

## **Situational awareness and good common sense: The keys to holiday safety.**

For many of us, the holiday season is a time filled with joy. From gatherings of friends and family to participation in religious and community activities, the months of November and December compel us to manage hectic schedules.

These hectic schedules can cause individuals to lose sight of their personal safety concerns as they dash to stores to make gift purchases or rush to attend social events. In some instances, this can be a recipe for disaster. The fact is, the holidays can also be an unfortunate time – a time when criminals are all too intent on crashing holiday spirits.

In past articles, I have touched on a concept we utilize in law enforcement about the presence of your surroundings and always being watchful for suspicious activity. This concept actually has a name. It's called situational awareness. It is a frame of mind in which you are aware of your surroundings and also aware of whom and what could be of help to you if a problem were to arise. It's the backbone of law enforcement training and it helps law enforcement officers survive each and every day. When put into practice, situational awareness and good common sense are key roles in someone's personal safety. The Guilford County Sheriff's Office would like to offer some crime prevention suggestions that you may find helpful in increasing your own situational awareness.

1. Lock your residential and car doors and keep your windows secure. It sounds simple and makes good sense; however a majority of reported offenses involve unlocked doors or unsecured windows. Thieves are cowards and in most cases, do not want to draw attention to their actions. Unlocked doors and windows help them enter and exit quietly.
2. Always be aware of your surroundings. This includes around your home, shopping centers or parking lots. If something doesn't look right or seems out of place, then your natural instincts are probably correct. Report all suspicious activity to the appropriate law enforcement agency by dialing 911.
3. Shop BEFORE dark if at all possible. Coordinate your shopping trips with friends or at least one other person. NEVER park in an unlit lot or area, no matter how convenient it may be. Remember, most thieves are cowards and do not want to be detected or seen when committing a criminal act.
4. Do NOT leave packages or valuables on the seat of your car. This creates a temptation for thieves. If you must leave something in the car, lock it in the trunk or put it out of sight.
5. Be sure to locate your keys prior to going to your car. Trying to locate your keys once you have arrived at your vehicle diverts your attention away from your surroundings and provides a window of opportunity for you to become a victim.

6. Do NOT overload yourself with packages and bags. It is important to have clear visibility and freedom of motion to avoid mishaps.
7. Carry your cell phone (if possible) with you during shopping trips. Most phones have a built-in GPS feature that can be activated when 911 is dialed. Often times in emergency situations people become disoriented about their location. Communicators can send help to a general location based on your cell phone's GPS signal. Contact your local provider to inquire about this feature.
8. At the end of the day, take valuables inside with you or at least keep them out of sight. GPS systems, MP3 players, purses, laptop computers, wallets (or money) are popular items for thieves. They should not be left where they can be seen. Thieves will be less likely to break into a secured vehicle, if they can't see anything of value to steal.
9. Park your cars in well-lit areas and keep parking areas at your home free of visual obstructions, such as high bushes or trees. You should be able to see your car from inside your home.
10. Help keep your community safe and call 911 to report any type of suspicious person, vehicle or activity, as soon as you see it. Please do not assume some type of activity or action may be justified. It's your neighborhood and it's your business. Become involved. It is impossible to calculate the number of crimes which are detected and then prevented as a result of neighbors looking out for one another.
11. Never, never, never invite strangers into your home. Inviting strangers into your home is an invitation for trouble. It's like a box of chocolates, you never know what you're going to get. We teach our children to keep a safe distance, walk with others and call or yell for help should it become appropriate. There are many people who we come into contact with, on a daily basis, who may never wish us harm, however there are some who would gladly take advantage of a situation and make you the victim of a crime. Follow your gut feeling or intuition. If something or someone doesn't look right or seems out of place, then chances are your suspicions are correct. (It turns out our parents were actually right when it came to strangers)

The Guilford County Sheriff's Office is committed to working with communities and neighborhood groups to raise awareness about crime prevention. Please do not hesitate to contact the Guilford County Sheriff's Office if you have questions or concerns about crime prevention or neighborhood watch programs. You can visit our website to learn more about other crime prevention topics at [www.guilfordcountysheriff.com](http://www.guilfordcountysheriff.com) or contact us at (336) 845-6691. Remember, the crime prevention process starts with YOU.

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