

Study Of The Nature And Extent Of The Problem Of Human Trafficking In Public Parks Of Kansas City, Missouri And The Efficacy Of Public Art In Public Parks To Mitigate Human Trafficking

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Abstract

Introduction

Public parks can become platforms for perpetrators of human trafficking because of the location, public use and design features of greenspace; it can also become centers for gathering and community engagement for residents. This study aims to examine features in the design of public greenspace that facilitate and mitigate exploitative behavior of traffickers and park usage by residents and visitors.

Method

By concentrating on three public parks of the urban core in Kansas City, MO as the field of study, this paper examines the natural features of site, demographics of the neighborhood, design of landscape and intervention of public art to establish relationships between locations of trafficking, park use, time of crime, seasonal variances and design elements that augment and prevent human trafficking.

Results

Increased trafficking in parks is associated with income level, social groups and landscape features. Greater trafficking levels relate to design features that provides cover for buying and selling of victims. But through the intervention of public art, trafficking levels are lowered considerably because of greater park usage by residents and visitors.; public spaces transform from dark spaces to lively places that facilitated public gatherings and physical activity.

Conclusion

Public parks are important for outdoor recreation and physical activity, however human trafficking has a detrimental effect on communities who cannot use the park because of criminal activity. Through intervention of public art, public parks transform into places of meeting, engagement, physical activity, and public ceremonies, which in turn reduces trafficking significantly.

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I. Introduction

Kansas City had a booming growth in the decade ending in 1890. Because of the railroad industry, the city grew from a size of 56,000 people in 1890 to well past 100,000 and stood finally at the turn of the century at 119,668. Kansas City found its place as one of the 28 largest cities in the United States, smaller than Omaha and St Paul but larger than Denver and Indianapolis.⁸

In 1882, one of America's first landscape architects George Kessler who had been born in Frankenhansen, Germany in 1862, came to Kansas City and set up his office. He had worked previously with the dean of landscape architecture Fredrich Law Olmstead in his New York office on the design of New York's Central Park. Olmstead had wanted Kessler to stay on, but Kessler's friends had arranged a job for him as Superintendent of Parks for Kansas City and Fort Scott, so he headed for the Midwest. However, his vision was far greater than a few parks. He wanted a new plan for Kansas City which included landscaped lawns, tree-lined streets in residential sections, public parks and drives, monumental plazas and axial boulevards. City planning was of great importance to Kessler.

Because of landscape architect George Kessler and the parks department of Kansas City, MO, the city today has 213 parks, 132 miles of boulevards and parkways, 49 fountains, 87 ornamental structures, 27 lakes, 38 miles of trails and bikeways, 105 tennis courts, five golf courses and four museums.¹

Demographics

The population of Kansas City, MO is 471, 767. Kansas City, MO is comprised of 149 neighborhoods. The predominant race of Kansas City is white which comprise 55.4%, their recorded number is 261,000. Black population is at the next highest percentage of 29.1%; their number is 137,000. The third highest population is

Hispanic (excluding black and Asian Hispanics) at 9.7% and makes up 45,800. Asians account for 2.6%, their number is at 12,100. Non-Hispanic mixed race is 2.6%, at 12,300. Finally, other race that are non-Hispanic makes 0.7% at 3,105.²

The white median age of Kansas City population is between 45 and 54 years of age at 7.6%; while the black population median age is also between 45 and 54 years of age at 4%. However, the largest age group of Kansas City population is between 35 and 44 years of age; their total number is 62,500.

The median income is \$47,500. The average income in the white community is \$60,400 while average income of black community is \$31,200. Average income of Hispanic community is \$37,100, Asian community is \$46,600 and mixed groups is \$44,900.

The population of Kansas City that has US born citizenship is 91.7% at 433,000. Most people of Kansas City are locals who have been in the city for generations. Only 14,800 are naturalized citizens and 19,700 are non-citizens.

Of the males of Kansas City, 42% of males are married and 42% are not married. 14% are divorced or separated, and 3% are widowed.

In schools of Kansas City, MO, the enrolment of boys over girls is higher until the end of middle school. Their numbers are 12,500 boys over 11,600 girls. However, when entering high school, these numbers change such that girls' enrollment is 10,900 while boys' enrollment is 10,300. It is observed that most of the dropouts are from public schools in the urban core where there are more African American and Hispanic communities. In children of Kansas City between the ages of 5 and 9, the numbers of those enrolled in school versus those not enrolled is 28,600 enrolled to 1,918 not enrolled. Between 10 and 14 years of age, 29,100 students are enrolled and 757 students are not enrolled. Between 15 and 17 years of age, the enrollment reduces to nearly half in size; the total number of enrolled student becomes 15,700, and finally between 18 and 19 years of age, that number drops significantly to 7,248.²

The median age of a victim getting caught in sex trafficking is 12-14 years of age.³ Most of the victims are from low-income neighborhoods where poverty is high, school dropout rates are high, drug trafficking is rampant and gun violence is frequent.

As for the sector for employment, Kansas City is the headquarters for many multinational companies like Hallmark, Burns and McDonnell, H & R Block and Cerner; so the majority of employed residents work in the private sector, comprising 67.8% of the population. 12.2% work for non-profit organizations and 3.4% work for the federal government. The median income of people in the private sector is \$41,200 and the highest pay in median income is with federal government at \$58,500. A segment of these blue collar and white-collar working-class men facilitate human trafficking by purchasing sex from traffickers, perpetrating the objectification of the vulnerable from low-income neighborhoods that are caught in the vicious cycles of poverty, addiction, and trafficking.

Human Trafficking

Human Trafficking is the second largest and fastest growing crime in the world today. DOJ, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and the Department of State (State) are the primary investigating agencies for federal human trafficking and other related offenses, with the Department of Defense (DoD) enforcing the U.S. military code to prosecute sex trafficking-related offenses.⁵

Since its inception, the National Human Trafficking hotline has reported 241 trafficking cases in Missouri in 2021. Nationally these cases are over 10,000 cases involving over 16,000 victims.

Missouri ranks **fourth** on the list of states with highest human trafficking rate in the United States.³ Although sex trafficking in Missouri was based mainly on pornography and motel-based venues, a significant number of cases were also reported from public parks of Kansas City MO which were seldom occupied by residents and visitors. Human trafficking victims included 213 female and 20 male victims in 2021. Impoverished, addicts, LGBTQ community and people of color made up almost the entirety of victims of trafficking.

Public Parks

Public parks in the urban core of Kansas City differ greatly in the following features- park maintenance, lighting, accessibility by public transportation, violence, demographic of neighborhood, noise pollution, flora and fauna, walking paths, natural resources and social interaction. There is great disparity between frequently used public parks of high-income communities consisting predominantly of white families where people are found to be more healthy and productive, versus low-income neighborhood parks consisting mostly Black, Hispanic and refugee families where people are affected by conditions of poverty, obesity, diseases like cardiovascular illness and diabetes, homelessness and disabilities. This arises from lack of leisure time, particularly of people living below the poverty line. Low socioeconomic and ethnic minority people have access to fewer acres of parks, fewer acres of parks per person, and to parks with lower quality, maintenance, and safety than more privileged people.⁴ Park safety issues are an environmental justice issue, especially as crime issues in and around parks are higher in

low-income communities of color. Because adults do not visit the park owing to safety concerns, they transfer their fears to their children, because of which children do not visit parks either, especially young and teenage girls. Because of the abandonment of these parks by adults and children, public spaces become hubs for trafficking by criminals who use darkness and absence of human activity to perpetrate the heinous crime of human trafficking by inducing drug addiction through methamphetamine to victims. Gun violence is also high in public parks as a result of human trafficking and drug addiction. Kansas City police data shows 182 killings in 2023, twelve more than in 2022 and three more than the all-time high of 179 in 2020. Meanwhile, across the state in St. Louis, Missouri's second-largest city saw 158 killings last year, 42 fewer than the 200 in 2022. The reason for high cases of human trafficking in Kansas City is because of the large network of highways crisscrossing thorough the city.



Map of Kansas City MO showing crisscrossing network of highways

Victims of human trafficking in Kansas City MO is of two categories- outdoor workers and indoor workers. These two categories differ greatly in the way they are treated by traffickers and johns. 37% of outdoor workers are robbed of their earnings while only 10% of indoor workers are robbed. 27% of outdoor workers are beaten as opposed to 1% of indoor workers. 47% are slapped, punched and/or kicked in comparison to 14% of indoor workers. 22% of outdoor workers are raped by traffickers and johns while less than 2% of indoor workers suffer body violation. 20% of outdoor workers are kidnapped compared to 2% indoor workers. The mortality of outdoor workers is far greater than indoor workers who are relatively safe from being attacked on the streets. The average life expectancy of a victim after they enter the world of is 7 to 10 years and death usually results from homicide, suicide, communicable diseases, overdose and addiction.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to qualitatively analyze the dimensions of human trafficking relating to park-based criminal activity, and the efficacy of public art as a viable means to mitigate trafficking of victims in public parks. This study examines issues of environmental justice by letting marginalized participants articulate constructs of safety in their own words and by using their insights as the basis for recommendations to improve park access and safety. Finally, studying park safety issues within an environmental justice framework allows us to expand our theoretical understanding of interactional justice.

II. Method

More than 2 million people live in the Kansas City metropolitan sprawl of 176 cities and 15 counties across eastern Kansas and western Missouri. In Missouri, the city's urban core covers approximately 318 square miles and in 2013 contained a population of 462,378 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a), with 31.1% of the population African American, as opposed to 12.5% overall in Missouri (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013b); in addition, only 55.1% of urban residents identify as "white not Hispanic/Latino," compared with 80.7% of Missouri's overall population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013b). In 2013, the rate of violent crime in urban Kansas City, Missouri, was 1,269.7 per 100,000 residents, versus 433.4 in Missouri overall (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2013). The Kansas City, Missouri parks and recreation department (PARD) operates 219 parks that range from 0.16 to 1,805 acres and include aquatic facilities, community centers, playing fields, fountains, and other amenities (Kansas City Department of Parks and Recreation, 2009).

For the purpose of this study, three community parks of the urban core of Kansas City have been identified for their physical features which facilitate the condition of human trafficking, and the effects of public art intervention. The parks are Lykins Square Park, Independence Plaza Park and Penn Valley Park

Lykins Square park

This 4.95 acre park was acquired by Kansas City Parks and Recreation in 1913. It is between east 7th and 8th streets on the north and south side of the park respectively, and Myrtle avenue and Jackson avenue on the east and west side of the rectangular park.

Lykins Square Park was part of the original parks and boulevards plans of the noted landscape architect George Kessler in 1893. This park is named after the first elected mayor of Kansas City Dr Johnston Lykins.

The neighborhood of Lykins Park is mixed, with equal proportions of Hispanic and Black communities, and a large influx of refugee population. There are 20 different languages spoken in Lykins neighborhood. It is bordered to the north by Independence Avenue which in 1982 was declared the second highest for criminal activity and gun violence in the United States. The park is flanked on the east and west by 2 notorious drug cartels, because of which, Lykins Square park became a hub for human trafficking.

Physical features of the park have attributed to propagation of human trafficking. The elevation drop of 15 feet from street level on the south side of the park makes it hidden from pedestrians and residential dwellers. This allows traffickers to violate victims at the base of the park where they cannot be seen by the public. A straight set of concrete stairs reach down from the street to the park and is covered in graffiti by victims asking for help.



Photo: Stairs from street to park, with graffiti by victims. Lykins Square Park. Photographer: Hasna Sal

Executive director of Lykins Neighborhood Association who is in charge of all the houses surrounding the park said, "There was a lot of crime in the park, which made people not want to live close to the park, which meant that a lot of houses were in disrepair around the park and got demolished. That just encouraged more crime in the park because there are practically no eyes on the park. One of our goals is to bring the park back to life, and in doing that, push crime away."⁶



Photo: Lykins Park on a weekend devoid of adults and children. Phtographer: Hasna SalPark is part of the original Parks and Boulevards Plan designed by famed George Kessler in 1893.

Lykins Square Park has trees, grass, walking trails, football court and children's playground but the neighborhood did not use the park for any activity. Houses surrounding the park were dilapidated with broken windows, collapsing roofs and wood rotten doors. Indoor spaces of these homes were covered in weeds and rodents. Walls had peeling paint and graffiti stains.

The park was abandoned by day, and after dusk, it became a hub for human trafficking. Young girls between 15 and 20 years of age were dropped off by traffickers in pickup trucks at the top of the concrete steps on the sidewalk of the park. The girls were clad in black leather outfits with stiletto heels and heavy makeup. They stood under the streetlights until they were picked up by 'tricks'. Older women who were trafficked wore regular clothes and closed shoes. They knew from experience that situations could quickly escalate to violence so they wore footwear that would help them escape with speed. Older women victims fetched the trafficker \$20 per trip whereas young girls brought more money, anywhere from \$50 to \$100 per trip.

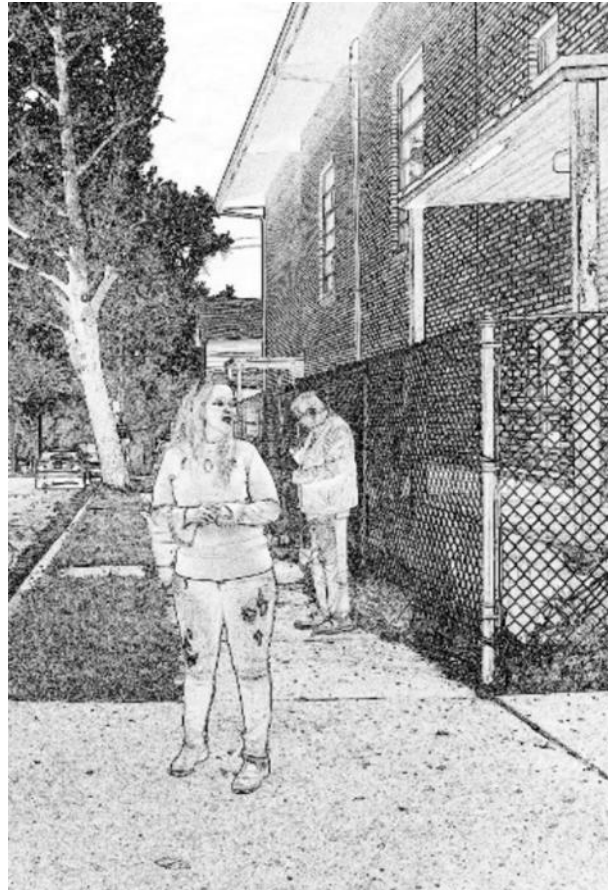


Photo: Older sex worker waiting for trick on opposite side of Lykins park. Photographer: Hasna Sal

Artist Cara Michell says, "This is a warning that when an unjust burden is placed upon anyone alone, the negative effects will spill over to everyone involved." ⁷ The victimization of the vulnerable in the community had a ripple effect on the whole community. Adults were afraid to send their children into the park. Street lights got vandalized, which in turn made the park dark and uninviting after dusk. The park became inhabited by homeless people and drug addicts. It became a hub for gang violence and gun shots. Many unaccounted human bodies were found in the park post-humous. Police force and residents abandoned the park.

Public Art Intervention

In 2020, Habitat for Humanity installed a memorial for victims of human trafficking in Lykins Square park. This installation was attached to existing street lights in the park at a height of 15 feet from ground level. The installation consists of 4 parts- 4 glass lighted panels, each panel is 2 feet in width and 4 feet in height. Each panel is connected to the existing light post with bolts. Sunlight passes through the glass panels, bringing a vivid display of color and figures into the park. At night the panels are illuminated with LED lights so that they glow with color against the darkness of the park.



Photo: Public Art Installation by Habitat for Humanity at Lykins Square Park. Photographer: Hasna Sal

Light and color from the installation transformed the park from darkness into lighted zones. Security cameras were placed near the installation to protect it from vandalism. This intervention resulted in large numbers of people visiting the park from nearby neighborhoods and surrounding cities. The influx of visitors into the park had an immediate effect on the pimps, tricks and trafficked women who vacated the park as a result. Children began to play in the playground. Single people brought pets to walk in the park. Adults played football on weekends in the park. Because of increased human activity, Kansas City Parks and Recreation sent mowers to mow the grass more frequently. Maintenance was provided with due diligence by the city. Trash and debris were significantly decreased because of human activity. Vandals broke a couple of the lights on the installation so one panel is not illuminated at night. But this did not decrease the high activity that prevailed in the park because of the installation. The property value of homes in the Lykins Park neighborhood saw a rise after twenty-five years, as more people wanted to purchase residences around the park after witnessing increased activity by residents in the park. The installation won the Neighborhood Stabilization award from the Mayor of Kansas City Quinton Lucas.

Survivors of human trafficking use Lykins Square Park to conduct rituals honoring the deceased victims of trafficking in their area. Survivors call each other ‘spirit sisters.’ On July 22nd, they celebrate Mary Magdalene’s feast at Lykins Square park by congregating together at the bottom of the concrete steps, playing loud music and sharing sweets and savories that were favorites of their spirit sisters. Then they hold a candlelight vigil and pray for the departed. The ceremony begins at sunset and is completed in 2 hours. Outsiders are not include in this ceremony; it is a private ritual of the marginalized community of Kansas City.

The installation has brought more police vigilance into the park. Site visits from local schools like Notre Dame de Sion High School make annual visits to the park to study the installation. Artists including musicians, dancers and painters use the park to practice their art and/or to promote their art through performances.

Independence Plaza Park

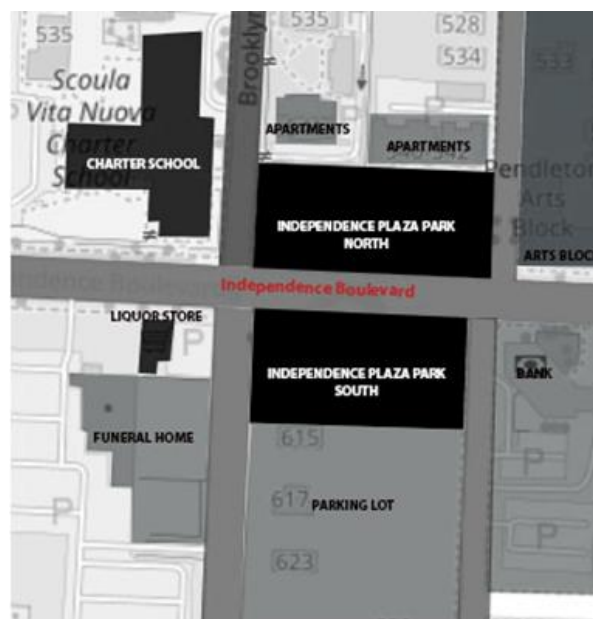
This rigorous drive for city planning and axial boulevards that Kessler learned from Europe, played out in the design of Independence Plaza Park. This park is unusual in its design in that it is split in the middle because of the axial plan of Independence Boulevard. Located at Independence Boulevard and Park Avenue, the park is divided into two parts – one part located on the north side of Independence Blvd. and the other part on the south. The total size is small, only 1.73 acres, but it was significant in the early development of Kansas City’s Park system.



Aerial photo taken from Google earth

Nature revealed itself in Kessler's parks. As part of the City Beautiful Movement, plans for Independence Boulevard were unveiled. Even Fredrich Law Olmstead passed in his Chicago World fair work to examine Kessler's plans for parks in Kansas City. Kessler wanted a departure from 'scenic parks' and instead designed for 'local parks' so that cities could dissolve boundaries between crowded neighborhoods and restful, quiet surroundings. He wanted distinct noises, sights and smells of urban life to be part of local parks. However, despite the planned parks and boulevards that brought better health and social relationships, he did not give much attention to Kansas City's zoning of spaces. The boulevards he designed attracted fine residences into the city because of higher property value owing to parks and boulevards. After all, he had seen from his work in New York how the establishment of Central Park in New York City had hiked property values up by more than 4 percent, while in Boston, Brooklyn and Buffalo, such dramatic hikes in property values had not occurred at the time.

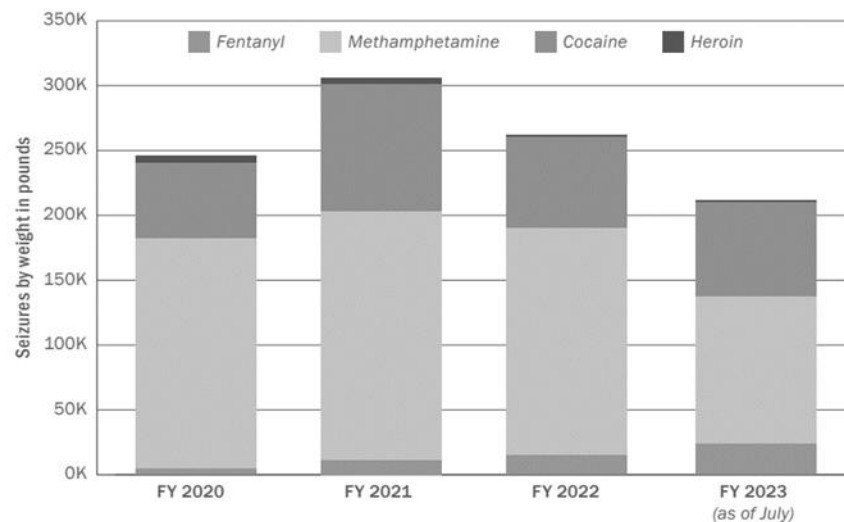
Kessler's lack of attention to zoning laws for the city became the cause of the neighborhood's decline because of conditions like high crime rates, prostitution, pollution, and addiction. The shade trees and shrubs that Kessler designed in the parks became cover for leisured indigents and nefarious activity in the city that resulted in gentry leaving the scenic neighborhood of the park, thereby facilitating even more crime and pollution. Independence Plaza Park became a hub not only for human trafficking but also for drug addiction. The park is located on Independence Avenue which has multiple retail shops, motels, and offices. There have been many police raids in the motels of Independence Avenue where victims are being trafficked. The smell of weed pervades the air in the park, and it is seldom used at night, except by addicts, traffickers, their victims, and johns. The pandemic escalated these conditions because of reduced police force and people on the street. The problem of Independence Plaza Park is evident from its zoning plan.



Site Map of Independence Plaza Park, Kansas City, MO

Independence Boulevard divides Independence Plaza Park into north and south parks. The north park has apartments buildings on its north side and a charter school called Scoula Vita Nuova Charter School on the west side. The east side has an art school where a non-profit organization called Charlotte Street Foundation conducts art classes. The south-east side is occupied by a bank, which closes at 5pm. The problematic condition is the liquor store on the south-west side, which is frequented by alcoholics and drug addicts, especially after dark. Broken beer bottles, glass shards, discarded needles and other trash were found littered in the grass of the playground; children of the school across from the park were prohibited from entering the park as a result. Without physical exercise, children are prone to mental illnesses like depression, obesity and higher cases of disturbance and violence. Even residents of Pendleton Heights apartments on the north side refrained from using the park for recreational activities and physical exercise. The park became abandoned by daylight and after dark, which further increased crime and pollution.

Figure 1: CBP Border Seizures of Fentanyl, Methamphetamine, Cocaine, and Heroin FY 2020-2023



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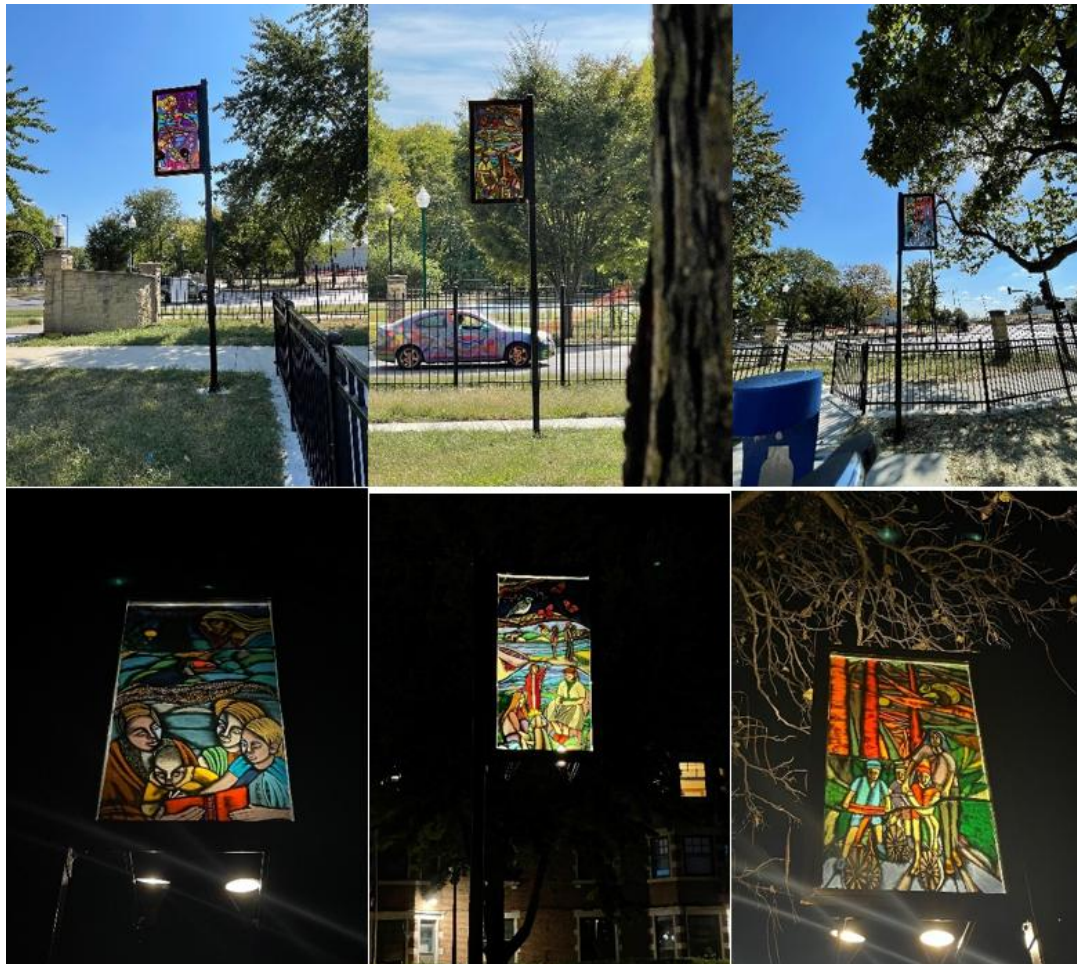
https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2023-09/23_0913_ia_23-333-ia_u_homeland-threat-assessment-2024_508C_V6_13Sep23.pdf

In 2022, Kansas City Parks and Recreation completed a \$1.2 million dollar investment in Independence Plaza Park. They removed the old playground equipment and put in new activity-centric equipment like swings, seesaw, futsal, and walking trails. They replaced grass with artificial turf where children's activities were focused. They replaced the non-functional fountain with a pickle ball court. Water stalls were placed at the corners of the park. The fence around the park was repaired. Additional lighting was added to make the park more visible at night. The topography of the park was redesigned to include some berms and slopes so children can enjoy the undulating design of the ground. Trash cans were placed at strategic locations, such as the entrance gate and near high activity areas. Workers were hired to clean the park once a week of debris.



Photo: Newly renovated Independence Plaza Park. Photo taken from Internet.

The last installation was three glass and steel sculptures at fifteen feet from the ground. Each glass panel shared the story of women- two survivors and one deceased victim- who were locals of the areas and who had suffered physical violence and mental abuse at the hands of their trafficker.



Installation of 3 glass panels in Independence Plaza Park with stories of survivors of trafficking

This installation is titled 'Live in Light' and visually narrates the stories of three local women; the first panel shares the story of a deceased victim of domestic violence who wanted to educate her two children in good schools so they could have a bright future. Education was the gift she wanted her children to have but before she could fulfil her dream, her partner who was an addict and a alcoholic stabbed her to death in front of her children. This panel is a homage to Maige and her dream of educating her children.

The second panel narrates the story of survivor Kristy Childs and her daughter; Kristy's daughter was murdered at a very early age and left behind her son who Kristy raised in addition to raising her own son as well. Kristy now helps many other victims of trafficking, so they don't face the fate of her daughter.

The third panel narrates the story of survivor Melissa Diehl who mustered courage from motherhood to fight her trafficker and escape to freedom. Her strength emerged from her determination that she did not want her daughter to endure the same heinous experiences that she had undergone. She is now a dedicated mother who raises her family and cares for her children with love and attention.

These stories of local women that celebrate the extraordinary in the ordinary raised interest in the neighborhood and generated more influx of visitors into the park. Families with children frequented the park; parents studied the panels while children were fascinated by the myriad colors of the installations. At night, the glass panels glowed with colors from the attached lighting and are clearly visible from the street and sidewalk. Because Independence Boulevard is a very busy street, the lights of the installations are protected from vandalism, unlike Lykins Park where the park is at a greater distance from the houses and pedestrians.

Independence Plaza Park is locked at night so straddlers from the liquor store cannot wander into the park and litter the place. Also, the panels are clearly visible to residents in the apartments of Pendleton Heights, and this has raised property value for the apartment complex for offering aesthetic vistas. The pristine conditions of the renovated park have generated new initiatives by residents to conduct fairs, physical activities and plein air art competitions in the park. This has increased community participation and collaborations amongst neighbors and visitors. From home-made Kombucha, cheese and cookies to jewelry, scarves and headbands, the Independence Plaza Park fairs have become famous in Kansas city because of the diverse communities that offer their talent and traditional artifacts for sale at reasonable prices.

The park also serves as an outdoor classroom for children of Scuola Vita Nuova Charter School, particularly on good weather days when teachers take the students outside to learn under shade trees and cool breeze. Children in kindergarten benefit greatly from the park because they run around and play in the activity zone which in turn raises their cognitive and motor skills. Most parents who send their children to this school are both working, so this is the only time the children get to be outdoors. Medical professionals recommend that conditions of mental illness, obesity, juvenile diabetes, and other medical problems can be mitigated by recreational activities outdoors and more time in the sun for children and young adults.

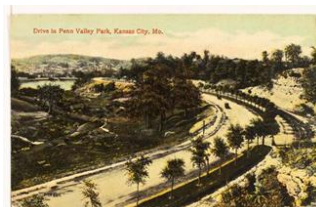
In her book 'Death and Life of Great American Cities,' author Jane Jacobs analyses the functionality of parks in the chapter dedicated to the uses of neighborhood parks. Illustrating the example of Penn's planning of the city of Philadelphia, she shows how the four parks that surround the center square of City Hall vary in their success and failure as open space or 'lungs of the city;' Jacobs points out how 'wildly different their fates are.' (Jacobs 1961, p. 120) Comparing the four parks Washington Square, Rittenhouse Square, Franklin Square and Penn's square, she describes the conditions around the parks which determine their outcome as an functional or blighted part of the city.

Jacobs notes the condition of Franklin Square as being the place where homeless, unemployed, and people of indigent leisure gather since it is surrounded by cheap hotels, flophouses, secondhand clothing stores, pawn shops and tattoo parlors. The park and its users are seedy, but it is not a crime park. Washington Square is mostly deserted since it is surrounded by office buildings and is therefore used only at particular times. It had been a pervert park in the fifties and had been renovated like Independence Plaza Park but because of the nature of the adjacent buildings, it remains deserted and vacant. Penn's Square is more of a small traffic island; adorned with a fountain in the middle, it is cumbersome to access by foot. It is more for motorists and only in very good weather, it sees a trickling of visitors. The most successful of the parks is Rittenhouse Square; the success of this park is because it possesses a diverse rim and diverse neighborhood hinterland. Immediately on its edges, it has in sequence, an art school with restaurants and galleries, a music school, and army office building, an apartment house, a club, an old apothecary shop, a navy office building, a church, a parochial school, apartments, a library, townhouses, and a vacant lot where a townhouse is being planned. Streets have shops and services of all sorts with newer apartments above. This physical arrangement of the neighborhoods affects the park physically in that the mixture of users of buildings directly produces for the park a mixture of users who enter and leave the park at different times. The park thus possesses an intricate sequence of uses and users.⁹

Independence Plaza Park also possesses this mixed-use quality in that it is surrounded by a bank, a school, an arts block and art school, apartments, a funeral home, and shops. Because the park is locked by night, it deters illicit users from occupying the park after dark. The park is still frequented by homeless people, but residents do not mind them. The park is used at different times of the day for the recreational activities and amenities it provides for everyone.

Penn Valley Park

Located in the heart of Kansas City, Penn Valley Park was built in an historic area once called Penn Street Ravine. The ravine was originally a heavily forested route for pioneers heading west on the Santa Fe Trail. By the 1890s, many of the trees had been cut down to construct houses and buildings.



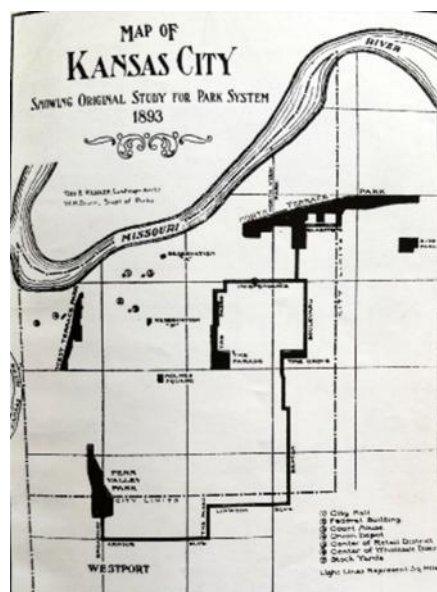
Picture taken from internet: <https://kchistory.org/image/penn-valley-park-drive>



Aerial map of Penn Valley Park , Kansas City, MO. Image captured from Google Earth.

The sweeping circle of the main drive of Penn Valley Park, lined with newly planted trees and a dirt service road alongside, is pictured on an old postcard published in color, shortly after the area was acquired for park use in 1900 AD. A man-made lake is seen in the left background. To prepare for the park, 300 homes, most of them dilapidated, were razed or moved. There were dirt roads and sidewalks built on stilts. Goats roamed the gullies between the limestone bluffs. The disreputable area was called Penn Street Ravine, or Vinegar Hill. George Kessler's creative landscape plans were carried out between 1900 and 1903. In comparison to Lykins Square park and Independence Plaza Park, Penn Valley Park is much larger in scale. Consisting of 130 acres (Wilson 1964, p. 122), this park was described by landscape architect George Kessler in 1880's when he was designing the layout of Kansas City as, "This region must have possessed rare beauty before it was touched by the hand of man." (Wilson 1964, p.50) Parks and Boulevards were widely accepted in the layout of the city by the Parks Board.

In 1896, it was because of the property owners living around the Penn Street Ravine, the rugged and blighted area between downtown Kansas City and the town of Westport who created a voluntary 'improvement association' that Penn Valley Park was proposed to George Kessler. The improvement association worked closely with the Parks Board and committees. They looked on when the park committee assured the upper house that Penn Valley Park would not interfere with streetcar lines. Both upper and lower houses signed the ordinances, and within fifteen minutes of the upper house signing, mayor of Kansas City at the time James Jones signed the ordinance for the park as well. There was much celebration for the new park in the city, particularly since it came on the heels of the donation of 1336 acres of parkland by Thomas Swope for Swope Park on the other side of Kansas City. In the midst of all the excitement, boulevard building went forward under Kessler's plan. Penn Valley Park did not have a boulevard near it.



Book: 'The City Beautiful Movement in Kansas City.' p. 55

When railroad construction began in 1906 for creating Union Station and railroads in Kansas City to the north of Penn Valley park, railroad workers sought out framed houses of the large and beautiful Penn Valley Park on the south side to reside. Then the majestic Union Station- Kansas City's door way to the world- was connected on its south side via a narrow park to the large expanse of Penn Valley Park. Kansas City did not have a cultural center until then. At this time, Kessler presented a civic plan with public buildings on the east side of Penn Valley Park along where Broadway Street ran in the north-south direction and had retail stores on its east side. Broadway street effectively cut off Penn Valley Park from the shops and pedestrians of Kansas City's Main street. Kessler's plan provided an entrance to the park in the shape of an ornamental traffic separation at the junction of Grand Avenue and Main Street.(Wilson 1964, p. 112)

Penn Valley Park had been one of the 'gems' of Kansas City's Parks system. Its beauty was considered 'marred by cheap houses stores' (Wilson 1964, p. 122). When they were auctioned off, the desolate land became pocked by excavations and defiled by rubbish heaps. Because the terrain sloped south to north, runoff water tore away topsoil for planting needed for newly planted trees and shrubs. To protect the habitat, Kessler created a dam thirty feet high across the northwest section, partially filling the basin and allowing the water to spread over the rest, thereby creating an artificial lake on the north side.



Penn Valley Park Artificial Lake. Picture taken from internet.

This created a rim for the park, further isolating it from the social activity and traffic flow of Union Station on the north beyond the lake. He created a series of 'lookout' points on the south side of the park with was at a higher elevation which afforded a succession of shifting views of the city's business and industrial districts. By 1904, all traces of small houses and shops were gone from the park and Penn Valley presented a finished appearance as a park separated from the city by crisscrossing streets that separated functional zones of the city from the natural landscape of the park. Kessler contended that parks were about playgrounds, the relative lack of slums, stable residential sections segregated from business developments, and the unity of a city tied together with boulevards that reached into every section. (Wilson 1964, 126) Kessler also claimed that boulevard development benefitted property owners through an increase in the value of their lands. In 1914, he reinforced this claim with a remarkable collection of documents that were letters from Kansas City businessmen that unanimously attested to the notion that handsome boulevards raised the value of abutting and nearby property. His aim at the time had been to influence legislators in St Louis to pass parkway legislation by using Kansas City testimonies as incentive to achieve his vision. The successful (and racist) real estate man JC Nicholls wrote, "The most attractive headline that you can run for an advertisement is 'on the boulevard' or 'near a boulevard.'" (Wilson 1964, p. 165) The board of public welfare in 1912 housing report stated that 'cleared places for recreation, light and air have been pushed through parts of the city where formerly there were bad housing conditions.' (Wilson 1964, p. 127) The American Institute of Architects in 1917 praised the plan of Kansas City for being the most complete and well-organized system existing in America at the time. Kansas City enjoyed almost one acre of park space for nearly every hundred persons in the community, a showing equaled by hardly any city in the country except Washington DC. However, Kansas City had been planned by the parks department, not by a planning commission; and therefore, faced issues with transportation channels. Penn Valley Park had the midtown street of Broadway running parallel to it, bearing large and noisy trucks and a crush of passenger cars that isolated the park on the east side from pedestrians and motorists. Broadway street as a result was widened nearly to the point of eliminating the tree filled median which in earlier years had separated the trucks from the cars. This has resulted in separating Penn Valley Park into two parts, with an underpass on the south side interchanges on the north, and a trafficway to the west. These rims created by vehicular traffic roads have made the smaller section of the park an isolated remnant containing Dallin's 'Scout' and Kessler's artificial lake.

'The Scout' is a famous statue by sculptor Cyrus Dallin in the south side of Penn Valley Park. It is more than 10 feet tall, and depicts Sioux Indian on horseback surveying the landscape. The Sioux sculpture was conceived by Dallin in 1910, and exhibited at the International Exhibition in San Francisco, where it won a gold medal. On its way back east, the statue was installed on a temporary basis at Penn Valley Park. The statue proved so popular that US\$15,000 (equivalent to about \$452,000 in 2023) in nickels and dimes was raised to purchase it through a campaign called "The Kids of Kansas City". The statue was dedicated in 1922 as a permanent memorial to local Indian tribes. It is located east of Southwest Trafficway in Penn Valley Park. However, because the park is isolated from all sides by trafficways and streets, the Scout is rarely visited by residents and visitors of the city. To the south side of the statue, an eighteen story luxury apartment complex by architects Skidmore, Owings and Merrill has been built that further segregates the statue and the park from the community. Titled One Park Place, this building towers over the city and creates deep shadows in the park, preventing southern light into the park.



'The Scout' sculpture in south side of Penn valley Park. Picture taken from internet.

Because of not having the planning commission included in the parks department's design for the city, other boulevard pavements created by Kessler also had to be widened into trafficways to accommodate heavy trucks, thereby erasing Kessler's once deep, tree lined parking. The last resort of the pleasure driver is now on the remote lanes in the big parks, where speedways have not broken down ancient hills.

On the west side of Penn Valley Park, there is a dog park along West 31st street. It is the most frequented part of the city. The dog park is designed along the rim of Penn Valley Park, so it is easily accessible to pedestrians and motorists. People do not have to venture into the dark alleys of the park to enjoy the facilities of the dog park. This is the most frequented part of the park. However, because of the surrounding office and institutional buildings, the dog park becomes vacant after dark when traffic becomes considerably less.



Dog Park in Penn Valley Park. Picture taken from internet

A park district Operations Building designed by noted Kansas City architects Root and Siemens was built in the southeast part of the park in 1910. The stone walls and building were quite attractive and did not look like a maintenance compound, but most of the structure was destroyed by an accidental fire in 1991. Today the Just Off Broadway Theatre is located near what is left of the maintenance building's walls. Between the theatre and the street in the south, there is a parking lot. However, there is 18 feet drop in elevation in this area of Penn Valley Park from the street level of west 31st Street. Motorists on the road cannot see the park and vice versa. As a result, the parking lot has become a hub for human traffickers, homeless people, and drug addicts. It has become a safety hazard for visitors to the theatre as well, which has decreased patronage as a result. On the other side of West 31st Street is a community college called Metropolitan Community College. The nefarious activities in the park after dark filter into quiet spaces on the college campus as well. On the north side of the park, crisscrossing network of highways further contributes to the isolation of the park.

There are walking trails within the park, but they are seldom used because of criminal activity in the park, even though the park offers exotic foliage and lush greenspace within the high density of city life.

On the west side of the park can be found the most remarkable feature of the park, the Bowl. The Bowl is 6 foot-deep, that waterfalls to a 9 foot-deeper end. The bowl is constructed with real concrete pool coping and tile on one side. It has been the cause of many fatalities for skateboarders, many of whom are amateurs and end up damaging themselves by attempting dangerous stunts. It is active by day but at night, this place also turns into a hub for traffickers and their victims.



Penn Valley Skate Park. Picture taken from internet.

In essence, Penn Valley Park is not visited as frequently as Lykins or Independence Plaza Park because of its enormous scale, dense foliage that obscures views and adjacency to institutional and commercial buildings. The lack of residential housing or commercial outlets results in meagre visits by visitors to the park. Despite having the public art of 'the Scout' in the park, it does not garner as much of an audience as the other two parks, perhaps because it is not easily visible or accessible. The path to the public sculpture meanders through the foliage so deeply that only visitors who have previous knowledge of the site can access it more readily. Also, the sculpture is poorly lit at night so people rarely see it after dark.

Parks were euphemized as 'lungs' of the city. Jane Jacobs debunked the idea by stating that 'it takes about three acres of woods to absorb as much carbon dioxide as four people exude in breathing.' (Jacobs 1961, p. 118) To understand the workings of a park, it is crucial to study its rim and immediate hinterland. (Jacobs 1961, p. 126) All neighborhood parks are creatures of their surroundings. While Independence Plaza Park and Lykins Square Park have 'eyes on the park' and have a constant ebb and flow because of functional physical diversity amongst users and uses, Penn Valley Park on the contrary has a rim of towering office buildings and exclusive luxury apartment buildings, the users of which hardly visit the park despite its adjacency.

III. Conclusion

Certain parks in Kansas City, according to survivors of trafficking are places of meeting between victim and trafficker, owing to their location, foliage, size, elevation, demographics, and other conditions. Many times, the victim is brought to these parks from foster homes where older kids lure younger children into these parks under false pretexts. Once the victim meets the trafficker, the second meeting is arranged in a motel where the victim faces rape, molestation, violence, and captivity. Traffickers study parks carefully beforehand so they can identify areas of poor visibility, low gradients, isolated paths and spaces near dumpsters which are rarely frequented by visitors. Spaces behind tennis courts, public restrooms and parks offices also become hotspots for isolating victims and trapping them.

In societies worldwide, human trafficking is the second largest and fastest growing criminal business in the world, and the vulnerable and marginalized are victims of this ubiquitous crime. Public parks, especially local neighborhood parks are being transformed by perpetrators of this heinous crime into meeting places and exploitative zones where victims are being forced into sexual slavery, drug addiction and untimely death. Only one percent of victims survive sex trafficking. In Kansas City, parks in civil neighborhoods like Antioch Park and The Arboretum have also been identified as sex trafficking hotspots by advocates like Maureen Reintjes and Lucy Bloom from agencies like 'NamUs' and Missouri Missing¹⁰.

Missouri ranks seventh in the nation for human trafficking. It ranks third in the nation for domestic violence. Springfield, MO is considered the methamphetamine capital of the nation. Kansas City is considered the navel of the country; it has many highways passing through the city. These conditions make the city a hotspot for trafficking. Many trafficked women in Kansas City who work as sex workers in the parks of Kansas City are runaways from places like Oklahoma, Illinois, Minneapolis, and Nebraska. Kansas City is called the city of fountains. Public parks in Kansas City, like JC Nichols Park contain fountains and pools of water for the public to enjoy in summer. However, these fountains serve a dark purpose for victims in parks who use the water to bathe when the community sleeps by night. Oral histories by survivors like Kristy Childs and Christine MacDonald¹¹ of Kansas City share how traffickers kept them surviving on methamphetamine and water from the fountains. When it rained, victims took shelter in abandoned buildings near the parks. They scavenged for food in the city's dumpsters.¹²



Fountain at Independence Plaza Park, Kansas City, MO. Photographer: Hasna Salam

In the design of public parks, special attention should be given to the smallest details like fence design, use of masonry, layout of lighting, topography, vistas, walking trails, types of trees and shrubs, bike paths, traffic flow, sun angles and wind patterns so that recreational spaces do not become platforms for perpetrators of human trafficking.



Masonry wall at Independence Plaza Park behind which victims were exploited. Photographer: Hasna Salam

Public art can be an effective tool to mitigate trafficking because it attracts residents and visitors into the park. One of the most effective ways to eliminate trafficking from public parks is to bring civilians into the park which in turn will drive perpetrators out of the park. But in order to bring civilians into the park, ‘public art’ in the park should connect with them. Citizens today are invested in current problems such as human trafficking, homelessness, child slaves, exploitation, organ trafficking, domestic violence etc. By incorporating these social narratives into public art in neighborhood parks, communities will raise the bar in awareness, vigilance and collective action for the mitigation of exploitation and marginalization. By ignoring such social conditions, communities normalize it. When public art becomes the medium of bipartisan support, conditions improve; one park at a time, one community at a time.

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