

Crime Concerns on the proposed Regnart Creek Trail

Residents along the path of the proposed Regnart Creek Trail have expressed concerns about safety from crime if the trail is built. These fears and concerns need to be considered and addressed as part of the plan for a new trail. The best way to determine whether crime will increase after building the trail is to review all the evidence from other trails and see what the outcomes were. This should give a reasonable prediction on whether it would be likely for the Regnart Creek Trail to cause an increase in crime, or would be 'unsafe' to use. Below is a review of studies about crime on trails, as well as a discussion on Cupertino trails and crime statistics on the proposed trail.

Crime Studies

Studies of crime rates along trails and in adjacent homes have been the primary subject many studies of varying sizes. One large national study with data on the incidence of crime, and/or attitudes about crime along trails is summarized below, followed by reviews of six suburban-specific studies, and then a few other slightly less relevant or lower quality studies. These are the best data available; no study of crime along a suburban trail (that can be found in a reasonable search) has been omitted from this review. **The overwhelming evidence of all of these studies are that trails are safe, and do not pose a risk of increased crime, and in fact may decrease it.**

The studies frequently include polling data from local residents abutting the trails as well as data from local police. Study authors can be academic scholars, government agencies, local planning departments, and engaged citizens. Factors that influence the reliability of a study include: (1) who authored the study and what organization funded the study?; (2) how were the data sources selected and the survey conducted?; (3) where was the study published (peer-reviewed journal/government entity/blog)?

In addition to evaluating the quality of each study, its relevance to Cupertino needs to be considered. For example trails in rural areas that mainly attract tourists are unlikely to be representative of our experience, as are trails in the downtown areas of big cities.

To put crime in perspective, US Justice Department statistics show that from 2004-2008 the fraction of all violent crimes in the US (including rape, robbery and assault, but excluding murder) that occurred in an "apartment yard, park, field, or playground" was 2.4%, and the fraction of property crimes occurring in those locations was 0.9%. These percentages become much smaller when adjusted for the number of people using those public amenities (i.e. crime rates per 100,000 users). Far more crimes occur, on both an absolute basis and per capita, inside the home, on streets or at workplaces.

National Study

Rails to Trails Conservancy, in cooperation with the National Park Service, commissioned the largest of all the studies in January 1997. It surveyed 372 trails across the United States, which reflected a diverse set of trail types, lengths and geographic locations. Trail types included 36 urban, 81 suburban and 255 rural trails. The length of these trails ranged from one-fifth of a mile to 145 miles. This survey asked trail managers to report any crimes against persons or property committed on their trails during the years of 1995 and 1996. Afterwards, RTC collected letters from thirty local law enforcement agencies regarding impact of the rail-trail on crime, the presence of trail users as a crime deterrent and comparisons of crime on the trail to the crime in surrounding areas.

They found that “Past studies, our survey results, letters from law enforcement officials, and comparisons to national crime figures all indicate that trails are safe places for local residents and visitors to enjoy. The findings of this report should reassure those with apprehensions about trail projects...” Out of 372 trails included in the study, RTC found only 3% which had experienced any type of major crime. This is a tiny percentage of typical crime rates in these areas. The authors also discovered that in many cases the trail networks reduced minor crimes such as graffiti and vandalism. As Sheriff Pat Conlin from Green County, Wisconsin wrote, “[Our] trail does not encourage crime, and in fact, probably deters crime since there are many people...using the trail for many activities at various hours of the day.”

The study results that are most applicable to Cupertino are from similar size suburban communities. A total of 82 suburban trails participated in the survey.

- One mugging was reported over a two-year span. In contrast the national rate of muggings in suburban areas per DoJ statistics for that time was much more significant at 102 per 100,000 inhabitants.
- Five assaults occurred in the same time period. In contrast, the national rate of aggravated assaults was 293 per 100,000 inhabitants in all suburban areas of the US.
- None of the suburban rail-trails reported a rape. In contrast the national rate of rape in all suburban areas of the US was 29 per 100,000 persons.
- There were no reports of murder in the two years. In contrast, nationally, four murders per 100,000 inhabitants occur annually in suburban areas.
- Only one suburban trail reported a break-in to adjacent property over the two-year period. In contrast the national rate of burglary is 820 per 100,000 inhabitants in suburban areas.

“I am very pleased to report that crime incidents along the walkway are almost nonexistent. I attribute this to several factors. Primarily, the high volume of use by families along this walking path has created a community ownership of this path,” stated Ross L. Riggs, Chief of Police from Louisville, OH.

The report concludes, “As the data in this report show, **crime on trails is minimal**. This becomes all-the-more apparent when put in perspective with risks associated with other activities. The way to minimize crime on trails is to ensure that users exercise proper safety precautions, keep the trail well maintained, and boost trail use. Crime generally does not occur in places where there are lots of people and few hiding places. Positive-looking places tend to encourage positive behavior.”

The complete pdf of the report can be downloaded here:

<https://www.railstotrails.org/resource-library/resources/rail-trails-and-safe-communities-the-experience-on-372-trails/>. The report has been cited in hundreds of other studies in scholarly

journals, government publications, and newspaper publications. Letters from law enforcement professionals can be found starting on page 20 of the report.

Suburban Studies

There are six other studies that seem to be most relevant to Cupertino, as they were performed in suburban locations.

Burke-Gilman Trail Study, Seattle, WA

This was one of the first studies to ask property owners about their experiences living near the trail. The trail assessed was the Burke-Gilman Trail, a paved, 12-mile trail that runs mostly through residential neighborhoods. At the time of the study (1987), the trail had been open for eight years. The purpose of the study was to better understand the experiences of residents who live near this established and highly-used trail, with the goal of informing the debate over a trail that was proposed in another part of the city, and which was opposed by some adjacent property owners. The study was conducted by city staff. They interviewed residents who lived adjacent to and near the trail, real estate agents who sold homes near the trail, and police officers who patrolled near the trail. Police officers did not observe any increase in vandalism or burglaries at homes adjacent to the trail. There are, on average, two incidents per year that could be related to trail users. No residents stated that the experience of living near the trail was worse than they expected.

Lafayette/Moraga Trail, Suburban San Francisco

The National Park Service (NPS) and Pennsylvania State University conducted a comprehensive study of trail users and trail abutters along 8-mile LaFayette/Moraga Trail in suburban San Francisco. The study, entitled "The impacts of rail-trails: a study of users and nearby property owners from three trails" was published in 1992. The aspect of this study that pertains to crime was a questionnaire mailed to residents living within one quarter mile of a trail. It inquired about trail use, crime and other complaints. Overall the authors found that property owners had experienced relatively few problems. Most abutting property owners reported that rates of vandalism, burglary and trespassing had remained the same or decreased since the trail opened. The report concluded that, "Neighbors along all three trails reported that living near the trails had turned out to be better than they had expected it would be and better than living near the unused railroad right-of-way had been."

Mountain-Bay Trail, Howard, WI (suburb of Green Bay, WI)

In 1998 the Brown County Planning Board conducted a study of crime on trails near the proposed area of a new trail, the Mountain-Bay Trail, in Howard, Wisconsin, a suburb of Green Bay. A study was undertaken by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to review police records of lands located along the Ahanapee Trail in Kewaunee County and along the Gillett to Wabeno Trail in Oconto County. They found no record of crimes reported by landowners adjoining the Ahanapee Trail between 1980 and 1997, and only three reported cases of trespass violations on land located along the Gillett to Wabeno Trail during that same time period.

Once the new Mountain-Bay Trail was built, the local residents were polled by the Brown County Planning Commission staff and the Green Bay News-Chronicle three years later. Both polls found that residents adjacent to the trail have had no problems with criminal activity along the trail. An ongoing study undertaken by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources found crime along the Mountain-Bay Trail within the Village has been virtually non-existent.

Analysis of Bike Paths, Vancouver, BC, Canada

Vancouver Engineering Services Department conducted a comprehensive analysis of bicycle paths in the city, entitled "Bicycle Plan 1999: Reviewing the Past, Planning the Future." City-wide residential break and enter data for 1995, 1996 and 1997 was analyzed and no relationship could be found between the location of bicycle routes and the frequency of residential breaking-and-entering crime reports. In addition to city-wide data, two neighborhoods were analyzed before and after a bikeway was constructed. As with the city-wide data, no correlation was found between bikeway development and the frequency of breaking-and-entering crime reports.

Mallard Creek Greenway, Charlotte, NC

Researchers at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, working with crime data from Charlotte and Mecklenburg County police, surveyed crime patterns along the trail and compared it to overall crime in the neighborhoods surrounding the trail in 1997 (study period: 1994-1996) and again in 2004 (study period: 2001-2004). The purpose of the paper was to compare the incidence of crime along greenways with neighborhood incidence rates. The incidence of crime along the Mallard Creek Greenway and adjacent properties was nearly half that of the surrounding Charlie One Police District and only 12.7% of the countywide crime rate. These early data suggest that greenways do not attract crime. "Greenways are as safe as the urban landscape that surrounds them." These data suggest that greenway-adjacent properties do not incur greater risk of crime than other properties within the same neighborhood statistical area. On the contrary, greenway-adjacent properties had lower crime rates 75 percent of the time.

Study of five recreational trails, Denver, CO

A study of property values and public safety along five recreational trails in the metropolitan Denver, Colorado area was conducted by researchers at The Conservation Fund and the Colorado State Parks State Trails Program in response to "concerns expressed by several different neighborhoods over the proposed construction of new trails. These concerns included fears that the presence of an urban trail might lower property values and also create a risk to public safety, thus adversely affecting the quality of life in the neighborhood. These concerns are similar to concerns voiced in the past over proposed trails that are now established and accepted." The study found that, "No public safety issues could be directly linked to the trail," and "Concerns that urban trails might adversely affect public safety and property value in surrounding neighborhoods are not substantiated by the results of this study."

Other Studies

Bush Creek Trail, Santa Rosa, CA

A student at Sonoma State University conducted a study of the Brush Creek Trail in Santa Rosa, California by interviewing residents whose homes directly abutted the trail, with property lines as close as one foot to the edge of the trail. Seventy-nine of 85 residences participated in in-person interviews. The trail had been open for nine years at the time of the study in 1992. In addition telephone interviews were conducted with owners of two apartment buildings and one mobile home park located along the trail. The study concluded, with respect to crime: "This survey does not support claims that trails adjacent to residences cause an increase in crime. Most of the crimes that can be directly attributed to the Brush Creek Trail involved vandalism by adolescents. Considering the trail has been open for 9 years the number and types of crime polled in this survey are minor in nature."

Crime on the Minuteman Bikeway: Arlington and Lexington Police perspectives and the Weston Rail Trail Task Force (RTTF)

While there has been no formal study of crime on the Minuteman Bikeway, several news articles, trail reports and web sites maintained by trail advocacy groups have quoted Arlington and Lexington police officers regarding crime (or the lack of it) along the Bikeway over the past 15 years: “Each of us would tell you that the Bikeway is a valuable asset to the community and that the calls for service on the bikeway are insignificant when compared to the calls for service we receive generally.” The Weston Rail Trail Task Force (RTTF), a local anti-trail advocacy group, has also produced a committee report on crime for this bikeway stating there were 470 calls per year that could be attributed to the trail. This report is at odds with crime statistics reported by the local police. Unfortunately the Weston RTTF report appendices (showing the data cited by the RTTF for these crimes) are not available online, nor can the referenced survey be retrieved via internet searches.

Three Trails in Cary, NC

A 1995 survey-based study of three trails in Cary, North Carolina, submitted as a master’s thesis to the University of North Carolina, found that, “The results of the survey, which achieved a 75% response rate, supported the hypothesis that most residents feel satisfied with the greenways and that problems are minimal.”

Douglas Trail near Rochester, MN and the Heartland Trail in northern Minnesota

The study concluded that residents adjacent to existing rail-trails experienced much less crime than was anticipated by residents near proposed rail-trail projects.

Other studies across the U.S.

Other studies of trails were also conducted between 1979 and 1997: A National Park Service study of the 26-mile Heritage Trail in rural Iowa; a 16-mile St. Marks Trail through small communities in Florida; and the Mohawk-Hudson Bike-Hike trail study in New York. All studies found that, “while some residents were apprehensive about trail projects most did not experience problems after the trail’s opening. In fact, many became users of the trail and the majority recognized the trail’s economic and health benefits to the community.”

Local Information

Locally, we have several trails here in Cupertino, and more that are just outside of our city limits. Cupertino trails include Blackberry Farms Trail, Stevens Creek Trail, the Saratoga Creek Trail, the small connector paths at Scenic Circle and Orogrande, and the (not designated, but used) UPRR trail. We also have various paths that continue through parks directly adjacent to homes (such as at Creekside Park and Jollyman Park), that are used by many walkers and cyclists.

Comparison Trail in Cupertino

The most relevant trail for comparison would be the Saratoga Creek Trail, as it is located in Cupertino only a mile away, has a portion backing to homes, has a long straight portion without an ‘exit’, travels along a creek, and connects with a bridge to a park. This trail is under the jurisdiction of the West Valley Division of the Santa Clara County Sheriff Department. (The trail also continues south into Saratoga for another couple of miles, which is also under the same jurisdiction.)

Upon a request of the Cupertino City Staff, Captain Rich Urena, the West Valley Division Head, attended the third public meeting on the Regnart Creek Trail to answer questions from residents about potential crimes and service calls along the trail. Based on his review of similar trails in the area, he stated in his speech that **“it does appear that [The Regnart Trail] is a safe place to walk, a safe place to have a trail.”** For a full video of his remarks, see https://video.cupertino.org/video_player.html?size=1&playlist=2&playlistid=1084. He is also planning to attend the City Council meeting on August 21st to answer any questions.

Regarding crime statistics, he said that there have been five calls since 2010 on the Saratoga Creek Trail. Four of these were for noise and one for a homeless person wandering on the trail. There have been not any service calls to the trail area since 2016.

SCVWD access path (proposed Regnart Trail) crime statistics

As a review of criminal activity that is present at the currently proposed Regnart Creek Trail location—the Santa Clara Water District (SCVWD) property—here are the three-year statistics provided by the Sheriff Department for 2015-2017. Captain Urena has also explained that there are likely more incidents than this that have been tagged as occurring on a surrounding street instead of on the property:

- 2 involved towing of vehicles due to expired registrations (these can be safely assumed to not have happened on the trail)
- 1 involved possession of metal knuckles
- 1 involved a mentally disturbed person
- 1 involved finding property

Conclusions

Trails are not immune to crime. Incidents happen in almost every kind of environment, and bike and walking paths are no exception. Though very sad and unfortunate, crime incidents by themselves (whether to home or person) are not a reason to decide whether to build a trail. The important part is comparing whether crime will increase with a new trail, not whether it will occur at all.

Will putting in a trail make crime more likely to occur than the currently empty water district property? **The overwhelming evidence from studies on hundreds of trails is no. In every study, the installation of trails has not increased crime and in some cases has decreased it.** After the trails are built, adjacent residents of properties and police agree that new trails do not increase crime for them and become enjoyable amenities. Locally, our Cupertino trails have been safe, and **our SCC Sheriff has confirmed that the Regnart Trail would be a safe trail to use for our residents.** With all this evidence, it is clear that the conclusion should be that the Regnart Creek Trail will not have adverse crime issues.

(References/Links to studies available on request.)