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# RESTORING PUBLIC ORDER IN A CITY PARK

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by

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***Abstract;** In 1991, Stockholm narcotics officers conducted a crack-down in an attempt to reduce drug activity in a central city park. This evaluation uses surveys of residents living near the park, interviews with local business owners and park drug offenders, and site observations to demonstrate that the police tactic was successful in virtually eradicating drug activity in the park. An analysis of arrest records over time suggests that while some displacement occurred, it was diffuse and benign.*

## INTRODUCTION

Parks are designed for recreational use by a variety of people: children to play, mothers to stroll their infants, senior citizens to sit and enjoy the scenery. But parks also attract "illegitimate users" — those who congregate to sell or use drugs, drink publicly and panhandle. These deviant individuals disturb and threaten legitimate users of parks, and it falls under the auspices of local police to discourage such behaviors. A number of studies of police responses to gatherings of deviants in public areas have been conducted in Sweden (e.g., Kuhlhorn, 1991; Björ et al., 1992), but these have not measured public opinion regarding the activities of deviants and police responses to deviant behavior.

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The dearth of research in this area prompted the present study, which focuses on Vasaparken, a city park in the heart of Stockholm known for its drug use and trafficking.

Vasaparken is situated in a residential neighborhood, easily accessible by subway, bus and car. Topographically, the park consists of two parts: a hilly area covered with trees and the site for a children's playground, and a flat, grass-covered section with a summertime cafe and a permanent bench built into an alcove. A state-monopoly liquor store is located across one of the park's bordering streets.

### **THE INTERVENTION**

In the spring of 1990, the police focused extra resources on the problems of drug use and sales in Vasaparken, bolstering its narcotics unit with seven additional officers and employing a "stationary method" tactic. This strategy entailed conducting covert observations in the park and radioing information describing offenders to arrest patrols situated outside the park. Both uniformed and mounted police regularly patrolling the park were informed of the special unit's actions and agreed to cooperate by increasing the number of patrols in the area. The crackdown began in mid-April and lasted for six weeks, after which the mounted police efforts continued, but with less intensity. This crackdown is consistent with Sherman's (1990) definition, which requires a temporary increase of police activities in a designated area for specific crimes considered to have previously been under-enforced.

Independent of police actions in Vasaparken between the spring of 1990 and 1991, park authorities redesigned the park to make it less attractive to drug dealing. This redesign included:

- the trimming of hedges around the hilly area where drug users tended to congregate;
- the placement of a "dog toilet" on the hill to encourage legitimate users to frequent the area where drug use was most prevalent; and
- the redesign of the area around the dug-in bench to improve visibility.

## METHODOLOGY

A variety of methods were employed to study the nature of offending in Vasaparken. We conducted systematic observations of the park, as well as before-and-after interviews with business owners in the immediate area and offenders frequenting Vasaparken, and sent a questionnaire to a sample of area residents. Table 1 outlines the research methodology employed.

**Table 1: Summary of the Research Design**

<b>Method</b>	<b>Dates and samples, Time 1</b>	<b>Dates and samples, Time 2</b>
Systematic observations of Vasaparken	April-October, 1990 3 days/week, 3 hours/observation period	April-November, 1991 3 days/week, 3 hours/observation period
Survey of "legitimate" park users. (random samples from 2500 households located in park vicinity)	1990 440 households surveyed, 78% response rate representing 460 individuals	1991 402 households surveyed, 74% response rate representing 387 individuals
Structured interviews with business owners	1990 n=32	1992 n=31 (reinterviews of 1990 respondents)
Semi-structured interviews with offenders	1990 n=5	Offenders not reinterviewed
Analysis of arrest reports for narcotics offenses	1989-1992 n=54	

### Observations

Following a method introduced by Reiss (1979), observers conducted systematic observations of offending behavior in Vasaparken in order to understand the incidence, prevalence and distribution of offending occurring in the park. During each observation period, observers conducted hourly foot patrols of the park

and recorded the numbers and activities of persons by location. Police activities and other significant incidents were also recorded during these observations. Several individuals conducted observations independently to ensure reliability of the data collected.

### *Observation Time 1*

The first set of observations, conducted in April 1990, extended from the early morning hours through the late evening. Observations indicated that offenders fell into one of two categories: "loners," who were clearly intoxicated; and a group of adult males who consumed alcohol and hashish. The core members of the latter group arrived in the park around 10:00 a.m. — shortly after the state monopoly liquor store opened, consumed alcohol and smoked hashish in the park, and left late in the afternoon. The group tended to grow throughout the day, with the early afternoon the critical time for potential disturbances as a result of the large numbers. Because of these temporal patterns, observations between June and October were conducted during the afternoons. The activity was observed three times a week, in three-hour sessions.

Observers noted that the group of drug users was unusually hardy, congregating even in cold and inclement weather. In the spring, they congregated around the permanent bench and numbered from seven to ten persons. Their behaviors, such as loud, boisterous talking and public urination, often intimidated legitimate users, who took extra efforts to avoid passing by the group. As the temperature became warmer, the group changed locations to congregate on the tree-covered hill. The size of the group grew to an average of 15 to 20; sometimes as many as 30 gathered to smoke hashish on the hill. By autumn, the group's membership diminished to less than ten. Members engaged in drug sales discretely, with individuals leaving the group temporarily to conduct a transaction with a buyer.

Observers noted that the uniformed police patrolled the area primarily by car, rarely leaving the vehicle to issue warnings or request that the group leave the premises. The group would, however, leave the area and return shortly after the patrol car departed. Occasionally the police would pick up extremely intoxicated individuals and transport them out of the park or to the police station. Mounted police attracted the attention of legitimate users, who often walked up to the officers and patted the horses.

In addition to uniformed officers, an occasional plainclothes officer was observed from time to time.

### *Observation Time 2*

In the spring of the following year, no drug offenders were observed in the park. A few drug offenders returned during the summer, but the group did not exceed five in number. Unlike the previous year, legitimate users now occupied the hill; only rarely was the smoking of hashish observed or the occasional potential buyer witnessed inquiring about sales. Indeed, it appeared that the drug problem at Vasaparken had been virtually eradicated.

While many of the individual public drinkers remained in the park, they did not disturb legitimate users in the way that the group of drug users had in the previous year. Observers noted that on sunny days more public drinkers could be observed. While they sometimes urinated publicly, they nonetheless did not seem to be disturbing legitimate users. Fewer interventions by police were observed. Uniformed police continued to patrol the area, but with less frequency than the year before.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Interviews with Offenders**

Interviews were conducted with five members of the Vasaparken offender group in 1990. Introductions were made through a social worker, who helped to select willing group members to participate in the interviews. All five subjects were male, aged 25 to 40, and had an established pattern of drug abuse. Alcohol and cannabis were their drugs of choice, with three members also reporting occasional amphetamine use. None of the five subjects were employed full-time; their income was derived from occasional temporary work, welfare, and presumably drug dealing and other criminal activities. All subjects had criminal records, which included drunk driving, forgery, assault, and theft, and all had served brief prison sentences. In many aspects this small subsample of offenders resembled a group of offenders apprehended by police during a crackdown in another of Stockholm's public parks in the 1970s (Bejerot et al., 1974).

The subjects reported that they were long-time, regular users of the park, having visited between four and five days a week for

years at a time. Vasaparken served as a meeting point where they knew they could find each other, and where they also knew they could find alcohol and hash.

The subjects were aware that their presence at the park often disturbed other park visitors, especially when the group became large and many were intoxicated. Whereas fights occasionally broke out among group members, subjects reported that fights did not transpire between the group and passersby. Subjects felt that they had the same right to use the park as others; as long as they kept to their part of the park and did not harm passersby, they felt they should be left alone. All the offenders relayed stories about police abuses, such as unjustified harassment. They also made distinctions between "rough" and "straight" cops. Three of the five subjects indicated they were aware of increased police activity in the park.

### Surveys of Local Residents

Surveys of households located near Vasaparken were conducted in the fall of each year. Significant differences in responses between time periods suggest that the perceptions of public disorder in Vasaparken had changed for the better. As Table 2 indicates, a significantly smaller percentage of respondents perceived problems as "big" in 1991 compared to 1990. Responses did not differ significantly by sex or age.

**Table 2: Local Residents' Perceptions of Public Order Problems in Vasaparken — 1990 and 1991**

	<b>Before (1990)</b>	<b>After (1991)</b>
Big	45	21
Some	49	65
No problems	7	14
TOTAL	100 n=411	100 n=336

Chi Sq: =52.23, d.f.=2, p<0.0001.

Both males and females used the park in similar ways, with more than 50% of respondents indicating that they passed through Vasaparken at least twice a week. Patterns of park use were similar from one year to the next. Of the offensive situations encountered by respondents, most reported witnessing intoxicated persons. As Table 3 indicates, respondents reported significantly fewer offensive incidents in 1991 than in 1990, regardless of the frequency of park visits.

**Table 3: Percentage of Respondents Having Witnessed or Experienced Offensive Situations During Recent Visit in Vasaparken†**

	Visiting Park Weekly or More		Visiting Park Less than Weekly	
	1990	1991	1990	1991
Saw intoxicated person	97 (125)	89* (106)	90 (249)	67*** (199)
Got upset by an incident	65 (125)	47** (105)	41 (238)	22*** (199)
Saw an incident to which police should respond	55 (12)	33** (102)	31 (231)	17*** (190)

Test of significance (Chi Sq.) based on each group from the two years investigated  
 \*= $p < .05$ , \*\*= $p < .01$ , \*\*\*= $p < .001$ .

† Controlling for frequency of visiting the park. Totals appear in parentheses.

Those who reported experiencing disturbing incidents in Vasaparken — especially female respondents — were less likely to frequent the park, and this pattern was consistent in both samples. In 1991, however, fewer respondents indicated that they had been upset by witnessing disturbing incidents.

**Table 4: Percentage of Respondents Having Avoided Visiting Vasaparken in Daytime Because of Worries about the Conditions in the Parkf**

	Got Upset by Incident		Not Upset	
	1990	1991	1990	1991
Females	73 (94)	67 (54)	48 (97)	35* (119)
Males	50 (101)	39* (42)	23 (94)	12* (109)

Test of significance (Chi Sq.) based on each group from the two years investigated

\*=p<.05

† Controlling for experience of disturbing incident during recent visit, males and females. Totals appear in parentheses.

These same patterns are demonstrated in nighttime visits to the park. An overwhelming majority of women reported avoiding passing through the park in the evening because of fear. Only male respondents who had not recently encountered an offensive incident in the park registered a significant decrease in the percentage of those avoiding the park in the evening.

**Table 5: Percentage of Respondents Having Avoided Passing through Vasaparken in the Evening Because of Worries about the Conditions in the Parkf**

	Got Upset by Incident		Not Upset	
	1990	1991	1990	1991
Females	97 (94)	96 (54)	87 (97)	86 (117)
Males	81 (88)	72 (43)	64 (98)	47* (110)

Test of significance (Chi Sq.) based on each group from the two years investigated

\*=p<.05.

† Controlling for Experience of Disturbing Incident During Recent Visit, Males and Females. Totals appear in parentheses.



Thus, in 1991, respondents perceived the level of public disorder in Vasaparken to be much lower. Respondents in 1991 reported experiencing fewer upsetting incidents in the park, and also avoided the park to a lesser degree, than those in 1990. Table 6 indicates a significant improvement in perceptions of disorder from 1990 to 1991.

**Table 6: Respondents' Perceptions of Change in Public Order in Vasaparken  
Percentage Distribution  
1990 and 1991**

	1990	1991
Much better	7	6
Better	16	42
No change	45	46
Worse	21	4
Much worse	11	2
TOTAL	100 n=385	100 n=292

Chi Sq.=101.70, d.f.=4, p<0.0001.

Those who responded that the public order had changed in the park were asked about their feelings of personal security and well-being. A large majority of respondents reported that they felt much more safe and secure due to the improvements at Vasaparken.

**Table 7: Perceptions of Security and Well-Being in Vasaparken During 1991  
(Percentages)**

	Feeling of Security	Feeling of Well-Being
Much better	7	11
Better	69	66
No change	13	14
Worse	7	5
Much worse	4	5
TOTAL	100 n=153	101 n=153

Respondents in 1991 reported seeing fewer uniformed police in and around the park compared to 1990 respondents, especially with regard to the mounted police. Relatively few respondents from either sample indicated that they had seen foot patrols at the park. The differences in perceptions of police presence were most pronounced among frequent users of Vasaparken.

**Table 8: Percentage of Respondents Having Witnessed Uniformed Police or an Intervention by Police During Recent Visit in Park†**

	Visiting Weekly or More		Visiting Less than Weekly	
	1990	1991	1990	1991
Car patrol	82 (119)	67* (106)	67 (230)	49** (199)
Foot patrol	35 (92)	17* (106)	20 (189)	13 (200)
Mounted police	48 (100)	13*** (106)	13 (186)	9*** (199)
Intervention	40 (108)	14** (78)	22 (161)	14 (112)

Test of significance (Chi Sq.) based on each group from the two years investigated

\*=p<.05, \*\*=p<.01, \*\*\*=p<.001.

† Controlling for frequency of visiting the park. Totals appear in parentheses.

Of the 120 respondents who had witnessed a police intervention in the park, 69% rated it as "well-handled" or "very well-handled." Further, as Table 9 indicates, 1991 respondents had a more favorable opinion of the way in which the police managed the park than 1990 respondents, with 36% rating police activity "well" or "very well" in 1991, versus only 19% in 1990.

**Table 9: Percentage Distribution of Respondents' Opinions about Police Response in Vasaparken 1990 and 1991**

	<b>1990</b>	<b>1991</b>
Very well	2	5
Well	17	31
Neither well nor bad	47	49
Bad	24	13
Very bad	10	2
TOTAL	100 n=389	100 n=307

Chi Sq.=54.63,d.f.=4, p<0.0001

**Table 10: Percentage of Respondents from the 1990 and 1991 Surveys Agreeing or Disagreeing With Statements on Police Policy in Vasaparken**

	<b>Police Should be More Tolerant</b>	<b>Police are Often Too Curt</b>	<b>Police Should Act More Vigorousl y</b>	<b>More Often Patrol by Car</b>	<b>More Often Patrol on Foot</b>
Strongly agree	1	3	58	41	82
Partly agree	4	6	27	25	13
Neither	6	28	10	15	5
Partly disagree	7	9	3	8	0
Strongly disagree	81	54	2	12	0
TOTAL	99 n=757	100 n=654	100 n=764	101 n=762	100 n=781

Residents in both survey samples favored a rigorous, proactive police approach to problems in Vasaparken. An overwhelming

majority disagreed with the notion that police should be more tolerant toward offenders, with very few judging police behavior to be curt. Respondents also expressed the need for more frequent foot patrols in the park.

A multiple regression analysis of predictors of public opinion of the police resulted in four variables that significantly explained 35% of the variance in opinion. Having seen an upsetting incident in the park during a recent visit was associated with negative ratings of the police, whereas seeing the police on foot patrol and perceiving an improvement in the park predicted favorable opinions. As the age of the respondent increased, so did favorable opinions of police management of the park.

**Table 11: Residents' Opinion Concerning the Way the Police Managed Vasaparken (Multiple Regression Analysis)**

	<b>Coeff.</b>	<b>Std. Error</b>	<b>Std. Coeff.</b>	<b>t-Value</b>	<b>p-Value</b>
Intercept	4.568	.201	4.568	22.732	<.0001
Foot patrol	.392	.079	.180	4.942	<.0001
Age	.131	.034	.143	3.894	.0001
Perception of change	.435	.035	.457	12.269	<.0001
Upset by incident	-.383	.068	-.211	-5.634	<.0001

Adjusted  $R^2$  = .353,  $F$  = 67.88,  $p$  = <.0001,  $N$  = 492

The surveys indicate that the perception of the level of disorder in Vasaparken has changed for the better. Indeed, 1991 respondents indicated that they used the park more frequently than their 1990 counterparts. In addition they had a more favorable opinion of the police, even if officers were seen less often.

### **Interviews with Local Businesses**

In 1990, and again in 1992, owners whose businesses are situated near Vasaparken were interviewed to gauge the extent to

which commerce was affected by the drug activity at the park. Almost two-thirds of the respondents considered disorder in the park to be a "big" or "very big" problem in 1990, whereas considerably fewer shared that sentiment in 1992.

**Table 12: Problems in the Park Created by the Vasaparken Drug Offender Clientele: Percentage Distribution of Local Business Owners' Opinions, 1990 and 1992**

	<b>1990</b>	<b>1992</b>
Very big	43	8
Big	20	29
Fairly small /small	37	46
No problems	0	17
TOTAL	100 n=30	100 n=24

**Table 13: Problems for Business Created by the Vasaparken Drug Offender Clientele: Percentage Distribution of Local Business Owners' Opinions, 1990 and 1992**

	<b>1990</b>	<b>1992</b>
Very big	9	6
Big	25	13
Fairly small/small	34	32
No problems	31	48
TOTAL	99 <sup>a</sup> n=32	99 n=31

(a) Not 100% due to rounding errors.

About one-third of business owners felt that the drug activity at Vasaparken harmed their businesses. Specific problems identified were shoplifting, vandalism, panhandling, and harassment and intimidation of customers. However, nearly a third had not

experienced any problems associated with drug users. In 1992, fewer business owners overall indicated that they had experienced problems.

On the whole, in 1990 business owners indicated they were dissatisfied with police services. Several suggested more intense surveillance, others recommended moving the liquor store and still others suggested that the park be redesigned to discourage drug users from congregating. By 1992, however, a majority of business owners were satisfied with police services. They noted the improved situation at the park, and attributed this improvement to both police activities and the redesign of the park.

## DISCUSSION

### Results of the Changes at Vasaparken

The triangulated evaluation method, of the research design, with its combination of surveys, interviews, and observations, leaves little doubt that the situation at Vasaparken changed for the better. However, due to the nature of social science evaluations, one cannot be absolutely certain that the improvements at the park were a result of police actions, and it is appropriate to consider alternative explanations for this outcome.

One such explanation is that the park's redesign is solely responsible for the improvements at Vasaparken. Attributing the improvements to the redesign alone is questionable, particularly because police documented the disappearance of drug users a few months before most of the physical changes to the park were made. However, it is quite possible that the redesign prolonged the effect of the intervention. The park redesign occurred after the crackdown successfully eradicated drug activity in the park. Therefore, it might be hypothesized that the improved environment, which significantly increased natural surveillance and the number of capable guardians, discouraged offenders from returning.

It appears that the most probable explanation for the initial disappearance of the majority of drug offenders and trafficking, and the concomitant increase in public order at Vasaparken, is the police intervention. Indeed, interviews with offenders support this finding; some offenders felt that life at Vasaparken had be-

come "too messy for them" because of the threat of arrest by narcotics officers.

## CONCLUSION

### Displacement Effects

The above findings suggest that drug users had permanently vacated Vasaparken, but where did they go? One explanation for the drug users' disappearance could be that they found another, more desirable, location to occupy. Sherman (1990) suggests that displacement is a likely outcome of the kind of police tactics employed at Vasaparken. In order to trace possible displacement effects, record checks were conducted of the 54 drug offenders who were arrested in Vasaparken in 1990 and who had at least two drug arrests subsequent to that time. This group accounted for 40% of narcotic offenses in the park. The offenders were involved in other crimes as well, especially thefts. Their average age was 30.5, and only two of the 54 were females (Ekenwall and Siipo, 1994). Records were examined to determine the location of arrests for these individuals between 1989 and 1992.

As Figure 1 indicates, in 1989 — even with the high level of disorder in Vasaparken — relatively few arrests were made. As a result of the crackdown, the number of recorded offenses for the group increased in Vasaparken and in other areas of Stockholm as well. Arrests declined in the park in 1991, whereas they continued to increase in other parts of the city. The dip in arrests in 1992 is attributed to the European Soccer Championship, which distracted the narcotics unit from its normal tactics.

Figure 1 reflects an offender displacement from Vasaparken to the inner-city area, as well as to other parts of Stockholm. Some offenders were arrested in another park situated on the outskirts of the city, where they continued to peddle drugs. This park did not have as many attractive features for drug use and hanging out as Vasaparken, with the exception that the topography made police surveillance more difficult. The park was not as attractive for legitimate users either, and considerably fewer patrons visited. The drug users had fewer legitimate users to intimidate and also enjoyed the absence of capable guardians in the area. It appears that while displacement occurred, it falls under the heading of "benign displacement" (Barr and Pease, 1990); offenders were dis-

placed to several different areas around the city, and in the new park location they were displaced to an area where their activities affected fewer legitimate users. This displacement phenomenon is similar to that found by Kühlnhorn (1978); police employed the Temporary Custody Act to restore public order in a park occupied by a large group of drug users. An analysis of reported crime in adjacent areas revealed that while some displacement occurred, the overall problem had improved.

**Figure 1: Number and Place of Arrest for Narcotics Offenses in Stockholm, 1989 - 1992, for 54 Narcotic Offenders Arrested During the Crackdown in Vasaparken**



One must also consider that the elimination of drug activity at Vasaparken had a significant impact on the drug trade. Customers must know where and when they can purchase drugs, and the elimination of drug activity would inevitably have increased the effort involved on the part of buyers to find sources of drugs.



## **Policing Tactics**

Based on the perceptions of respondents, the source of much of the public disorder in Vasaparken was not drug sales or use but the disturbing behaviors of the drug users: littering; urinating publicly; and behaving in a loud, drunken manner. The correction of these behaviors falls under the purview of the uniformed police. However, the uniformed police patrolled the park in an unplanned, haphazard manner, driving around and often missing a deviant group entirely. This failure to address public order in the park is probably due to the traditional culture of the uniformed police, which is reactive in nature (Reiss, 1971; Knutsson and Partanen, 1986). Officers belong to a strict hierarchy, but contacts with command officers are indirect, usually coming through dispatchers, which leaves considerable room for patrols to define their own tasks. Officers race from one incident to another, and overall performance is measured by response time and the time taken to handle an incident. Under the traditional model of policing, patrol officers consider leaving the car for foot patrol a dangerous and undesirable activity, thwarting their ability to race to the scene of the next incident. The priority is to catch "real criminals"; offenders such as the drug users at Vasaparken are considered "small fish."

However, operating within a different culture, guided by planned and coordinated actions, the uniformed police could have eradicated the drug problem at Vasaparken without the help of the narcotics unit. Indeed, Vasaparken could have been used as a demonstration project for problem-oriented policing (Goldstein, 1990). A distinguishing feature of problem-oriented policing is that it is place- and crime-specific. Typically, the implementation of a measure follows the following four-step process (Eck and Spelman, 1987):

- (1) scanning and identifying the problem,
- (2) analyzing it and choosing the appropriate method of response,
- (3) responding to the problem, and
- (4) assessing the outcome of the intervention.

The difficulties in Vasaparken could easily have been solved in this manner, and the approach might have served as a case study of a successful implementation of problem-oriented policing. As a pedagogic example, it could be useful in encouraging officers to apply a proactive rather than a reactive approach to crime prob-

lems. This is exceedingly important as a first step in implementing problem-oriented policing as a routine approach.



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