Studies have found that tourists are disproportionately victims of crime. Yet there have been no previous victimisation studies of tourists within caravan parks conducted in Australia. Offences on parks in Australia are not separately recorded in official crime data and it is likely that many crimes go unreported because people are travelling. The transient nature of park residents, the ease of access to caravans, tents and cabins means caravan parks can be an inviting target for thieves. Also tourists carry items of interest to thieves, such as cameras, mobile phones, portable CD players, cash, and credit cards.

The purpose of this study was to conduct an exploratory investigation of the nature and extent of crime within caravan parks in Australia. Case studies of 36 caravan parks in two regions in Western Australia and two regions in New South Wales were conducted involving 121 interviews with park managers, tourists and permanent residents, police, security guards, local government and industry personnel. The study was funded by the Western Australian Office of Crime Prevention.

The Findings

The study found that crime and anti-social behaviour is generally NOT a major concern within caravan parks in Australia. While 23% of tourists and 32% of permanent residents of parks within the study reported being a victim of crime, each of the mostly older aged group of victims reported only one incident of relatively minor theft in their lifetime. Furthermore, the attitudes of all participants towards crime and safety demonstrated a lack of concern. Few crimes were reported to police because they were considered not to be serious. However, 25% of caravan parks within the study experienced some problems with crime, particularly petty theft. The types of items reported stolen included clothing from clotheslines or washing machines, alcohol and food from eskees, bicycles, surf-boards, wetsuits, fishing rods and other sporting equipment, mobile phones, laptop computers, wallets and handbags, generators, tools, barbecues and gas bottles. Break and enter crimes were also a problem on a few parks. Offenders had detailed knowledge of various makes of caravans, were aware that locks on vans and canvas annexes are easily accessible, and knew how to enter a van where people are asleep without making the van rock.

As well as teenage gangs, participants primarily blamed drug and alcohol abuse for crime on caravan parks.

Although there was some concern for the safety of children on parks particularly in regard to traffic, there was no evidence of fear of crime amongst tourists and residents. Victims of crime did not consider crime to be serious and reported no fear of crime. They were also likely to return to a park where an offence occurred. Tourists may rationalise the costs and value of holidays against negative victimisation experiences. British studies have also found that tourists’ fear of victimisation was considerably less than their actual level of victimisation. Tourists who were victims of crime tended to believe that the event was beyond their personal control, which suggests that tourist may play a helpless role in regard to their personal safety and security. At the same time, most tourists acknowledged that...
their safety and security was their own responsibility, which means that it will be open to educational programs to enhance precautionary behaviors. Park residents believed managers were primarily responsible for park security. Communities were regarded as more responsible than police for ensuring safety and security on local caravan parks.

Crime on caravan parks is clearly situational. Police data for the study areas revealed caravans within caravan parks appear to be much safer than caravans parked in other areas such as roadside stops, bush camps or private residences.

The proximity to business centres and highways, and the ease of accessibility to parks that are unfenced renders parks “hot spots” for property crimes. Parks in busy holiday coastal regions appeared to be more vulnerable to crime than some small rural towns. The level of crime within the surrounding community seems to have an effect upon the level of crime experienced within a park. Certain sites within parks such as those along park boundaries were more likely to be targeted by thieves.

Security lighting, police patrols, static guards, security fencing and boom gates were the most effective forms of security. Crime prevention on parks is maintained by the diligence of park managers and though the eyes and ears of permanent residents. Networking between park managers allows the sharing of information between parks about potential troublemakers. Yet many tourists remain vulnerable to crime because they are nonchalant about their personal safety and security. There exists a common perception that rural Australia is relatively free of crime. However, comparisons of rates of crime per head of population reveal that some rural communities experience higher rates than city areas. The study found that while tourists did consider security when choosing a park, the standard of park facilities was the deciding factor.

Figure 6: Responsibility for safety and security on parks.

Crime on caravan parks is clearly situational. Police data for the study areas revealed caravans within caravan parks appear to be much safer than caravans parked in other areas such as roadside stops, bush camps or private residences.

While there is an appreciation that no two caravan parks are the same, many security practices on parks appear to be ad hoc. Problems could arise in terms of liability should some serious crime occur. Consistency in park management and policy would increase if more businesses become aligned with state and national bodies of the Caravan Industry or park chains such as Top Tourists, Big 4 or Family Park chains. Parks will also benefit from the legal, educational and moral support these organisations provide.

Conclusions

The finding that crime and antisocial behaviour is not a major concern on caravan parks cannot be generalised to all of Australia as the research was conducted in two regions in two states only. Furthermore, it is impossible to identify the numbers of people who have given up caravan holidays because of crime. Yet the findings suggest that caravan parks do provide a relatively safe environment for their guests. The caravan industry is one of the fastest growing tourism sectors in Australia and with the baby boomer generation about to join the Grey Nomads touring around the country, future growth is assured. However, patrons need to be mindful that parks are public places with public roads and public amenities. Simple commonsense precautions for personal and property security will go a long way to decrease opportunities for crime and ensure people enjoy a safe and trouble free holiday.

This information is derived from as yet unapproved Western Australian Office of Crime Prevention funded research. The views expressed are the responsibility of the author and are not necessarily those of the funding body. For more information contact:

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