

Research Note

“Activating” Park Spaces in Anchorage’s Town Square Park

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Town Square Park is an urban park in Anchorage, Alaska. Designed as a meeting place and landscaped respite from the commotion of downtown Anchorage, Town Square Park has long been associated with crime and disorder. This brief research note describes an intervention meant to reduce disorder in the park, including an abbreviated evaluation of the intervention.

Park Location and Description

Town Square Park is located in the center of downtown Anchorage, bordered by 5th Avenue, 6th Avenue, the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts, and E Street. Designed in 1988 as part of the Project 80s initiative to upgrade and renew infrastructure, the park was completed in 1991. In 1997 and 2008, improvements to the park were made. The park is roughly one city block in size and features paved sidewalks that meander through the landscape. Rolling landscape design and trees meant to provide relief from the hustle and bustle of city life obscure the interior of the park from 5th Avenue and 6th Avenue; there is no clear line of sight through most of the park. A high fountain with concrete walls occupies the center of the park and further obscures visibility. The fountain has been inoperable for at least two years.

Problem Identification and the Intervention

Determining the nature of crime and disorder problems is often difficult, and determination of the problem to be solved has consequences for the effectiveness of interventions (Payne, Gallagher, Eck, & Frank, 2013). In this case, the Anchorage Downtown Partnership (a private nonprofit providing maintenance, snow removal, safety patrols, and other services in the Anchorage Downtown Improvement District), the Anchorage Police Department, and business leaders identified the problem as disorder in the park primarily caused by homeless persons and alcohol/drug users. These problems rarely resulted in daytime calls to the police, but caused considerable distress to local businesses and tourists.

The intervention was designed to increase activity in the park—to

“activate” the space—in an effort to attract park users who were less likely to engage in disorder in the park. To that end, the Anchorage Downtown Partnership facilitated several events during the summer of 2014, which included concerts, food vendors, and activities for children. These events were scheduled in the middle of the day, in the hours bracketing the lunch hour. The lack of available data which could be used to examine the effectiveness of the intervention prompted then Anchorage Police Department Chief Mark Mew to request assistance from the UAA Justice Center.

Measurement and Methods

Measurement is critical to evaluation. However, creating objective measures of relevant park characteristics proved difficult. Many of the initial conversations with key stakeholders near the park focused on *undesirable persons*. However, as the UAA research team and stakeholders discussed exactly what made a person undesirable, it became clear that it was certain *behaviors* that were undesirable. These behaviors were used to define disorder. The research team then developed a plan to observe and document those behaviors in the park.

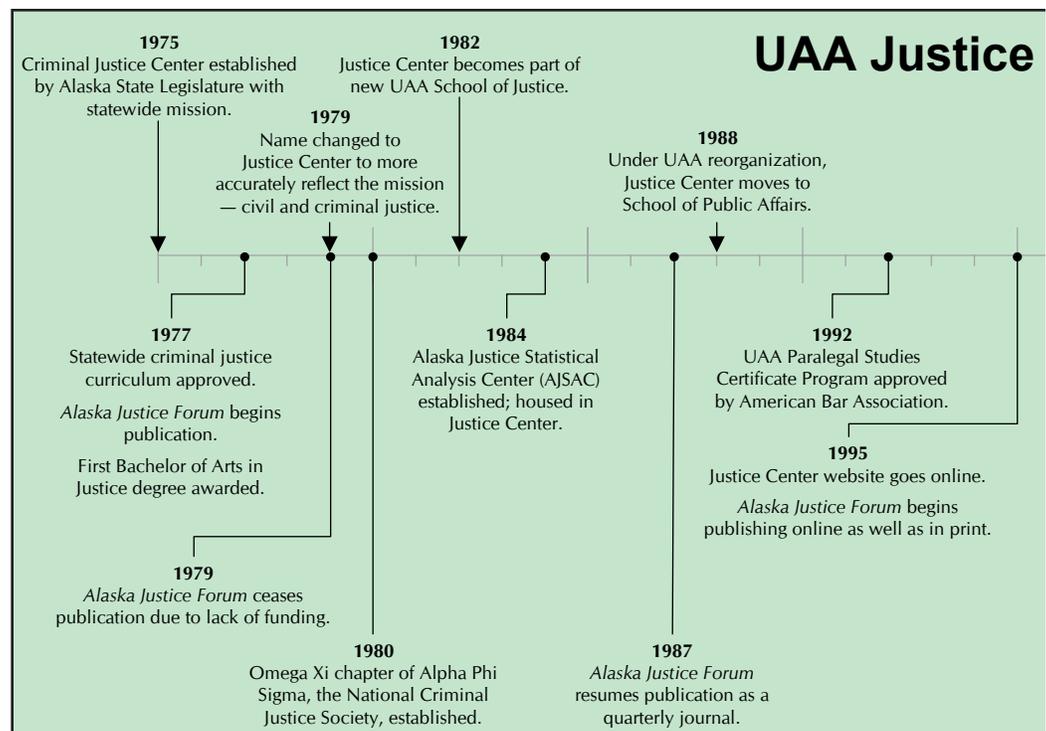
Due to the complex environment of Town Square Park, we divided the park into 12 different zones. These zones were based on informal observations of how people

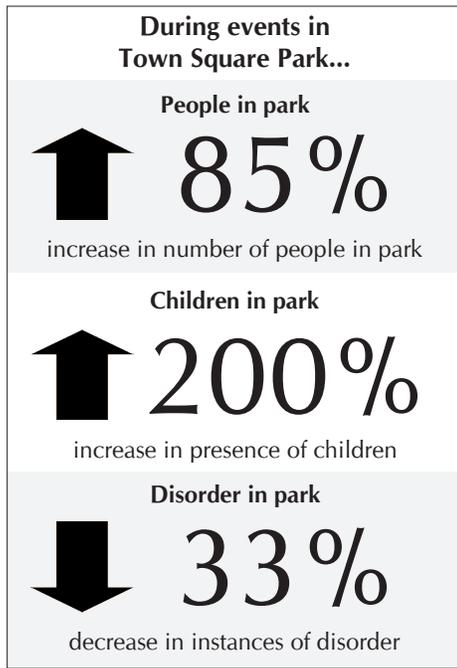
used the park. We observed these zones from the Alaska Center for the Performing Arts, which overlooks the park and provides a clear view of nine of the 12 areas. The research team walked through the three remaining areas to gather observations.

Each area was observed for three minutes. We recorded the maximum number of people in the area and whether any guardians were present (i.e., police, Parks and Recreation staff, Anchorage Downtown Partnership Ambassadors). We also recorded whether the following types of disorder were present: loud/disruptive people, people drinking alcohol, people smoking (tobacco and other substances), panhandling, skateboarding, drug dealing, and drug use. Each type of disorder was measured as *what it looked like*, with the idea of keeping our measurement as close to how a person casually walking through the park would interpret the actions of other people. Our measure of *drug use*, for example, did not require a field chemical test of the substance—if it looked like drug use, it was coded as drug use. We combined these measures into a single indicator of disorder for each three-minute period.

Findings

We observed 571 three-minute periods across nine days between July 17 and 31, 2014, between the hours of 11:00 a.m. and





increased presence of children and families made a qualitative difference in the park atmosphere.

While we observed no serious crime in Town Square Park, we did observe disorder in 13 percent of our observations (77 of 571 observations). While not unusual, disorderly behavior was not the norm in the park during our observations. Disorder was less likely during events (10%) than when events were not occurring in the park (16%). This reduction in disorder was short-term, with disorder typically reappearing within two hours after the conclusion of the event in the park. The research team noticed the persons who often dealt drugs in the park would leave during events and return shortly after the event ended.

Summary, Limitations, and Conclusion

While far from a panacea, the effort to activate Town Square Park was successful in both increasing park usage and reducing disorder—at least during events. Park usage increased substantially while disorder was reduced. More than the quantitative measures, however, the overall *gestalt* of

the park changed during events. Put simply, Town Square Park was a better, nicer place to be when events were staged there.

This work has limitations. First, the evaluation design is a weak one-shot pre-post design. It is not feasible to do a random-controlled trial of interventions at urban parks in Anchorage; each urban park in the downtown area has a unique construction and context. Parks in other cities are in different social contexts as well. Second, our measures were less than perfect. The research team was brought in just shortly before the intervention was to be fielded. Being included earlier in the problem definition and intervention planning process of the project could have resulted in a stronger evaluation design. Even with these limitations, our work shows that a public-private partnership to reduce disorder in Town Square Park can be successful.

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4:00 p.m. This included two days before the intervention, two days after the intervention, and the five weekdays of the intervention, during which the Anchorage Downtown Partnership and its partners staged events in the park.

Park usage increased 84.6 percent during events, from an average of 3.9 to 7.2 persons per park area. The presence of children, a key success metric for some stakeholders, also increased during events—36 percent of observations included children during events, compared to 17 percent when events were not occurring in the park. The

More on Solving Crime and Disorder Problems

Hilborn, Jim. (2009). *Dealing with Crime and Disorder in Urban Parks*. Response Guide Series #9. Washington, DC: Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, U.S. Department of Justice. (http://www.popcenter.org/responses/urban_parks/).

Payne, Troy C.; Gallagher, Kathleen; Eck, John E.; & Frank, James. (2013). "Problem Framing in Problem Solving: A Case Study." *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management* 36(4): 670–682 (2013). (<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-01-2012-0081>).

Center Selected Milestones, 1975–2015

