"I NEVER HIKE ALONE": SECURITY ON THE APPALACHIAN TRAIL

Killings Defile Sanctuary Of Nation's Remote Trails
But the Appalachian Trail Is Called Safe

BY RICK BRAGG

AMICALOLA FALLS, Ga., June 7 - The slayings of two young women beside a rushing stream near the Appalachian Trail made national headlines not so much because of who the victims were or how the killings were committed, but because of where the crime happened.

The reason the killings had such impact, backpackers and National Park Service officials say, is because they remind people who are already weary and frightened of crime in their cities and neighborhoods that there is no such thing as a perfect sanctuary, no matter how deep into the woods they go.

The bodies of the two young women...
Recent high-profile crimes in national parks and related areas have contributed to a heightened awareness of and concern for security in parks and outdoor recreation. In 1996 a double homicide occurred along the Appalachian Trail (AT); two women were killed near their campsite in Shenandoah National Park. A series of homicides occurred in and around Yosemite National Park in 1999, and a National Park Service ranger was killed in Horohokau National Historical Park that same year. These are only a few examples of violent crime in outdoor recreation settings. While these incidents may be [and hopefully are] isolated occurrences, they raise the question of how secure visitors are — and feel — in parks and outdoor recreation areas.

The issue of crime in parks and outdoor recreation is especially problematic. Parks are conventionally considered places where we can withdraw from society and escape the troubles of modern life. However, incidents like the murders on the AT and in Yosemite are stark reminders of the realities that sometimes plague our contemporary world. Parks and outdoor recreation areas are not divorced from the security issues that trouble the rest of society. What are the affects of crime and security issues on park visitors? How safe do visitors feel in parks and outdoor recreation settings? How do security issues affect visitor behavior and enjoyment?

We explored these questions and issues in a wide-ranging study of visitors to the AT. Study questions addressed perceived security on and adjacent to the trail, number and type of security incidents encountered, and
TABLE 1: VISITOR PERCEIVED SECURITY ALONG THE AT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Day user</th>
<th>Overnight</th>
<th>Section hiker</th>
<th>Thru hiker</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Percentages)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While you were on the AT</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Secure</td>
<td>67.3</td>
<td>64.2</td>
<td>59.8</td>
<td>74.5</td>
<td>66.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasonably Secure</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>33.6</td>
<td>38.6</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>31.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Insecure</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Insecure</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>While leaving the AT (e.g., to go to surrounding towns)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Percentages)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Secure</td>
<td>64.8</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>34.0</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>50.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasonably Secure</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>67.3</td>
<td>46.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Insecure</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Insecure</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yosemite Area Killings Remind Women That Crime Isn't Confined to Big Cities

Yosemite-AREA Killings Remind Women That Crime Isn't Confined to Big Cities. The killers, on the nightmare-inspiring streets of the Burglars, tell of a man who robbed and killed a woman in a secluded area in the woods. For those of us who love the outdoors and think of it as a haven, the murders are not only terrifying but sobering, leading us to wonder whether we can ever be safe again in natural wonders like Yosemite National Park. The sad thing is that people don't take these things seriously in big cities. But the reality is that crime is everywhere.
preventative behaviors. The study was conducted in the summer and fall of 1999. Nearly 3000 visitors were contacted along the trail, and asked to complete a mail-back questionnaire. Using a series of follow-up mailings, nearly 2000 completed questionnaires were returned representing a response rate of 66 percent. The questions addressing security defined the issue as “feeling free from being threatened or attacked by other people on the trail.”

Visitors were first asked how secure they felt while 1) on the AT, and 2) leaving the AT (e.g., to go into surrounding towns). A four-point response scale was used ranging from “Very Secure” to “Very Insecure”. Findings are shown in Table 1. Data are presented by the four types of hikers on the trail: 1) day users [respondents who reported being “on the trail for one day only”], 2) overnight visitors [respondents who reported being “out for more than one day”], 3) section hikers [respondents who reported “hiking sections of the AT with the intent of hiking the entire trail over an extended period of time”], and 4) thru-hikers [respondents who reported “hiking the entire AT in a calendar year”].

**Most Feel Secure**

It is clear that most hikers feel secure while on the trail: a strong majority of all four types of hikers reported feeling “very secure”. However, there are some incipient doubts. Nearly a third of all hikers reported feeling only “reasonably secure”. These doubts are magnified substantially in areas adjacent to the trail. Only half of all respondents felt “very secure” when leaving the trail, and these doubts are felt most strongly by section and thru-hik-
TABLE 5: OPEN-ENDED COMMENTS ON SECURITY ALONG THE AT.

- "I was followed into town."
- "I heard gunshots."
- "I ran away and didn't tell the police, but told other hikers."
- "They made rude comments that upset some members of my group."
- "They partied behind the shelter all evening."
- "Our friend's car was broken into and plenty of gear was stolen."
- "A very restless night for me."
- "They left a horrid mess."
- "I witnessed two bear poachers walking up the AT at midnight carrying rifles."
- "My wallet was stolen."
- "Two tires were slashed while I was out hunting."
- "A very strange individual who seemed drunk was hanging around the trailhead."
- "I never camped alone, it just felt more comfortable in a group."
- "I would never hike alone."
- "It's dangerous to be a young woman alone."
- "As a woman hiking alone, I felt safer in shelters, with other thru-hikers."
- "I'm an ex-officer and always carry a gun."
- "I would be concerned about letting my children go hiking alone."
- "I'm aware that people have been murdered on the trail."
- "I don't enjoy sleeping alone on the trail."
- "Being a female, I never feel secure enough on the AT to camp alone."
- "I never hike alone."
- "People are not to be trusted when camping alone."
- "We are always careful when talking to people we meet."
- "On occasion, when we saw a sketchy character, we hung out with others for the evening."
- "When camping near roads or other places with easy access, I would camp with other thru-hikers. We would look after each other."
- "I stay at shelters because I enjoy the security when I'm around others."
- "You just never know."
- "I've felt threatened by unleashed dogs."
- "The double murder still creeps me out."
- "It is always safer to camp with other hikers."

Visitors were also asked if they had encountered a security problem in the past 12 months either 1) along the trail, or 2) at a trailhead or parking lot within a few miles of the trail. Findings are shown in Tables 2 and 3. To some degree these data are reassuring: only a very small percentage of hikers [less than 5 percent of all hikers] reported encountering a security problem either on or off the trail. Security problems are reported substantially more often by section hikers and especially thru-hikers, probably because they spend the most time on the trail.

However these data are also troubling. While there are no official counts of the number of visits to the AT (such counts would be inherently difficult to conduct), the National Park Service estimates that the trail accommodates at least 3 million visits per year. Even if only a very small percentage of visitors report a security incident (as was found in this study), this represents a potentially large number of such incidents per year.

**Problems Go Unreported**

Visitors were also asked if they had reported security problems they had experienced to law enforcement authorities. Nearly three-quarters of respondents (72.5%) did not report incidents that occurred on the trail, while nearly half of respondents (47.8%) did not report incidents that occurred at trailheads or parking lots. These data suggest that crime and related security problems along the AT, and perhaps in parks and outdoor recreation in general, may be substantially underreported.

Finally, visitors were asked if they ever intentionally hike or camp near other people while traveling on the AT for reasons of safety or personal security. Findings are shown in Table 4. Substantial percentages of all types of hikers, users who spend the most time on the AT.
ers reported adopting this type of behavior, although it was considerably more prevalent among section and especially thru-hikers. Once again, these findings are troubling: substantial numbers of hikers are deliberately seeking the safety of others, a behavior that may inherently diminish the freedom and solitude traditionally associated with parks and outdoor recreation.

Visitors were also given an opportunity to record open-ended comments in response to the security questions asked. A sampling of these comments is shown in Table 5. These comments are a powerful testament to the types of security problems that are encountered by some visitors, the range of visitor responses to these incidents, and the effects of perceived security issues on the quality of the recreation experience. Visitors are experiencing security problems that range from inconsiderate, nuisance activities to serious criminal acts, and these problems are altering visitor behavior, especially among some groups of visitors such as women. For example, 30 percent of women in our sample reported intentionally hiking near other people for reasons of safety or personal security, compared to 16 percent of men. Concern over security and related changes in visitor behavior, may be undermining the quality of the recreation experience.

**Incipient Doubts About Security Persist**

Is security a problem on the AT and, by extension, in parks and outdoor recreation more broadly? Inescapably, the answer appears to be "yes". While only a small minority of visitors in this study report encountered a security problem, the absolute number of visitors and the security incidents this represents may still be high, perhaps even shockingly so. Still more troubling is the degree to which perceived insecurity generated by such incidents — especially those that receive attention in the national news media — ripples through the population of trail users. Incipient doubts about personal security seem to have crept into the minds of many trail users, even to the point of seeking the safety of others while hiking and camping.

To be fair, the data reported in this study should be considered within a broader context. Clearly, crime rates are substantially higher in population centers than they are in parks and related outdoor recreation areas. In the words of one of our study respondents, "I go to get away from people. If I wanted..."
What should parks and recreation managers do about problems of visitor security?

What should parks and recreation managers do about problems of visitor security? Perhaps a first step is to assess and monitor the nature and extent of the problem through studies like the one described here. Official police reports of crime in parks and related areas may substantially underestimate security problems.

If security is found to be a significant problem, then management action is warranted. More focus on law enforcement may be called for, especially in the event of serious criminal activity or threats to visitor safety. However, in large parks and dispersed outdoor recreation areas such as the AT, there are obvious limits to the effectiveness of this approach, and it may even be inappropriate if carried to an extreme. Perhaps a more effective approach is to communicate clearly and deliberately with visitors, including an objective assessment of security issues, suggested guidelines for ensuring a safe visit, and encouraging visitors to report security problems encountered. The Appalachian Trail Conference, the organizing body for hiking organizations that manage the AT, has developed such guidelines that are posted on its website. These guidelines are shown in Figure 1, and might serve as a model for other park and recreation managers.