



Women and Community Safety Fact Sheet #2

Community safety is a fundamental quality of life issue - a safe community is a liveable community, a healthy community, an economically viable community.

Crime, violence and fear have different implications for different people, often depending on their level of risk and vulnerability. As well, the physical, social and institutional structures of communities combine to affect issues of violence and participation of people in their communities.

Women's (and other marginalized groups') perceptions of safety and knowledge of risks, play a critical role in determining if, and when, they use particular community environments. In turn, this affects the choices we make in relation to employment, housing, recreation, education, shopping and community participation. When the ability of people to participate in community life is restricted, it affects the vibrancy of the whole community.

Studies have counted over a 1,000 strategies that women use to try to avoid danger, such as not going out at night alone (if at all), avoiding certain areas of the community, and attending fewer evening activities including educational activities, employment activities, and public meetings:

- women are eight times more likely than men to forego an evening activity due to concerns for their safety;
- 68% of women routinely lock their car doors when driving (compared with 40% of men);
- 58% of women routinely check the back seat of their car before getting in (compared with 33% of men); and
- about one half of women do not use public transportation or parking garages due to concerns for their safety. (Statistics Canada, Violence Against Women Survey, 1993)

Many people in your community may not have the luxury of choice when it comes to avoiding potentially dangerous situations. They may not be able to choose where to live, shop, work or go to school. For example, women who have to work night shifts, who cannot afford to own a car, who have to walk or rely on public transit to get to work, school or essential services, women who need to attend school, community meetings and other activities often must do so despite their knowledge of risks. Nationally, over 40% of women who say they are worried about walking alone after dark must walk alone at least once a week and sometimes daily. (Statistics Canada, 1993)

What is the role of the community environment in all of this?

The community environment includes the physical, social and institutional (decision-making processes). Each of these components work individually and together to affect women's safety, perceptions of safety, and their ability to be part of the community.

WOMEN'S PERSONAL SECURITY ISSUES

The Physical Environment

While the physical environment does not *cause* violence, it does create opportunities for violence to occur.

For example, research on public places where sexual assaults have occurred has found that a number of features are often present:

- the ability of an offender to predict time and path of a potential victim;
- the presence of an ambush site ;
- an attack site which is often enclosed on three sides;
- poor visibility; and
- an escape route for the offender.

Physical characteristics of the environments that are often identified in relation to safety concerns, include inadequate lighting, isolation, entrapment sites, lack of signage or emergency services, inadequate security, obstruction of sightlines, and poor maintenance.

The Social Environment

Just as important however, are social factors, attitudes and behaviours that may be prevalent in our communities. Familiarity with an area and the people, social norms about women's appropriate use of space, (e.g. "*women should not go out at night alone*"), knowledge of crimes that have occurred in a place or in similar places, and knowledge of the traumatic consequences of violence are all part of how a place may be perceived, and factor into decisions about appropriate use of those places.

In small, rural, and/or isolated communities, personal security issues are often exacerbated by geographical and social isolation, lack of public transit, poor economic and social conditions, lack of social and emergency services; and long distances to work, recreation, and community services. In a study of rural women who were abused by their partners, researchers found that rural women stayed in abusive relationships five to seven years longer than women living in urban areas because of lack of resources, and isolation from support systems. (McLaughlin and Church, *Cultivating Courage: Needs and Concerns of Rural Women Who are Abused by their Partners*, 1992.)

The Institutional Environment

The institutions that operate in communities - local government, education, health services, etc. - have responsibilities with regard to provision of services to *all* citizens. How these services are provided, where, and how sensitive they are to the groups they serve, all have an impact on how accessible they are to women and other vulnerable groups.

For example:

- a local college may not be accessible to women who need to take night courses if it is not linked adequately with public transit, or if women don't feel safe there at night;
- health and social services are sometimes spread out over distances that make them hard for people without vehicles to access;
- the safety of workplaces depend on adequate policies and practices to prevent harassment or assault;
- the accessibility of decision-making processes depends on things like formality of processes, language, meeting schedules and location, as well as receptivity to issues.

Thus, any community safety strategy that is to effectively address the complex nature of women's personal security issues must be an **integrated** one; that is, it must address the physical, social **and** institutional factors involved in women's community safety.

For more information, check out "Women and Community Safety: a resource book on planning for safer communities" available from the Women and Community Safety Project, or online at www.saferfutures.org.