

Rail-Trails and Public Safety

*A summary of a comprehensive
study showing rail-trails are
one of the safest places to be.*

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Rail-Trails have become very popular across the United States over the past few years. And, while widely popular once they are open, the development stages sometimes raise several questions about how adjacent landowners and the community will be impacted by the trail's development.

This brochure answers some of the more frequently asked questions about security of rail-trails. Most of the information in this brochure was compiled from a Rails-to-Trails (RTC) Conservancy report, published this January, conducted in 1997 in a joint study with the National Parks Service.

This comprehensive report drew its conclusions from an extensive study of a wide variety of trails covering nearly 7,000 miles. It includes the responses from 372 trails; 36 urban, 81 suburban and 255 rural rail-trails. The length of the trails ranged from one-fifth of a mile to 145 miles. There was also a diverse mix of geographic locations represented with 38 of the 49 states that have at least one rail-trail responding. The survey estimates average usage at about 121,000 users per trail per year.

RTC collected additional information on the impact of crime on rail-trails from law enforcement agencies and other citizens with trails in their jurisdictions.

Analyzing the information gathered from all these components resulted in a thorough study from which we can draw solid conclusions and logical analogies to our situation.

Q: Is there a lot of crime on Rail-Trails?

A: NO

Overall, the RTC study showed that **rail-trails are one of the safest places to be**. The RTC report compared crime statistics of four different location types and found parks, which

include rail-trails, to be the safest compared to parking lots, on the street, or even inside your own home.

In addition to the RTC report, four separate studies of rail-trails in Washington state, Minnesota, Iowa, Florida, California, and New York were conducted between 1979 and 1997. The results indicate that **rail-trails do not increase crime.**

National crime statistics for suburban trails show little to no crime on the trail system. Results from the 81 suburban trail surveys are as follows:

- The national rate of suburban muggings is 102 per 100,000 people; **NONE** of the suburban rail-trails reported muggings in 1995 and only one in 1996.
- The national rate of suburban aggravated assaults is 293 per 100,000 people; three assaults occurred on three suburban rail-trails in 1995 and two in 1996.
- The national rate of suburban rape is 29 per 100,000 people; **NONE** of the suburban rail-trails reported a rape in 1995 or 1996.
- Nationally, four murders per 100,000 people occur in suburban areas; there were **NO**

reports of murder on suburban rail-trails in 1995 or 1996.

Past studies, RTC survey results, letters from law enforcement officials, and comparisons to the national crime figures **all show that rail-trails are safe places for local residents and visitors to enjoy.**

We raise these issues because there have been many unsubstantiated claims of violence and crime on trails. This empirical research proves otherwise.

Unfortunately we do not live in a crime-free society. Crime even occurs at airports, shopping malls and zoos. However, no one would rationally argue that we shouldn't build them because crime might occur there. The same should be true for trails.

Q: Is there a lot of property damage to adjacent landowners from trail users?

A: NO

In the category of minor crimes, such as graffiti, littering, sign damage or motorized use, 75 percent of the trail managers responding to the survey reported **NO minor crimes occurring.** Of the small number of property crimes

committed, most had a minor effect on the trail itself and rarely harmed adjacent private property. In instances where property damage was reported, it was quickly corrected as part of routine trail management.

The comparisons of minor crime incidents off and on the rail-trail system is as follows:

- The national rate of suburban burglary is 820 incidents per 100,000 people; only one suburban trail reported a break-in to adjacent property in 1996.
- 3% of suburban trails reported trespassing.
- 17% of the suburban trails reported graffiti.
- 24% of the trails reported littering.
- 22% of the trails reported sign damage.
- 14% of the suburban trails reported unauthorized motorized vehicle use.

For example, one respondent stated that litter was non-existent on the trails in his area, but only became a problem in underdeveloped areas.

“My family took part in a community clean-up day. ... But by the end of the mile and a half, we had found ONE piece of litter almost too small to have noticed. ... once you leave the path and continue where the

railway line had been, the trash and graffiti are overwhelming.”

- Ross L. Riggs, Chief of Police
Louisville, OH

Q: Is the trail being planned with safety in mind?

A: YES

The Carmel Police Department has plans in place to dedicate officers to patrol the trail during peak usage times and will use supplemental patrols at other times.

In addition, the Carmel Clay Parks and Recreation Department plans to implement a Trail Ambassadors Program to assist in the management of the Monon Trail.

There are several ways to minimize the potential for crime along the trail. One way is to encourage its use. As with any other public or private space, the presence of other users tends to help suppress criminal behavior.

Design features and trail patrols also help mitigate undesirable behavior. A vegetative barrier is most desirable for homeowner privacy and safety. Vandals may find it easy to leap a fence or spray paint graffiti on it, but the same

is not true for a row of bushes. The trail was designed at a width to allow for both a long line of sight and a vegetative screen between homeowners and the trail.

Appropriate trail width also permits emergency vehicle access. The trail will include distance markers at frequent intervals to indicate to emergency or park personnel the specific location of an incident or area in need of maintenance.

Q: Will there be adequate parking?

A: YES

Some residents in nearby neighborhoods have expressed concern over parking. The Monon Trail design allows for adequate parking at both the 96th and 146th Street trailheads. Additional parking will be available at Main Street.

Plus, the abandoned Kroger store parking lot currently provides easy access to the trail and more than 560 parking spaces. After the City Center is developed, even more parking will be available. During the busiest trail usage times, the weekends and holidays, the Civic Square lots provide supplementary parking.

The City has already partnered with the Lions Club on Main Street, to provide public parking just a few short blocks from the trail.

We hope we've addressed your main concerns regarding safety, privacy and adequate parking. The Monon Committee has worked with the City of Carmel, the Parks Department and the Police Department to design a safe, enjoyable trail for our community.

If you would like the complete 27-page RTC report, contact them directly at 1100 17th Street NW, 10th Floor, Washington, D.C., 20036. They charge \$9.95 for the report.

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