

Crime in the Parks

by Anne Schwartz

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An attempted rape in Prospect Park in September as well as four attacks on women in city parks earlier in the year has raised concerns about whether the parks are becoming more dangerous after years of improved safety and even though citywide crime rates have remained low. [New Yorkers for Parks](#), the parks advocacy group, has counted 25 violent crimes in parks reported in the press since July.

In mid-November, City Councilmember Joseph Addabbo, the chair of the parks and recreation committee, held a hearing to learn what the parks department is doing to improve safety and to examine the role of the Parks Enforcement Patrol. Patrol, or PEP, officers, who are under the jurisdiction of the parks department, enforce rules and issue summons for smaller offenses, acting as a deterrent to crime. But there are just 75 PEP officers to patrol the parks in the entire city, not counting officers stationed at recreation centers and special events or employed through separate contracts for the Hudson River Park, Battery Park City, and Lower Manhattan. At several public meetings organized by Brooklyn elected officials after the assault in Prospect Park, some residents complained that PEP officers do little when minor incidents are reported.

At the City Council hearing, park advocates called for adding more PEP officers and creating a parks division within the Police department, similar to the transit, housing, and school security forces. They also recommended that the city monitor crime in parks through the COMPSTAT crime-tracking system used by the police. Because many parks fall within several different precincts, it can be difficult to detect patterns of crime inside parks and around their borders.

The parks department believes there has been no increase in crime. "Truly, the city is safer than it's been in 30 to 40 years, and we think the parks are safer, too," said Liam Kavanagh, first deputy commissioner for the department, citing preliminary data showing a decrease in crime from several police precincts, including the one that covers Prospect Park. The crime rate in Central Park, which has its own police precinct, has also fallen over the last ten years.

Nevertheless, Kavanagh acknowledged the psychological effect. "If you've ever had a house or a car broken into, crime takes on a much more personal meaning. People feel the same about parks."

Just the perception of an increase in crime can be harmful if people become afraid to go into the parks. "One of the things that have made parks safer is the fact that people are using them. The more people out using the parks, the less likely it is for there to be crime and other problems," Kavanagh said. "We're just concerned that people's response will be to stay away from the park rather than go out and reclaim their turf."

The parks department has begun several new efforts to collaborate with the police department on tracking incidents and monitoring potential problems. The parks department is in the early stages of sharing its GIS (Geographic Information System) data with the police department so that information on parks can be included in the COMPSTAT system. The first step is to provide park boundaries, but as the parks department adds more detail to its computerized maps, the process will be refined. Ultimately, the department will have the ability to provide exact

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coordinates of where a problem is occurring within a park so that not only police but also fire and Emergency Medical Services personnel can respond more quickly. Emergency responders are now sent to the nearest street address, which has sometimes caused delays in getting to the right spot in time.

Since the beginning of the year, parks department sector managers have been taking precinct commanding officers on evening and night tours of the parks in their territory. This gives the park managers a chance to show where problems are occurring — usually things like graffiti, vandalism, people living in the parks - and talk about strategies to deal with them. It also helps develop personal relationships that can cut through layers of bureaucracy and get things accomplished faster.



Anne Schwartz is a freelance writer specializing in environmental issues. Previously, she was the editor of the Audubon Activist, a news journal for environmental action published by the National Audubon Society, and an editor at The New York Botanical Garden.