briefing summarizes the research findings on the relationship between urban vegetation and crimes, aggressive behavior, and safety. The science findings are not conclusive and may even seem inconsistent or conflicting, yet certain patterns and relationships appear across several studies.

Fast Facts

There are, on average, about 3,800 crime victims per 100,000 population in the U.S. each year.¹

Among minor crimes, there is less graffiti, vandalism, and littering in outdoor spaces with natural landscapes than in comparable plant-less spaces.⁴

Public housing residents with nearby trees and natural landscapes reported 25% fewer acts of domestic aggression and violence.⁵

Public housing buildings with greater amounts of vegetation had 52% fewer total crimes, 48% fewer property crimes, and 56% fewer violent crimes than buildings with low amounts of vegetation.²

Studies of residential neighborhoods found that property crimes were less frequent when there were trees in the right-of-way, and more abundant vegetation around a house.^{6,7}

In a study of community policing innovations, there was a 20% overall decrease in calls to police from the parts of town that received location-specific treatments. Cleaning up vacant lots was one of the most effective treatment strategies.¹²

Vegetation can be managed to create a reassuring environment, reduce fear, and increase citizen surveillance and defensible space. Principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) suggest how to achieve safer places.

cite: Wolf, K.L. 2010. Crime and Fear - A Literature Review. In: Green Cities: Good Health (www.greenhealth.washington.edu). College of the Environment, University of Washington.

Conclusions

Vegetation is a desired feature of public open spaces in cities. Some crime prevention specialists have advocated removal of most, if not all, vegetation in potential problem areas. However, the relationship between natural settings and crime prevention is more complicated than originally thought. More research is needed to look directly at urban greenspace, crime and causality.

Nonetheless, initial theory and evidence suggests that vegetation may be linked to lower levels of crime in residential neighborhoods, particularly poor inner-city neighborhoods. Residential vegetation has been linked to a greater sense of safety, fewer incivilities, and less aggressive and violent behavior. The link between urban forestry and urban greening with healthier social systems is surprisingly straightforward. The presence of trees and well-maintained lower understory vegetation can transform barren spaces lands into pleasant, welcoming, well-used places. Such common spaces serve to strengthen ties among residents, increase informal surveillance, and deter crime, thereby creating healthier, safer urban communities.⁶⁸

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