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## CITY & STATE

### Popularity of Monon keeping crime in check

By Tom Spalding and Fred Kelly  
[tom.spalding@indystar.com](mailto:tom.spalding@indystar.com)  
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#### MONON TRAIL

The Star looks at the 15-mile Monon Trail as its latest segment nears completion.

Portions of the Monon Trail are surrounded by crime -- car break-ins, home burglaries and drunken fistfights -- yet the path itself stays pretty safe.

Now comes its final, southernmost link, where paving work is expected to finish up next month. It runs a route through neglected communities such as the one covered by Indianapolis Police Department beat 63, which has more violent crimes than any other area along the Monon.

Nearby residents and community leaders worry that drug dealers, prostitution and violent crime will keep people off the newest part of the trail, according to a 1999 report by the Indianapolis Urban Enterprise Association.

But the new section might not pose a threat to trail users. In fact, backers believe the trail might help reduce blight and crime nearby, rather than encourage them.

"Coming through this neighborhood, people are apprehensive," Frankie Tibbs, a trail cleaner for the city's Department of Public Works, says as he looks at the "ungodly" junk where the 10-foot-wide path crosses 25th Street, in beat 64. "Once we get this stuff out of here, and development, they won't have any problem."

In Carmel, where the trail expanded two years ago, residents saw definite improvements.

Bruce Baker, 38, lives next to the trail on Freeport Drive near 116th Street.

He said many people used the abandoned rail bed for recreation and illegal dumping before officials turned it into a park.

"Some people would take their four-wheelers down the path," Baker said. "People would dump old refrigerators and water heaters. Before it was a park, it was not policed, so I feel safer with it as a park."

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In Hamilton County, there were 49 complaints along the trail from January 2000 to Sept. 30 of this year. Even those were usually minor -- often simply reports of a suspicious or intoxicated person.

In Marion County, 43 incidents have been documented on the trail in 21/2 years, according to law enforcement, few of them serious. Typical examples include a fleeing crook using the path as an escape route, or a kid stealing another kid's bike.

"I feel as safe here as when I'm walking on any street," said Pete Richason, 27, a pharmaceutical sales rep who will jog up to 11 miles per outing on the trail. "I've never worried about it, to be honest with you, even if it's a questionable neighborhood."

The statistics are not a precise measuring stick because police and sheriff's deputies don't always include the trail when they tally crimes -- some incidents begin on the trail but are reported only after the victim goes somewhere else to report the trouble.

In some ways, the Monon is a police department's best friend, with 1.2 million sets of eyes and ears annually doing the kind of observation that community block watches and other programs only dream of.

Moneyless joggers and cyclists don't make attractive targets for crooks, and smart trail users remain alert, looking out for one another -- and the clock.

"Most of the time I feel safe, but I only walk during the noon hour or at 4 p.m. on, when it will be more heavily traveled," said Robin Millspaugh, a 29-year-old teacher who stopped to chat in Broad Ripple. "I also am sure to tell someone I talk to that I am headed there before I leave, in the event that something happens."

But a walker on the path's new southern leg can see the challenges ahead.

Nikolai Tellman and Kelly Forrest, new Indianapolis residents, explored the trail during a sunny Friday lunchtime with their 3-year-old golden retriever, Gracie. Headed in the same direction on a guided tour were Indy Greenways Administrator Ray Irvin and William Reardon, the Indianapolis Police Department's North District deputy chief.

Amid the weeds sit a discarded orange couch, a cracked white bookshelf and someone's open bags of trash, bordered by dozens of empty beer cans.

Less than a mile away, a man has set up a campfire beside the trail, melting wire insulation to get precious copper, which he can sell as scrap for \$35 to \$40 a pound.

And nearby, in a yard filled with weeds, old tires and other junk, at least a half-dozen dogs -- some obviously malnourished -- bark loudly as their attempts to jump at the strangers are frustrated by short leashes. They have no water.

The sight is grounds for an inspection, and it is so obvious that Reardon cuts short his tour so he can radio for city Animal Care and Control workers to come to the property.

When Forrest, a Franklin College professor, and Tellman, a professional writer, are asked by Reardon and Indy Greenways' Irvin about the trail, the couple sing its praises.

"I can see in the long run this would really make a difference," Forrest says.

But even they sense a need for caution sometimes.

"I feel pretty comfortable in the day," Tellman said. "I'm not sure I would at night."

Capt. Joe Schmid, an Indianapolis park ranger, describes the main crime problem as vehicle break-ins near key Monon parking lots, including 75th Street and Westfield Boulevard.

"There's no more crime on the Monon Trail itself than in the areas surrounding it," Schmid said. "We've had purses grabbed and bikes stolen, but anywhere in the city you go, it can be that type of activity."

He adds there has been no major study of crime on the trail.

Reardon and Irvin agree with the idea that the South Monon could serve as a flower among weeds, supplementing police patrols, anti-crime walks and neighborhood watch efforts. It could create a sense of purpose, an incentive for a homeowner to reinvest in his property or a renter to want to plant a tree, replace a rusty fence or create a mural on an otherwise bland wall.

That's the same sentiment shared by those residents and community leaders in the enterprise association report. Developing the trail, they said, would increase safety by bringing pedestrians into the neighborhood, reducing dumping and boosting people's incentive to keep their property clean.

Landscape experts will create enough of a buffer zone along the new stretch of trail to avoid any hiding places for would-be attackers. A couple of locations on the South Monon will have extra lighting and emergency phones.

Crime specialist Debbie Fletcher of IPD's North District said the department plans to use its new North District three-officer bike patrol team to supplement the ranger patrol on the Monon, and that program will get under way soon.

Irvin says he understands the need for safety.

"I'm very sensitive to us not leading people into harm's way."

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Call Tom Spalding at 1-317-327-7939.

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