

Urban Pathways to Healthy Neighborhoods

Focus on: Personal Safety

What are Urban Pathways?

Urban pathways go by many names, including bikeways, trails and greenways. These pathways are used for healthy recreation and—when seamlessly interconnected with pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure like sidewalks and bicycle lanes—can be ideal routes for active transportation, including biking and walking.

Part of the Solution

In many urban areas across the country, low-income populations and communities of color face disproportionate challenges of obesity, difficult commutes and scarcity of open space. Promoting the development and use of urban pathways can help address these challenges by integrating physical activity into daily routines, connecting residents with green spaces and providing cost-effective solutions to improving community health.

The Urban Pathways Initiative

Through the generous support of The Kresge Foundation, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC) launched the Urban Pathways Initiative to advocate for equitable investment in vulnerable communities that promote the health, transportation and environmental benefits of trail use. Learn more at www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways.



Studies have shown that trails themselves do not generate crime^{1, 2}. But in many urban areas, crime and safety are serious, pervasive issues, and even the perception of trail safety may influence trail use³. Addressing concerns about crime and violence is particularly important in low-income urban communities where residents, especially children and women, may not be physically active due to violence or fear of violence⁴. Strategies to increase physical activity on urban pathways need to consider crime and safety because they are broader determinants of health-related behavior.

Since trails are often community focal points, crime on the trail can be perceived differently than crime on the street—it may generate more attention that keeps people away from the trail. The following examples provide a variety of strategies that can be used to deal effectively with crime and safety issues, including: working with police, creating trail patrols, engaging youth, lighting and designing the trail properly, keeping the trail well maintained, and encouraging trail use through programming to increase “eyes on the trail” and to ensure the trail has a reputation as a safe space.

“What came up really early on when we were talking to residents was: ‘[The trail] is not going to be safe. Are we sure it’s going to be safe? How do we keep it safe?’ We were wondering that ourselves, too. What we did was look at other cities and find out their experiences and learned right away that trails in general are safe and that the perception is what we have to work on.”

—MARIE KITTREDGE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, SLAVIC VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT
MORGANA RUN TRAIL, CLEVELAND, OHIO



This issue summary is part of a series that explores best practices and lessons learned from urban pathways across the United States. To access the entire series visit www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways/lessons.

Incorporate concepts of crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED) to address potential crime and safety issues.

CPTED is a way of developing or modifying the built environment to reduce the fear and occurrence of crime. Principles of CPTED include: natural surveillance, access control and territoriality⁵. To provide natural surveillance, design trails with clear sight lines and orient buildings so that windows face the trail, providing an “eyes on the trail” effect. Keeping urban trails well maintained will contribute to their attractiveness, which can be an important factor in increasing trail use⁶. Establishing a sense of ownership by installing signage, art or landscaping demonstrates that the trail is cared for, and keeping the trail well maintained reinforces that sense of ownership, creating an environment where “crime is uncomfortable.” Also, ensure the trail is in your city’s 911 emergency locator system. Since trails may not have a standard street classification and/or no associated physical addresses, emergency responses may be delayed.



Photo: Daquella Manera

Dallas, Texas Katy Trail

To improve emergency response to trail incidents, the city developed an innovative Emergency Locator System, using the Katy Trail as a pilot project. Signage markers with unique location identifiers are placed at every eighth of a mile; these are assigned geographic coordinates that allow emergency crews to easily determine the best route for reaching the emergency.

Contact: Friends of the Katy Trail, www.katytraildallas.org

Start a citizen-led volunteer trail patrol and work with local law enforcement to monitor the trail regularly.

Engage law enforcement by inviting them to trail events and activities. Attend neighborhood safety meetings and create a dialogue with police officers about monitoring the trail effectively. Provide training to volunteer patrols that helps them address concerns and make suggestions for common precautions (carry cell phone, be aware of your surroundings, travel during daylight hours, know your location).

The police do not necessarily make all communities feel safer. There may be distrust of the police, or fear of working with law enforcement officials. Citizen-led initiatives where not all participants have contact with police may be one way to overcome this mistrust. Volunteer trail patrols can act as a liaison between the community and the police. A regular presence of authority, whether law enforcement or volunteer-based, will help alleviate fear and may reduce the perception of crime and violence.



Learn more about how neighborhood residents and trail users dealt with incidents of crime on Washington, D.C.’s Met Branch Trail in the case study on the back and at www.railsto-trails.org/urbanpathways/lessons.

Use programming to provide regular activities on the trail...

... providing an “eyes on the street (or trail)” effect. Activities and events that invite community participation help introduce more neighborhood residents to the trail and create community ownership. Efforts to abate illegal graffiti and keep the trail well maintained must be frequent and consistent.

Crime may get more attention and media coverage if it occurs on the trail than if it occurs on a nearby street. Be prepared to respond to concerns and create opportunities for trail users and neighborhood residents to be involved in developing solutions, which may include hosting activities or informal meet-ups like walking clubs during high-risk times.

“You have to be patient. Because in the beginning, things will get vandalized a bit and busted up. Keep coming back, keep putting it back. As you keep putting it back, you engage more people and tell them the story so it works its way out to more and more people. Eventually, the actual act of vandalism becomes a spark that excites people to protect a space.”

—DORIA ROBINSON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, URBAN TILTH
RICHMOND GREENWAY, RICHMOND, CALIF.



See other Urban Pathways to Healthy Neighborhoods issue summaries for program suggestions and examples (FOCUS ON: Promotion and Programs, Art, Gardens)

TAKE A LOOK!

IS IT SAFE?

Crime and Perception of Safety on Urban Pathways

A short film produced by RTC explores the issue of crime and safety on three urban trails in Washington, D.C., Cleveland, Ohio, and Richmond, Calif. Interviews with trail managers, neighborhood residents, trail users and law enforcement provide insight and suggestions for how to defuse and address concerns prior to trail development, and solutions for dealing with crime on existing trails.

For more information, visit www.railstotrails.org/urbanpathways/lessons.



1. Rails-to-Trails Conservancy. 1998. Rail-Trails and Safe Communities: The Experience on 372 Trails. <http://community.railstotrails.org/media/p/17.aspx>
2. Greer, D. 2000. Omaha Recreational Trails: Their Effect on Property Values and Public Safety. www.unomaha.edu/recadmin/trails/omahatrails.pdf
3. Wolch, J. 2010. Proximity and Perceived Safety as Determinants of Urban Trail Use: Findings from a Three-City Study. *Environment and Planning*, 42: 57–79.
4. Cohen, L., et al. 2010. “Addressing the Intersection: Preventing Violence and Promoting Healthy Eating and Active Living. Prevention Institute. www.preventioninstitute.org/component/jlibrary/article/id-267/127.html
5. Dannenberg, A.L., Frumpkin, H., Jackson, R.J. (Eds), 2011. *Making Healthy Places: Designing and Building for Health, Well-being, and Sustainability*. Island Press, Washington, D.C.
6. Reynolds, K.D. et al. 2007. “Trail Characteristics as Correlates of Urban Trail Use.” *Health Promotion* 21(4): 335–345.

CASE STUDY: CRIME AND URBAN PATHWAYS

METROPOLITAN BRANCH TRAIL • WASHINGTON, D.C. • LENGTH: EIGHT MILES • OPENED IN 2010

A long-awaited section of the Met Branch Trail (MBT), connecting Northeast D.C. neighborhoods to downtown, opened in May 2010. The trail runs in a formerly neglected, light industrial section of the city along wide swaths of active railroad tracks and Metro, D.C.'s light rail system.



Before the trail was constructed, neighborhood residents and potential trail users were concerned about crime and personal safety. The District Department of Transportation (DDOT), the trail manager, responded to these concerns by designing the trail to include large, frequently spaced solar panel lights. In addition, illegal graffiti was rampant along the corridor. DDOT partnered with the DC Commission on Arts and Humanities to begin a large-scale mural project adjacent to the trail, and illegal graffiti ceased to exist where murals were installed. However, illegal graffiti covered many of the new light posts and the trail itself. Although it is a constant struggle to eliminate vandalism on the trail, persistent efforts by DDOT and community members to remove the graffiti and to install more public art resulted in a steady decrease of illegal graffiti.

CPTED on the Met Branch Trail in Washington, D.C.

“Every place where there is access to the trail, where there are neighborhood streets, we tried to beautify those connections. Because they had previously been dead-end streets, they were places where businesses kept their dumpsters, illegal parking was going on, so we removed the dumpsters and parking. Where we could, we put parks or gateway connections to the trail. We also did community events and community outreach so people knew about the trail and would come from the neighborhood, because the best way to keep it safe is to have people using it.”

—HEATHER DEUTSCH, BICYCLE SPECIALIST AND TRAIL PLANNER, DDOT

Shortly after the trail's grand opening, RTC created an online listserv for trail users and neighborhood residents as a way to share information about the trail, monitor conditions and report any incidents of vandalism or misconduct. Soon after, a few disturbing incidents occurred. Personal items were stolen from trail

users, some visitors were verbally harassed and physically attacked. Community residents and trail users became concerned and fearful of using the trail. In partnership with DDOT and other neighborhood groups, RTC convened a community meeting with the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD). MPD increased patrols on the trail, and DDOT installed portable cameras near locations where incidents were occurring frequently. The number of incidents decreased that year but persisted a year later. Concerned trail users joined forces with the Guardian Angels, a local citizen-led crime prevention group, to patrol the trail. By combining regular trail patrols with consistent trail programming and activities, fewer incidents of violence occurred. Combined with CPTED, these efforts will help ensure a safe and welcoming trail for years to come.

