

Policy Brief: The Public Safety Impact of Rec N' The Streets (RNTS)

Executive Summary

Rec N' The Streets (RNTS), a Seattle Parks & Recreation initiative, activates underutilized parks through structured recreational programming. Evidence shows that RNTS significantly reduces violent crime and stabilizes public safety conditions, making it a cost-effective complement to traditional policing.

- **Impact:** ~0.49 fewer violent crimes per park-season
- **Baseline:** ~0.63 crimes per park per season
- **Annual prevention:** ~85 violent crimes avoided
- **Estimated savings:** ~\$1.27 million per year
- **Additional effect:** Reduces crime volatility and prevents spikes

Bottom line: RNTS eliminates a large share of violent crime in treated parks while making safety improvements more consistent and predictable.

What RNTS Does

- Deploys mobile recreation (sports, fitness, arts, youth programming)
- Targets **low-equity and underutilized parks**
- Increases:
 - Community presence
 - Structured activity
 - Informal supervision (“eyes on the park”)

This aligns with **routine activity theory**: crime declines when guardianship increases and opportunities decrease

Key Findings

1. Crime Reduction (Primary Effect)

- RNTS leads to:
 - **~0.49 fewer violent crimes per park per season**
- Average baseline crime:
 - **~0.63 incidents per park per season**

Interpretation:

- The estimated reduction is **large relative to baseline levels**
- Implies an **approximately 75–80% reduction in violent crime during active RNTS periods**

In simple terms:

RNTS is associated with eliminating the majority of violent crime in participating parks during active seasons.

2. Annual Impact

- RNTS operates **~176 programs annually**

Estimated total reduction:

- **$176 \times 0.48 \approx 85$ violent crimes prevented per year**
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3. Fiscal Impact (Cost Avoidance)

- Estimated **cost per violent crime $\approx$ \$15,000**
 - Includes policing, courts, and processing costs
 - Supported by cost-of-crime literature (e.g., McCollister et al. 2010)

Total annual savings:

- **~\$1.27 million**
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4. Beyond Reduction: Improving Stability

RNTS does more than reduce crime levels—it **changes crime dynamics**.

- Signed-log results show:
 - **Statistically significant reduction in crime fluctuations ($\beta \approx -0.215$)**
 - **Fewer sudden spikes in violent crime**

- More **stable and predictable safety trends**

Interpretation:

- RNTS:
 - Dampens increases when crime is rising
 - Reinforces decreases when crime is falling

RNTS doesn't just reduce crime—it prevents volatility and makes safety outcomes more reliable.

Narrative: How RNTS Reduces Crime

RNTS works by **transforming the environment of parks**:

- Increased foot traffic → **less anonymity**
- Structured programming → **less idle time**
- Visible presence → **higher perceived risk of detection**

These mechanisms:

- Reduce opportunities for crime
- Increase informal guardianship
- Strengthen community cohesion

Result:

Parks shift from “low-use, vulnerable spaces” to “active, self-regulating environments”

Why This Matters

Public Safety

- Prevents ~85 violent crimes annually
- Reduces **both crime levels and volatility**
- Improves safety in surrounding neighborhoods (spillover effects)

System Efficiency

- Reduces demand on:
 - Police response
 - Courts and prosecution
- Helps allocate enforcement resources more efficiently

Cost-Effectiveness

- Generates ~\$1.27M in avoided costs annually
 - Functions as a **preventative public safety investment**
 - Likely lower cost per crime prevented than reactive enforcement
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Policy Implications

1. Expand Proven Programming

- Scale RNTS to additional parks
- Focus on areas with similar risk profiles

2. Target High-Impact Locations

- Prioritize:
 - Historically higher-crime parks
 - Low-activation spaces

3. Integrate into Public Safety Strategy

- Position RNTS as a **complement to policing**
 - Pair with:
 - Youth engagement initiatives
 - Community outreach
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Limitations

- Non-random program placement (possible selection bias)
- Potential undercounting of zero-crime park periods
- Small cluster sample size (~20 parks)

However:

- Results are **consistent across multiple models**

- Supported by strong quasi-experimental design
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Conclusion

RNTS demonstrates that **community-based programming is a high-impact public safety strategy**.

- Reduces violent crime substantially relative to baseline
- Stabilizes crime trends and prevents spikes
- Generates significant fiscal savings

Final takeaway:

RNTS doesn't just reduce crime—it removes a large share of it and makes safety outcomes more stable, all while saving public resources.