



Combatting criminality at leisure, play and recreational parks in South Africa

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Abstract

People visit parks because they have an inherent need to 'recharge their batteries' and they also offer a needed space for contact with the natural environment. They also serve a social function as they present opportunities for meeting with family and friends in natural settings. Parks generally serve the purpose of creating a feeling of comfort and security in their visitors. Unfortunately this is not always the case. South Africa is endowed with numerous magnificent public recreational parks spread all over the country, with the purposes of enabling people to utilise the spaces for relaxation, recreation, gathering and so on. While these recreational parks contribute significantly to peoples' (residents, local and international tourists) relaxation, recreation and well-being, it is quite disturbingly unfortunate that various criminal activities are being perpetrated frequently by criminals in and round these recreational parks. Visitors to parks often harbour concerns about anti-social behaviour and especially serious crime. Reports of vicious attacks, stabbing, stealing, snatch and grab, sexual assaults, and murder abound within this public recreational spaces. This article examines these criminal activities in the parks and how they can be tackled and combated in order to make public parks safe for recreation and leisure.

Keywords: Outdoor spaces, relaxation, criminality, safety and security, law enforcement.

Introduction

South Africa is a country riddled with violent crimes of all sorts and in various dimensions and these crimes are ravaging the society, crippling development and are constant threats to individual's freedom and the very essence of the existence of humanity (Chutel 2017). In South Africa, crimes like rape, assault and theft are being committed on a daily basis. According South Africa Crime Rate & Statistics 1996-2019, crime rate continues to increase on a yearly basis. For instance, crime rate increased by 3.5% from 2012 to 2013 (31.7% vs 32.7%); by 3.5% from 2013 to 2014 (32.7% vs 33.8%) and by 0,6% from 2015 to 2016 (32.7%vs 33.8%) (SSA (2019)). This upward progression of criminal activities on a yearly basis is disheartening for the victims who are affected by the crime and the government, the law enforcement agencies who have been tasked with the responsibility to fight and tackle crimes in South Africa. Daily, crimes are committed in all nooks and corners of South Africa and public recreational spaces in the country are no exemption, especially those situated in the urban and city centre. Recreation is an activity that people engage in during their free time, to refresh, rewind, relax and enjoy either alone or in the company of friends, relatives. Usually, people recognize all these activities as having socially redeeming values which usually have remarkable and refreshing outcomes at the end of the day (Packer, 2006).

Generally speaking, leisure is a time when a person is free from obligations, work either paid or unpaid) (Anderson, 2013). Also, leisure is a form of activity in different dimensions when people engage in during their free time-activities especially when it is not work oriented and devoid of engaging in household maintenance tasks such as housecleaning (Bloomfield, 2005). Interestingly, leisure has been linked with good and improved the state of mind (Iso-



Ahola and Mannell, 2004). According to Perry and Munien (2012), public recreational spaces are very important for social cohesion and the health and well-being of community members.

Whereas, play is the ability to feel relaxed and it depicts a state of being non-serious, but at the same time one is actively engaged (Mainemelis, et al., 2010). Most times, play is typified by spontaneity, joyfulness and inhibition (Bateson, 2013). In most cases, this is done not as a means to an end but for its inherent pleasure derivable during the period of play. Whereas recreation is an activity that people engage in during their free time, enjoy and recognize as having socially redeeming values which produces a refreshing outcome (Manning and More, 2002).

Recreation and leisure-time are good for the human beings. However, the problem is that in South Africa, there are huge safety, security and crime concerns in these recreational spaces. Murder, rape and theft are common (Perry and Munien (2012). The tragedy that unfolded at the open grounds of Rhodes Park, Kensington, back in 2015, when a gang of armed hooligans brutally attacked two couples while strolling and enjoying the ambience of the park after a long church service is an example of very unfortunate incident (Hlatshaneni, 2019). This harrowing incident was a wake-up call for the country's national security system on the importance of enforcing safety measures in public parks (Hlatshaneni, 2019). Therefore, combating these crimes at these spaces is critically imperative or else the benefits of these spaces will be nullified and this will consequently affect the development of the country. Undoubtedly, criminal activities have their own impacts and consequences. The fear of crimes at parks, if left unchecked by adequate security, will definitely lead to avoidance of going to parks. If participants have direct experience with park crime and incivility, this will impact them and they might discourage other people to go to parks (Kury, 2008). It is against the back of the tackling and combating crimes at the leisure and recreation places that this article examines the phenomena and offers viable solutions to address the issue.

Methodology

This article utilised contemporary literature relevant to the issues surrounding the prevalence of criminal activities at public recreational parks and spaces. Data from literature indicates that these outdoor spaces are mostly developed by the government as legitimate places for recreational and leisure purposes at all times (Carmona et al., 2008). Whereas, the current situation in South Africa is that these places are the target for criminal activities. In order to address this, literature on interventions pertaining to the tackling and combating of crimes were sourced and used to offer solutions on how to outrightly prohibit criminal activities ravaging the public recreational parks in South Africa.

Literature review

The government of South Africa as well as the citizens are concerned about the increasing crime rate in the country (Shaw & Gastrow, 2001). Against the backdrop of the alarming prevalence of criminal activities, the government has continuously increased the budget allocated for safety and justice sectors to fight crime which has become pandemic since crime was preventing foreign investors to come and invest in the country. According to Gould (2014) the country failed post-1994 to hold to account those who violated human rights during the apartheid era, and resorted to amnesty in exchange for the truth. In 2017, South Africa was 123rd in world rankings for peace making and it is seen as one of the most dangerous and violent places globally (BusinessTech Report, 2018). According to BusinessTech Report, (2018), "South Africa's reputation as one of the most dangerous places in the world is also apparent in the overall societal safety and security category, where it ranks in the top 20 countries in the world as the 18th most dangerous place, socially (factoring in crime and social violence)."



This is as a result of the relatively easier access to dangerous weapons, upped levels of criminality, increased levels of violent demonstrations and this is exacerbated by political terror (BusinessTech Report, 2018). Most people feel unsafe in their homes, streets and parks because of the prevalence of criminal activities.

According to Konijnendijk *et al*, (2013), parks plays an integral role in the society as they offer environmental, social-cultural and economic benefits to city habitants. However, people are changing their habits and recreational needs as public parks are no longer conducive for their recreational needs (Hayward and Weitzer, 1984). Other studies have shown that many people have resorted to indoor activities as they feel safer and less exposed to being a victim of crime compared to parks (Chiesura, 2004). Declines in social cohesion between city dwellers has given birth to weakened levels of social control in recreational parks, hence increases in criminal activities such as drug-dealings, killings, rape and muggings occur (Mavuso, 2016).

It is the responsibility of the local sphere of government to plan, develop, manage and protect infrastructure and facilities, including public parks, forests and recreational assets as well as buildings and properties in its community. However, the high levels of crime and violence occurring in public areas, especially in Johannesburg, make it very difficult for local government to protect public parks (Simone, 2004).

Sanctions and punishments for criminal offences during this period have been slack and not effectively enforced in order to alleviate the level of crime in South Africa during mid-2000s. Recognising this critical problem, the Ministry of Safety and Security established in Johannesburg a research institution called the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV), solely with the aim of identifying means and recommendations on how to fight crime in South African public parks (Van der Spuy and Shearing, 2014). Many factors such as the unmet socio-economic expectations of black South African youths and the high influx of African immigrants into South Africa have been perceived to be responsible for the high crime rate (O'Donovan, 1998; Hough, 2004). Statistics show that foreign nationals enter South Africa every 10 minutes (Neveling, 2006). According to Breetzke, (2010) about 10 million foreign nationals from neighbouring African countries, many of who are illegal immigrants, reside in South Africa. Hence, in a bid to meet their needs and considering that they do not have valid work permit, some of them resort to crimes. Other possible causative factors include amongst others poverty, neglect, low self-esteem, alcohol and drug abuse which can all be connected to why people break the law and commit heinous crimes.

Due to the high level of criminal activities within the country's public areas or spaces, which include the public parks, South Africa and Germany's government agreed on a joint initiative, namely the Inclusive Violence and Crime Prevention (VCP) Programme. The VCP Programme aims to support the existence and realization of South Africa's government strategic outcome number three which is "all people in South Africa are to feel safe" by promoting and enhancing an integrated, systematic approach towards the formation of safer communities within the country. The main purpose of the programme is to enhance the current and future conditions of the local government by implementing measures that are aimed at preventing violence, with the assistance of the national and provincial spheres of South Africa's government (VCP, 2012).

To optimize passive surveillance in locations where large parks or similar spaces exist, the government should consider developing a range of activities that minister to and are suitable for a range of age groups (Kruger, 2010). This could include and not limited to; restaurants; tea gardens, playgrounds, informal markets and picnic areas. Considering the activities outlined, such activities should be juxtaposed so that the aims of achieving passive surveillance are not high jacked and exploited. For instance, the park's playground should be located in a place where it is clearly distinguished or rather visible from the tea garden, playgrounds, and so on. it should not be positioned next to an undeveloped vacant land, since this will increase potential for criminal activity(Kruger, 2010).



Safety is a serious issue for especially young children, the elderly and women in public spaces. Many women don't visit parks because of their fear of being raped. Patrick (2002), asserts that women don't visit parks because of a lack safety and security. Park users need to have a sense of control over the place they visit and be in a position to get assistance in a time of crisis (Altman & Zube, 1989).

Owing to increases in the already high crime rate, the government certainly needs to strengthen the implementation and enforcement of criminal law and legislation in order to curb criminality in public parks, recreational and leisure places (Simpson, 2016). The then Minister of Police, Fikile Mbalula initiated Operation *Fie!a II* with an overall objective of maintaining law and order, peace, security and stability, create a conducive environment for all South Africans to participate in social and economic activities in the country, reclaim the areas that have been taken over by criminals, provide humanitarian assistance and empower vulnerable and highly affected communities and reaffirm the confidence of South Africans in the government and the South African Police Services (SAPS). The concern is that these objectives are yet to be achieved even with the current new administration and new Minister of Police.

Interventions Introduced for Preventing Crime: Policies and Legislation

It has been recognized that criminal activities can be curbed by implementing and applying sound planning, design and management principles to the existing environment. It is also acknowledged that the physical environment could have a positive impact in individual's perceptions of safety within the environment (Tim, 2000). Therefore, for effective prevention of criminal activities, it is important to put in place effective and sustainable interventions and principles. Some of the interventions and plans in place are:

Effective and Safety- conscious Environmental Planning, Design and Management

The National Development Plan 2030 (NDP) reflects that spatial or environmental design as a situational factor is important when establishing a framework for community safety and crime prevention i.e. and it specifically states "... urban design that will take account of safety..." (NPC, 2012). The Integrated Urban Development (IUDF) outlines that the most essential role in creating safer living environments is proper planning, design and management (DCGTA, 2016). Visitors to parks require a way to find their way around parks with ease, and this contributes to a sense of security. Sourcing help must not be difficult in any park. In the evenings sufficient lighting is non-negotiable. Physical access should be exploited by providing users with a selection of legible routes on well-placed boards to and from areas in a park. The design of a park also has a direct impact on people's perceptions of safety and security and their willingness to use a park (Deasy, 1985).

In 1996, the National Crime Prevention Strategy (NCPS) of South Africa was introduced by the government. One of its pillars focused on "reducing crime through environmental design." The execution of this pillar was encouraged by an all-encompassing study which was conducted by the Council for Security Studies (ISS). It included an encompassing local research with its main focus at contextualizing international theories, approaches and concepts, including and not limited to Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) (Jeffery, 1977) environmental criminology, defensible space, situational crime prevention and 'eyes on the street.' The White Paper on Safety and Security of 2016, emphasises that public parks safety can only be achieved through environmental design.

The Integrated Social Crime Prevention Strategy

The Community Safety and the South African Police Service (SAPS) Social Crime Prevention unit implemented by Provincial Departments within South Africa currently plays a vital role in preventing social crime within the Republic of South Africa. According to Averill (2018), "social crime is a popular form of lower class social resistance involving behavior characterized by



law as illegal but is supported by wider (usually peasant) society as being moral and acceptable.” These crimes are driven by a variety of social conditions such as poverty, lack of opportunity, poor education, wrecked family structures, high levels of alcoholism and drug use and they are usually called street crimes. To tackle and combat these there is need to create the opportunity for good jobs with liveable wages, good educational opportunities, stable family structures and solid infrastructure (Averill, 2018).

This strategy identifies that a variety of line functions existing in the government department’s lines functions have an evident link to social crime prevention and a number of the programmes that were developed contribute to the achievement and execution of social crime prevention objectives. The Victim Empowerment Programme has been recognized as a notable programme considering the other programmes that exist in which the Department of Social Development (DSD) also played a vital role for government and other stakeholders since the implementation of the NCPS in the year 1996. The formalization of the Integrated Social Crime Prevention Strategy outlines rather than introduce the precise linkages between government departmental programmes and social crime prevention (ISCPS, 2011).

As a result, government departments focus their attention mostly on families; social welfare; communities and poverty alleviation; support and empowerment of women and development of youth; the care of vulnerable groups i.e. the elderly, the disabled and children which are all irretrievably linked to the implementation and achievement of social crime prevention in other departments.

Draft White Paper on Safety and Security

The 2016 White Paper on Safety & Security stems from an extant review of the White Paper on Safety & Security of 1998. It is a policy which was established with a sole mandate or purpose of crime and violence prevention and enhances an integrated and holistic approach to safety and security. The 2016 White Paper on Safety and Security that was embraced by the South African Cabinet earlier this year as a new policy on safety, crime and violence prevention that supports an integrated and holistic approach to safety and security with the National Development Plan. Chapter 11 of the Constitution prescribes that the safety and security of citizens should not be recognized only as a responsibility of the state, but also a fundamental human right as envisaged within the ambits of Chapter 2 of the Constitution and “a necessary condition for human development, enhanced productivity and improved quality of life”. Chapter 24 of the Constitution further advocates or pray for all citizens to have a right to a safe environment that is not harmful to the well-being or health of citizens.

The Municipal Systems Act of 2000

Section 152 of the South African Constitution defines the responsibilities of local government. Local government is responsible for four things:

- a) to ensure the sustainable delivery of services to communities;
- b) to aid social and economic development;
- c) to encourage a safe and healthy environment; and
- d) to include communities and community organisations in the matters of local government through participation.

Safety in the society and community, to be precise, safety in public recreational and leisure spaces are crucial ingredients for creating habitable and prosperous cities (Mtengwane, 2018) which are welcoming to locals and tourists alike. Sadly, safety is not always a priority for local government and cities. This is frequently because the responsibility for ensuring a safer



environment has been vested with the national authorities, regardless of safety being one amongst many of the highest demands of South African citizens (Mtengwane, 2018).

The local government and mayors have played an important role in the development of community safety over the past 20 (twenty years) in countries across North America, Europe, Australia and Africa. There have been increasing numbers of initiatives developed and implemented mainly for targeting crime, social exclusion of individuals, minority groups, victimization and neighbourhoods. The links that exist between social disadvantages and poverty, neighbourhoods and crime have depicted that many law enforcement agencies and the communities need to work together to prevent crime (Shaw, 2005).

Synthesis

The importance of all recreational parks and spaces resources is that of their social values. Therefore, it is the responsibility of all spheres of government of South Africa to provide these outdoor recreational resources with ample security available to curb criminal activities in these spaces at all times. Obviously, recreational activities do occur within the social environment and form part and parcel of the social environment of the community. These recreational resources are conspicuous part of the pattern of social interaction. They are places beyond work and are effective as a social nucleus where participants convene (Van Doren et al., 2019). These open spaces and resources are social spaces where people and participants are brought together in order to interact in what should be secure environment.

Leisure is vital to human well-being, because it represents an opportunity for self-expression, identity, and self-actualization apart from our work (Stebbins, 2006). Inadvertently or consciously, people participate in some kind of outdoor or indoor recreation, whether actively or passively. Adequate leisure time has been known to stimulate the demand for recreation and enormous resources are required to meet these demands (Clawson & Knetsch, 2013). Currently, the purpose and overarching benefits of public recreational parks to people are being defeated and overturned by the perpetuation of criminal activities in these parks (Ramutsindela, 2004). Thus tourists for example are warned about visiting parks and cautioned about what may befall them.

Moreover, these places have become weaponized because of lack of adequate safety measures to repel criminals. Also, public recreational and leisure spaces are essential counterparts to more settled places and routines of work and home life, providing the channels for movement, the ebb and flow of human exchange, the modes of communication, and are generally common grounds for play and relaxation which have lately been assaulted by criminal activities in South Africa (Carr et al., 1992). Hence there exists a dire need for proactive intervention to repel and ward off crimes and criminals in these spaces.

Conclusion

Recreational parks are meant to be places where people go to relax, recuperate from the stresses of what is often mundane daily life and have fun. Public recreational and leisure spaces are hypothetically safe places where job opportunities and businesses can occur. For example, small businesses in open spaces and shops cater for the participants promoting many retailers' businesses and socioeconomic activities. Criminal activities at recreation spaces are unfortunately endemic and most times perpetrated with impunity. This is because, most times, there is lack of or an outright absence of law enforcement officers at these sites to prevent and apprehend criminals. Therefore, places that are supposed to be where people enjoy themselves, recreate themselves, play and relax, have now become weaponized in South Africa because of the prevalent crime which ravages the sites, society and especially the participants. Government often only enforce the implementation of interventions when there is an outcry by the users of the public recreational and leisure parks or when an heinous



criminal activity occurs in those spaces. Whereas, it is globally acknowledged that security and safety should be the norm in public recreational spaces and not an exception to the rule. Addressing the issue of safety in parks and open space is a multifaceted task.

The problem cannot be unraveled by fighting crime alone using policing, or even by design or other acts. It requires a comprehensive and integrative strategy involving many stakeholders but especially the government. It is essential to permit and encourage diversity, cultural exchanges and business in communities and allow all people to flourish in healthy, functional cities, localities and parks. It is therefore critical that the community is included in planning and programming of the open spaces and parks in our towns and cities.

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