

Using Design to Reduce Crime

February 29, 2016, Feature, by Michael Cannavino, CPRP



Why would you wait for a crime to occur if you have the means to prevent it from happening? Law enforcement agencies often spend too much time and resources on reactionary practices regarding crime instead of implementing preventative measures. Crime prevention strategies and community policing are evolving concepts that need to be applied by law enforcement agencies and park systems nationwide. One form of proactive strategy is Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, or CPTED (pronounced sep-ted). CPTED is a plan or project that uses specific design principles to work toward deterring criminal behavior while positively impacting the image and usage of an area or facility.

Not Just for Law Enforcement Agencies

CPTED is a technique that can be used ubiquitously. Putting together a CPTED plan involves a variety of departments (marketing, planning and design, maintenance, media relations, executives, etc.) and each specific principle of design will show individually how much the practice can benefit you and your organization. Instead of focusing efforts on catching and stopping criminals, CPTED focuses on their behaviors and analyzes — “Why are criminals picking this location and committing this crime?” CPTED provides a different style of assessment, designed to work to prevent the crime before it occurs.

This concept is based on the theory of the “Crime Triangle” — a helpful model that can be used to analyze an issue for a CPTED project or for a proactive approach for trying to work toward preventing the occurrence of a specific crime. In either case, your assessment of the situation begins in the center of the triangle.

In order to make an initial assessment, you must begin by having an understanding and knowledge of the crime. Start your assessment by asking yourself questions such as:

- Do you feel there is an individual committing this crime, or a group?
- When is this crime occurring?
- Is it day or night, or in a specific timeframe?
- Who is being affected by this crime? Who is the victim?

Once you have a strong understanding of the situation, you can begin to analyze how to stop it. This understanding relates to the outer edges of the Crime Triangle: the victim, the suspect or the location. The understanding of the Crime Triangle is that all three pieces of the triangle have to be available in order for a crime to occur. However, crime prevention is possible if at least one of the elements is removed.

The Actors and the Principles

CPTED defines three types of “actors” on whom you should focus your attention:

Normal Actors — In parks and recreation, these are the frequent visitors, volunteers, runners, hikers, fishermen/women, bicyclists, program attendees, who use a facility. You want to focus your efforts on assuring that your normal users continue to be positively engaged with your organization.

Observer Actors — These actors are still considered to be positive users and are as important as normal actors, with a casual inclination. Designing space for observers is essential and equally important to ensuring the safety of those merely passing through or just enjoying a lunch break.

Abnormal Actors — This refers to negative users and where attention needs to be paid in order to develop a plan to protect and maintain a specified location. It is important not to focus on the individual, but on what about the location is drawing the abnormal actors to commit criminal activity in that location.

According to the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC), there are four main principles to CPTED:

1) Access Control — Using the layout of your environmental design to physically limit the access and egress points. This practice can also guide users, both positive and negative, to a specific direction within the park. Controlling access makes negative users feel uncomfortable and less apt to commit a crime.

2) Surveillance — Involves the elimination of physical barriers that inhibit the casual observer from scrutinizing behaviors inside a space. Surveillance is enhanced by lighting, proper placement of shrubbery, well-placed windows, elimination of physical barriers, and architecture and social commitment.

3) Territorial Reinforcement — This concept involves facilitating the process of turning an area over to legitimate users who will take ownership of the space and care for it. This helps eliminate or reduce nuisance behaviors because bad actors using the space receive increased monitoring.

Activity Support — Probably the biggest advocate, especially to a parks system, is the amount of space you have to add positive actors to your park. Get creative! Engage with your community and get a feel for what they want to see or do, and implement it into your project.

4) Maintenance and Management — Keeping areas “clean and green” is the minimum standard for scheduled maintenance. Have a plan and take the extra steps to create a clean, well-kept area for your patrons. Do not let things like graffiti, garbage and/or damaged property be seen by your positive users. Have staff locate, clean and fix issues before your park is open or highly populated.

“There are strong overlaps and synergies among the four CPTED principles,” says the NCPD. “These have been identified separately for convenience and clarity of understanding. In practice, it may be useful to see all four principles as different facets of a single technique for dealing with the security of the physical environment.”

Overcoming Obstacles

It is especially difficult for a park district to incorporate some of these principles for a variety of reasons, but it is possible to be successful. If you have a 5,000-acre park space, do not try to fix your issues with one giant project. Break your park into segments and focus your efforts.

It is important to find the proper balance between the desire for seclusion and the aspect of safety. Many people enjoy the parks as a way to reconnect with nature and enjoy the peace of being alone outside. If you wipe out half the trees in your park to have open sightlines throughout an entire hiking trail, some of that connection may be lost.

Most park districts will not have the funding to generate huge capital projects to fulfill CPTED requirements. Here are a few ways you can attain your goal:

Get Creative! — If you are having an issue with graffiti in a certain area, reach out to local artists and turn the area into something artistic. Have them create a mural in the area where the problem is occurring. They will use their own supplies, it will add positive users to the area, and they will have a sense of pride and be invested in seeing that it stays in good condition.

Use Your Community — Most communities have some kind of nonprofit group that is dedicated to the stability and future of the community. These organizations can help generate revenue through additional grant funding or fundraising. Get them involved and keep everyone engaged!

Cultivate Sponsors and Donors — Let people in the community know your plans! A local company or private donor may want to get involved. For example, you may be working to fix a picnic area where a couple who are donors became engaged, and they want to front the funding for the project. Remind people why they love the park and why they want to preserve it.

CPTED will never serve as the only source of crime prevention or take the place of traditional policing strategies, but implementing the procedures can lead to further success for your organization.

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