

Showdown at the Playground

Vancouver Police Department, British Columbia
Grandview-Woodland Community Policing Centre

Scanning

Grandview Park, a one-square block of green space at the center of Grandview-Woodland, is a diverse community. The park, located on Commercial Drive, the neighborhood's main road, doubles as a backyard for a variety of people and a variety of purposes. The park is also adjacent to a large community center that houses an elementary and high school, day-care center, and various community services.

The neighborhood is next to Downtown Eastside (DTES), an area plagued by drug use and drug dealing. However, DTES is slowly gentrifying and its drug dealers are moving to other areas. When some drug dealers and their clients from DTES moved to Grandview Park in the summer of 1998, Grandview-Woodland Community Policing Centre (GWPC) recognized that the park faced an emergency.

Reports to GWPC regarding routine park problems were consistent from 1995 to the summer of 1998. However, reports to GWPC of hard drug sales and drug use in the park during the summer of 1998 prompted the Centre to declare a state of emergency in the park.

Analysis

To properly respond to the array of problems in the park, police analyzed the problem from the following perspectives:

- Social dynamics and the movement of problem populations within Vancouver.
- Park structure and its effect on criminal behavior.
- Police response to problems in the park.
- Coordination of services.
- Community meetings and community surveys.
- Maintenance of community standards.

DTES, which is comprised of about 20 square blocks, is the country's poorest section, as reported by Census Canada. It also has one of the highest needle-based drug user populations and HIV drug infection rates in North America. As DTES undergoes gentrification, available low-cost housing diminishes. The criminal element in DTES is moving to other low-rent areas in Vancouver. Grandview-Woodland, a working-class community with an artistic component, is highly diverse, and the available housing provides a range of options, which is attractive to DTES residents. Additionally, public transportation links the two neighborhoods.

In June 1998, police renewed efforts to control the criminal element in DTES. One effect was dispersal of crack dealers and their clients. Some of this criminal element moved to Grandview Park, causing frightened local residents to abandon the park. Through the media, GWPC in August and September 1998 placed the onus of reclaiming the park on the community.

Response

The many project partners set a number of goals, including:

- Ensure that members of the community could safely return to the park.
- Ensure long-term solutions for park problems.

- Involve the community in the problem-solving process.
- Redirect delivery of police services.
- Coordinate delivery services(s) among the providing agencies.

With the significant increase in reports on drug dealing, and especially the dealing of crack, Constable Jean Prince organized several plainclothes operations to identify the drug dealers. Community members willingly opened their homes to police officers as observation points, and Park Watch, a volunteer foot patrol, provided police with information on drug deals and dealers.

GWPCPC asked the Park Board for immediate action to control graffiti and litter. The Board responded within 1 week. Britannia Continuing Education created “Spruce the Drive,” hiring youth to pick up litter, remove graffiti, and paint murals. The workers spend 1 day every week in the park.

Information collected about drug dealers during the plainclothes operations and suggestions from Simon Fraser University criminology students helped horticulturists understand how the park should be changed. They eliminated obstructed sightlines, severely pruned covered areas, and replaced the low bushes where dealers hid drugs. In 1999, GWPCPC began a proactive summer program called Park Watch, a volunteer, nonconfrontational patrol of the park.

The Dog Pound also stepped up its enforcement of unleashed dogs used by drug dealers to intimidate residents. The Park Board and the Britannia Community Center contributed staff and organized cleanups and mural painting.

Assessment

At each phase of the project, local residents and community agencies responded to the requests of GWPCPC to help save the park. Before the response, drug dealers and their clients dominated the park. Few children used the playground and local residents walked around the park, not through it. After the response, the drug trade fell, parents began bringing their children to the playground, and area residents returned to the park.

By the end of September 1998, GWPCPC had drastically reduced the number of drug dealers. The highly visible response caused a marked decrease in 911 calls. During August 1998, police received 37 calls to 911 for service to the park. In September 1998, the number dropped to six. Similarly, calls to GWPCPC went from five in August 1998 to zero in September 1998.

One of the goals was to increase the effectiveness of police responses in the park. This goal was reached through the information collected during Park Watch. Further, 911 calls-for-service indicate solid successes as police increased arrests, warrant arrests, and drugs seized.

Proactive police work also increased significantly. The results can be measured in calls generated by patrol members. Dispatched calls are generated by a public complaint. The monthly average of dispatched calls during the summer of 1998 was 19, falling to 13 the next summer. In July 1998, police reported 15 dispatched calls and only 3 the next year. Comparison of these two summers discloses an inverse relationship between dispatched calls and calls generated by police and Park Watch. In July 1998, there was 1 police-generated call and 15 dispatched calls. In July 1999, there were 18 police- or Park Watch-generated calls and 3 dispatched calls. The results indicate that in 1999 GWPCPC successfully helped patrols to respond proactively to park problems.