STATEMENT OF GRANT PURPOSE

The Effects of Urban Green Space on Criminal Activity and Sense of Safety

As an urban dweller in North Philadelphia who spent her childhood years exploring the woods in rural Pennsylvania, I have often wondered how these two worlds intersect. My undergraduate work in Environmental Studies and Geography and Urban Studies has led me to a convergence in disciplines that I had not anticipated. The dynamic interaction between humans and their environment has opened up to me a new door of research. More specifically, I seek to answer the question: How does urban green space relate to criminal activity and sense of safety? I propose to study at the University of Utrecht in the Master’s Programme in Urban Geography to further explore this relationship. I will also work with Dr. , Director of the Netherlands Institute for Health Services Research, who has studied the effects of urban green space on health and social safety. Dr. will help me uncover the implications of my research for urban policy here in the U.S.

The Urban Geography program is housed in the Faculty of Geosciences, which is the largest university teaching centre for geosciences in the Netherlands. It also hosts the Urban and Regional research centre Utrecht (URU), which would prove to be an invaluable resource over the course of my socio-spatial studies of the urban environment. The combination of natural science and socio-economic research within the URU is unique in the Netherlands, and worldwide. Having access to the URU will support my efforts to explore the effects of urban green space on crime and sense of safety. Additionally, the experience that Dr. will bring to my research is unrivaled in the field of urban green space and social safety.

For centuries, it was believed that vegetation encouraged crime because it was thought to conceal criminal behavior. Recent work in this field of study, however, is proving just the opposite. An American study by Kuo and Sullivan (2001) found that urban residential areas with higher amounts of vegetation actually have systematically lower rates of both violent and property crimes as well as social incivilities. The same study showed that urban dwellers living in greener residential settings feel a greater sense of safety and report less aggressive behavior than those living in barren settings without vegetation. This is attributed to increased surveillance due to more users of green spaces. It is also associated with evidence on the mentally restorative effects of vegetation on the human brain which decreases propensity for violence (Kaplan 1987). Collectively, these findings have generated a new way of thinking about urban vegetation.

Recent American research conducted in the area of urban vegetation and crime targets inner city public housing complexes. My current research in Philadelphia as an undergraduate at Temple University focuses instead on the neighborhood level by observing block groups to look for trends in the relationship between urban vegetation and rates of violent and property crimes as well as perceived sense of safety. A pivotal project led by Dr. for the Netherlands Institute for Health Services Research (NIVEL) sought to identify the effects of green space on health, well-being, and social safety, and this project serves as a major inspiration for my study. The results of Dr. ’s four year-long study yielded policy-relevant outcomes supporting the idea that green spaces are important for health and social safety in urban areas. This project is particularly exciting as it opens doors for urban planning in cities outside of the Netherlands. Studying with renowned researchers, Dutch students, and international peers at an institute leading in the fields of urban geography and spatial planning would create a unique opportunity to foster an environment of cross-cultural dialogue in the realm of policymaking for an ever-urbanizing world.
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In the first half of my one-year Master’s program in Urban Geography, I will complete content courses that will further my understanding of the urban environment and how people interact with it. The *Advanced Methods & Techniques in Geography and Planning* course will fine-tune my ability to collect qualitative data and analyze it using multivariate techniques. In *Mobilizing Persons, Places, and Spaces* I will study classical distinctions in social and urban theory to better understand modern spatio-temporal problems in cities. The course *Cities and Neighborhoods* will address the disadvantages of divided cities and ways to target these disadvantages through policy.

In the second half of the program I will carry out my Master’s thesis under the supervision of Dr. , who will share his experiences in the field. (Please see enclosed letter.) In this thesis, I will explore the ways in which my findings on green space and crime in Philadelphia neighborhoods can lend to policymaking in City Hall. Philadelphia’s Mayor Michael Nutter’s Greenworks Plan calls for the planting of one million trees and the creation of five hundred acres of green public space by the year 2025. The Mayor’s plan to make Philadelphia the greenest city in America is hopeful, but there is no mention of hope for crime reduction through these green efforts. In fact, in the Mayor’s seventy-three page comprehensive plan, the word “crime” is only mentioned twice. Such an oversight is perilous because without this basic connection, the Greenworks Plan could have no real salience with low-income communities, thereby sabotaging its intent of equity.

As a leading researcher in the field of urban green space and health, Dr. contributes much to the body of scientific knowledge regarding the spatial distribution and provision of health care services. He has been instrumental in influencing Dutch policy through geographic information system-based findings on the effects of green space on health. By working with Dr. , I will learn how to transform my spatially-based research into policy-relevant implications for Philadelphia and other U.S. cities. This cross-cultural mentorship would prove especially rewarding as the world faces ever-increasing rates of urbanization, and future planners and policymakers must look to incorporate sustainable methods of crime prevention into city planning.

Though there is no specific language requirement for the Fulbright program in the Netherlands, it is recommended that one has a working knowledge of Dutch upon arrival. Through spending a semester with two Dutch roommates, I have become familiar with everyday Dutch phrases; however, I am eager to learn more. In the spring I will be enrolling in a Beginner’s Dutch course at Montgomery County Community College. This will prepare me to communicate with new acquaintances in the Netherlands while allowing me to demonstrate greater respect for the country in which I will be living and studying.

In addition to my own research, I will be working closely with members of the European Geography Association for students and young geographers (EGEA). I will collaborate with Dutch EGEA members to create a working body of knowledge on the field of urban green space and crime. After careful planning, I will seek to host a symposium to disseminate our collection of information and facilitate an open forum on policy implications both in the Netherlands and throughout the world. This collaboration will present a unique opportunity to integrate socio-spatial findings from two different parts of the world. It is crucial for the future of urban planning and policy in the U.S to shift towards an internationally-minded approach. The perspectives that I gain in this Fulbright year will allow me to play an instrumental role in that transition.