

Community Safety and the Older Adult

According to the Administration on Aging report, *A Profile of Older Americans*, 80.6% of all adults age 65 and over lived in urban or suburban areas in 2009. The remaining 19% lived in nonmetropolitan areas. These older adults are less likely to change residence than any other age group and are also more likely to live alone. In 2009, 30.1% of older adults—11.4 million, lived alone. This percentage increases with advanced age; among women age 75 and over, 49% reported living alone in 2009.

Despite a decline in the national crime rate over the past two decades, perceptions of crime remain disproportionately high. More than two-thirds of respondents to an October 2011 Gallup poll felt crime in the United States had increased over the past year, while 48% felt it had risen in their local area. Those fearful of crime stated that they frequently or occasionally worried about being mugged (34%), falling victim to terrorism (30%), being burglarized while at home (30%), being sexually assaulted (22%), being attacked while driving (19%), being murdered (19%), and/or becoming a victim of hate crime (17%). About 38% said they would be afraid to walk alone at night within a mile of their home.

Among older adults, especially the physically impaired and those isolated from others, the fear of crime is often higher than among the younger population. Fear can be paralyzing; many older adults become afraid to leave their homes and withdraw from friends, family, and activities they once enjoyed.

Law enforcement, civic organizations, and individuals working together can successfully combat neighborhood crime. Following are statistical crime data as well as project ideas that can be used to improve community safety and reduce the fear of crime among older adults.

Facts and Figures

The number of background checks for the purchase of firearms rose from 14.4 million in 2010 to 16.5 million in 2011. Of all federal requests, 820,888 were denied in 2010. The most common prohibiting factors included prior felonies (61.8%), domestic violence misdemeanors (11.08%), and a history of controlled substance abuse (7.8%). (Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Background Checks for Firearm Transfers*; FBI, National Criminal Background Check System Operations 2010)

America is divided on the issue of gun control. 43% say laws governing the sale of firearms should be made more strict, while 44% say they should be kept as they are now. 11% say gun laws should be relaxed. (Gallup Annual Crime Poll, 2011)

An estimated 1.2 million violent crimes occurred nationwide in 2010. Violent crime decreased an estimated 6% nationwide from 2009 to 2010, the fourth consecutive year it has declined. Also in 2010, the murder rate decreased by 4.2%. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States: 2010*)

In 2010, an estimated 778,901 aggravated assaults—252.3 offenses per 100,000 inhabitants—occurred in the United States. 20.6% were committed with firearms. Fewer than 1% of victims were over the age of 50. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States 2009*)

Within three years of release, 2.5% of rapists and 1.2% of those convicted of homicide were re-arrested for the same type of crime in 2007. Released prisoners with the highest re-arrest

rates were for those convicted of robbery (70.2%), burglary (74%), larceny (74.6%), motor vehicle theft (78.8%), possession/sale of stolen property (77.4%), and possession/use/sale of illegal weapons (70.2%). (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2007)

Community Projects

Research shows that neighborhood problems such as public drug use, homelessness, abandoned buildings and cars, vandalism or graffiti, loitering, poor lighting, and trash reinforce resident fears and affect their sense of safety. (BJS, Criminal Victimization and Perceptions of Community Safety in 12 Cities, 1998) Further, proponents of the Broken Windows Theory believe that ignoring such issues leads to more neighborhood decline, while encouraging individuals to clean up and repair their property renews community pride and reduces both crime and the fear of crime.

The National Institute of Justice Strategic Approaches to Community Safety Initiative study states that, in order to lower crime rates, law enforcement must reduce high-crime-neighborhood poverty, eradicate drug demand, prosecute illegal firearms carriers, and support conflict resolution and anti-gang training in schools.

Projects for Law Enforcement

- ★ Provide an anonymous vehicle for reporting crime and suspicious activity in neighborhoods. This can be a mailer posted in your newspaper or public places with a phone number or email address for leaving detailed information.
- ★ Partner with neighborhood groups to combat neighborhood crime. Involve job training agencies, small businesses, mortgage lending institutions, educational associations, and local government to address neighborhood decay.
- ★ Under the Department of Justice Asset Forfeiture Program/Equitable Sharing Program, state and local law enforcement agencies are entitled to share proceeds from the seizure of drug and crime assets. Program details are available at www.justice.gov/jmd/afp/index.html. (U.S. Department of Justice)
- ★ Through Project Safe Neighborhoods, identify the most serious violent offenders in the city and increase the arrest, prosecution, and incarceration of these individuals.

Projects for Individuals

- ★ Make your home a less likely target for criminals. Trim shrubs and install wide-angle viewers, deadbolt locks, and exterior lighting.
- ★ Help those who need a hand making their homes more secure, including older adults, people living alone, and persons with disabilities.
- ★ Avoid high-crime areas in your neighborhood and pair or group up for evening excursions.
- ★ Start or strengthen a Neighborhood Watch, Window Watch, Adopt-A-Senior, or other neighborhood program.
- ★ Find out whether your area has community policing. If not, contact your local police department or sheriff's office to begin a program and build rapport with your officers. Invite an officer to attend all neighborhood crime prevention meetings.

Projects for Community Groups

- ★ Work with your local Environmental Protection Agency, city council, and other local officials to clean up vacant lots and transfer them to the community for parks and recreation areas. Neighborhood cleanup events are also an effective way to mobilize the community and fight decay.
- ★ Initiate a federally funded Project Safe Neighborhoods initiative through your director of public safety and local law enforcement entities. This project works to combat gun violence. Learn more at www.psn.gov.
- ★ Practitioners agree that community interaction increases sense of security. Work with law enforcement, social service providers, community groups, and religious organizations to give older adults tools to make them less likely victims of crime. (National Crime Prevention Council, *Engaging the Power of Prevention: 10 Action Principles*, 2005).
- ★ Lack of transportation, one of the most commonly expressed needs of older adults, can lead to “shut-in” mentality, exacerbating the fear of crime. Work with your local Eldercare Locator and the Administration on Aging to meet the following objectives:
 - Better coordinate transport resources.
 - Help older adults recognize and use their transportation options.
 - Develop creative and flexible designs for transportation services.



Resources

Administration on Aging

One Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20001
Public Inquiries: (202) 619-0724
Eldercare Locator: (800) 677-1116
aoainfo@aoa.hhs.gov
www.aoa.gov

Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives

99 New York Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20226
(800) 800-3855
ATFTips@atf.gov
www.atf.gov

Community Transportation Association of America

1341 G Street, NW, 10th floor
Washington, DC 20005
(800) 891-0590
<http://web1.ctaa.org>

Keep America Beautiful

1010 Washington Boulevard
Stamford, CT 06901
(203) 659-3000
info@kab.org
www.kab.org

National Crime Prevention Council

2001 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 901
Arlington, VA 22202
(202) 466-6272
www.ncpc.org

National Neighborhood Watch

National Sheriffs' Association
1450 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-3490
(703) 836-7827
nw@sheriffs.org
www.usaonwatch.org

National Training and Information Center

810 North Milwaukee Avenue
Chicago, IL 60642
ntic@ntic-us.org
www.ntic-us.org

Project Safe Neighborhoods

Office of Justice Programs
810 7th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20531
AskPSN@usdoj.gov
www.projectsafeneighborhoods.com

U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs

810 Seventh Street, NW
Washington, DC 20531
www.ojp.usdoj.gov

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Ariel Rios Building
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20460
(202) 272-0167
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www.epa.gov