



Women and Community Safety Fact Sheet #6

Women's Safety Audits

Meaningful community involvement is the key to building an effective community safety strategy. It is essential to look at community environments—from the physical, to the social to the institutional—from the perspective of those most vulnerable to violence and to engage those groups in a meaningful way in the identification of issues and implementation of solutions.

The Women's Safety Audit Tool, first developed by METRAC (Metro Action Committee on Public Violence Against Women and Children) in the 1980s is a simple, yet effective mechanism to look in-depth at the community environment from the perspective of women and other vulnerable groups. It provides a process through which to explore issues around women's safety, examine community environments for obstacles, and identify solutions to improve them.

The tool has been used in many different ways in communities all across Canada and around the world. There are as many ways to do an audit as there are places to audit. The process can be adapted for any physical environment, but it can also be used to examine any policies and processes.

A Safety Audit generally seeks to understand what women's safety concerns are and what women need to feel safer in their community:

- *Are there places in your community where you feel concerned about your safety?*
- *What is it about these places that causes you concern?*
- *What would make you feel safer in your community?*
- *What needs to happen to bring these changes about?*

In an audit of an area or building, the process usually involves a group discussion about participants' goals and objectives; a walkabout to assess the physical, social and institutional factors that affect women's safety and sense of safety; an exploration of solutions both during and after the audit; recording of observations and recommendations by project staff during each audit (on paper, but could also be on film and/or video); presentation of the results, through reports or events; working with those responsible for implementation.

And although the starting point in using the tool may be the built environment, the process inevitably leads to an exploration of other obstacles to safety related much more to the social environment - lack of safe and accessible transportation, inaccessible programs, lack of services for women and children, attitudes, beliefs and conditions that allow violence to happen, and so on.

The beauty of the Safety Audit is its ability to engage and mobilize a wide variety of community members in defining local issues and in implementing both short and long term solutions.

Working for Change

The Safety Audit Process

The audit walkabout usually involves an audit of a place and thus initially deals with the built environment. It is an exercise that brings people together to examine areas that have been identified in the initial consultation as particularly problematic.

It allows for individual and group expression of what aspects cause concern and how this affects the use of the place, as well as women's participation in community life. It is a time when women are encouraged to give their views about the shape of their surroundings and how things should and shouldn't be.

During the walkabout, the following checklist can be used, or the group can develop its own checklist. It is critical to have consistent recording, to make the implementation stage easier.

The basic questions of the safety audit are:

- How does this place feel? (In the day, at night, different seasons)
- Is this place accessible?
- Is this place known for safety issues?
- Does the layout make sense? Can people find their way around easily?
- Where is the nearest opportunity to access help in an emergency? (person, telephone, etc.)
- Are there things about this place that present opportunities for violence or harassment? - poor lighting, shadows, hiding spots, entrapment areas, movement predictors.
- What things could be changed to make this place be and feel safer?

Audit Recommendations

Recommendations generally fall under the following categories and responsibilities:

Improvements to physical environments

- Involving single and overlapping responsibilities of local government, provincial ministries, local institutions, private properties, community organizations

Municipal Process and Policy Development

- Involving Planning/development services (official community plans, zoning, other by-laws); Administration, Human Resources (workplace safety, staff equity)

Community Services and Programming

- Involving education and awareness, and service provision and social development.

Safety Audits should not be underestimated as merely a tool to assess physical sites; they are much much more. Safety Audits:

- are a great way to examine a variety of community environments from a wide range of perspectives - age, gender, sexuality, abilities, race/ethnicity, culture and language - and thus from the perspective of people who are the most vulnerable to violence;
- can be an easy way to get people involved in their communities and thus build stronger communities;
- will get people who might not normally be involved in the local decision-making process, involved;
- help local government to understand how community environments can affect things like where people can live, work and shop, and know what to plan for; and
- work to validate views of women and other vulnerable groups.

Safety audits are an easy way to get women involved in their communities and particularly those who might not normally be involved in the local decision-making process. Safety audits will also help local government to understand how community environments can affect things like where people can live, work and shop, and to know what to plan for.

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.