



Guidance Document

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Health practitioners have been striving to achieve the goal of “healthy communities and healthy people through prevention” for centuries (HCPHES, 2006). Since John Snow’s seminal work in 1854, public health practitioners have collected data from the field to gain a better understanding of actual health status and conditions in the community. Although community based research is essential to the improvement of our collective quality of life, it is not without some concurrent risk to researchers. Community field work can possibly expose researchers to risks such as vehicular traffic, theft of property, physical assault, or psychological trauma. This document is intended to serve as a guide to assist community based public health practitioners in the recognition of the potential risks associated with their important work, and to summarize the best-practice steps that can be considered to eliminate or minimize any risks.

Although the vast majority of interactions in the communities served by public health practitioners are quite safe, some areas and situations can result in an environment of heightened risk. The existing body of published literature on the risks of community based research is scant (Williams, T., Dunlap, E., Johnson, B., Hamid, A., 1992 and Paterson, B., Gregory, D., Thorne, S., 1999). But this limited amount of published information can be augmented with the procedures used by businesses and services that are regularly involved with similar exposures, such as postal service employees, social workers, and home service providers, to create a list of “best practices” that may be considered as a possible means of reducing risk, while still facilitating the completion of the important research activity.

The potential community based risks that might be encountered include:

- Risks of traveling to and from the community to be served
- Risks of working in an unfamiliar environment, potentially with new distractions present

- Risks of operating unfamiliar equipment or machinery
- Theft or damage to property of the practitioner
- Physical harm to the practitioner
- Psychological trauma experienced by the practitioner
- Situations that could promote accusations of improper behavior on the part of the practitioner

What can be done to reduce or eliminate these risks?

The UT Police Department has provided a list of tips to keep people safe while working and living in the community. This list is not meant to be all inclusive; however, it does reflect industry accepted best practices. See *Appendix A* for modern criminological theory; see *Appendix B* for situations involving international travel. Should the user of this document require additional information or training, please contact UTHHealth Safety, Health, Environment, Risk Management (SHERM) at 713-500-8100, UT Police Department (UTPD) at 713-792-2890, or the Office of Diversity & Equal Opportunity at 713-500-3130.

Before the trip:

- Map out the route with Google maps, Waze, or another resource
- Carry local contact information; local police, and EMS contact info; and “home base” contact information including your supervisor’s off-hours contact number and EHS’s contact number
- If meeting with someone, call them prior to departure to verify:
 - the correct address
 - there will be someone there to meet you
 - correct parking location
- Familiarize yourself with any equipment that is new to you; ask for training or specific operating instructions if an experienced individual is available
- Ensure you have any necessary protective or safety equipment such as latex gloves, sharps containers, etc.
- Ensure your cell phone is charged

Traveling:

- Wear prudent attire, do not appear over or under dressed. Blend in with locals.
- Inspect vehicle for safety (tires, overloading, brakes, etc.)
- Make sure vehicle has proof of insurance inside
- Project certainty of route and destination
- Avoid "high risk" regions
- Travel with a colleague/ trusted other
- Establish rapport with regular drivers
- Determine risk levels of varying means of transport (bus, train, taxi, hitch hiking, etc.)
- (Women) Sit with other women or middle aged couples

Parking:

- Choose well-lit parking areas
- Look around for loiterers before getting out of your motor vehicle

- Always lock valuables and packages out of sight in the vehicle
- If you get out of your vehicle, always turn off the ignition, remove the key, and lock your vehicle doors, no matter how soon you plan to return. This is particularly important at service stations and convenience stores
- Try not to park next to vans, large SUVs, pickup trucks, or other vehicles whose size and structure can provide concealment
- Exercise particular caution when using underground or enclosed parking garages. Always try to walk in the center aisle, rather than close to parked cars
- If you have the choice, park in areas that have an attendant or in locations with heavy pedestrian traffic

On site:

- Maintain situational awareness; note distractions and take notice of potential threats
- Avoid walking alone whenever possible
- When walking, walk in the middle of the sidewalk and walk facing oncoming traffic
- Attempt to appear confident and purposeful when you walk and be alert to your surroundings at all times
- If you carry a purse, carry it close to your body, preferably in front. Carry no more money or credit cards than you absolutely need
- When walking, try not to overload yourself with packages or other items. Keep your hands as free as possible
- When walking, choose busy, well-lit streets and avoid isolated areas, alleys, vacant lots, abandoned buildings, and construction sites
- When walking during hours of darkness, wear light colored clothing and carry a flashlight
- If you carry a purse with a shoulder strap, be prepared to let it go if snatched. Otherwise, you could be knocked down and hurt
- When walking, carry a loud whistle or high-decibel personal alarm. Use them to attract attention or summon help if you feel you are in danger. Carry the whistle or alarm in your hand so you can use it immediately
- If followed or threatened by someone who is walking, use your whistle or personal alarm or scream loudly, cross the street and run in the opposite direction
- When entering any structure be aware of all exits. Make sure nothing blocks the exits
- While working, focus on the task at hand

What to do if something occurs:

- If at any point the situation doesn't feel safe, leave
- Contain any anger and fear and speak in an authoritative tone that is loud enough for others to hear, but don't scream or yell.
- If the person or persons are attempting a robbery hand them whatever they want, do not resist
- If the person or persons are attempting a rape, fight and don't stop fighting.

Reporting:

- After an incident, immediately call the local authorities
- The authorities are going to need the following information
 - Who was involved (this includes names or descriptions of unknown individuals)

- What happened
 - Where the incident occurred (address or other descriptors if address is unknown)
 - When the incident took place
 - Are there any injuries
- It is important to report any injuries to UTHHealth using the [Supervisor's First Report of Injury Form](#).

What you should NOT do:

- Do not carry firearms or other offensive tools. These tools require special training; may be subject to certain legal requirements.
- Do not consume alcohol before or during community based work
- Do not operate vehicles or other heavy equipment if impaired and help (like an ambulance) can be called
- Do not carry large amounts of cash or valuables on your person or vehicle
- If cash gifts, cash equivalents, or gift certificates are required for compensation for participating in research only carry the minimum amount to complete the study in the time allotted for the visit.
- Do not carry cash gifts, cash equivalents, or gift certificates required for field research in a manner that can be seen by the public. Cover in an envelope prior to delivery.

Additional guidelines for reducing risk and ensuring a safer environment:

- Tell your supervisor where you will be and keep them informed of any unusual developments.
- Operate in a cautious defensive mode and work with your supervisor to mitigate potential risk scenarios.
- Think in advance of potential dangers that may exist. Learn to recognize signs of impending danger.
- Get to know the area or neighborhood where you are working. Always explore the location where you are working with people who are knowledgeable about the area. Learn as much as you can about the area you are going to before setting out to do outreach.
- Avoid working alone and always consider working in pairs or larger groups. Consider meeting in public spots or sites where others are around for safety support. Don't hesitate to ask for accompaniment, or to have an escort from a police officer.
- Introduce yourself and inform people of what you are doing and why.
- Carry a cell phone, business cards and identification with you. Do not carry valuables or other personal possessions such as jewelry, large amounts of money, etc. If carrying research incentives, arrange to hold these in a secure place.
- Use good judgment with personal safety being the foremost consideration. Follow your instincts and intuitions. Pay attention to your feelings. Ask yourself, *Am I feeling uncomfortable? Uneasy? Unsafe? Frightened?* Leave immediately if you feel unsafe or if someone is acting inappropriately.
- Be prepared to do what you need to do to protect yourself. Learn nonviolent physical defense and escape techniques. [Schedule of safety classes offered by UTPD](#).
- When in danger, maintain a calm demeanor and self-control. Firmly but calmly, inform the person that dangerous behavior is not acceptable.

Additional guidelines for handling threatening situations:

- Do not respond or react to abusive language.
- Avoid engaging in verbal altercation with the assaultive person.
- Avoid screaming, shouting, or threatening tones; do not sound harsh or sarcastic.
- Follow your instincts.

Use de-escalation techniques:

- Be simple, direct, and brief with words
- Use calm, low voice tones
- Avoid loaded words like “never”
- Be observational, comment on behavior not motivation; set limits on violent actions
- Do not cajole, threaten, challenge, or touch the person
- Talk quietly, yet firmly when person is loud and belligerent

Use evasive techniques:

- Never turn your back to assaultive person or animal
- Do not block assaultive person’s exit, unless to protect yourself
- Stay out of striking range, about three to four feet away
- Be ready to move quickly, hands unclenched and at waist level
- Consider using environmental factors—desk, door—to maintain a physical barrier while
- trying to get to the closest exit

Appendix A: Modern Criminology

The field of criminal justice has studied how individuals and groups create crime. There are two generally accepted criminal justice theories that are applicable to the protection of employees: the routine activities theory (RAT) and the rational choice theory (RCT).

The RAT rests atop three principles that are required for a crime to take place (Cohen and Felson 1979). These three elements include: (1) the presence of motivated offenders, (2) the presence of suitable targets, and (3) the absence of capable guardians.

In addition to the RAT, modern criminology also offers an additional theory; the rational choice theory (RCT) attempts to explain individuals' behavior (Chapman 2003). RCT assumes that people are motivated by their own self-interest while making everyday decisions. Individuals behave as rational creatures in that one can assume their actions are intentional and contain a consistent set of preferences (Malesevic, 2002). When these theories are combined they form The Crime Triangle.



There will always be two elements present, the victim and the criminal; however it is imperative that opportunity is reduced.

Appendix B: International Travel

The University of Texas System provides an insurance policy to all employees and students while traveling internationally on university business. This policy is provided to the student and employee free of charge. It is important that UT employees and students are aware of the resources available to them for safe and efficient travel. For more information contact Safety, Health, Environment & Risk Management at 713-500-8100 or click on [OnCall International](#) Enter The University of Texas membership number, 100143CPPD21 to access the UT portal.

Abbreviated FAQ, visit OnCall International's website for the latest information.

What is OnCall International?

OnCall International provides The University of Texas System travelers and expatriates with worldwide quality health care and emergency assistance services 24 hours a day.

How can OnCall International help?

OnCall International services are designed to help you with medical, personal, travel, security, and legal problems when away from home. Call OnCall International at any time to speak with a physician or security specialist about simple or critical matters.

How does it work?

Carry the OnCall International membership card with you at all times. It includes the telephone numbers for worldwide access to OnCall International. In the event of an emergency, call one of the emergency phone numbers listed on the card. You can also always chat with a representative online from anywhere in the world at <https://www.oncallinternational.com/chat/direct>. Be sure to reference The University of Texas membership number, 100143CPPD21.

For full information about the program and the benefits and services available to UT employees and students, please visit: <https://inside.uth.edu/travel/international/on-call-international.htm>

Additional information about international travel can be found by visiting the links listed below.

US Department of State

<https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/international-travel.html>

Peace Corps

<http://www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=learn.safety>

Appendix C: Additional Resources

Suzy Lamplugh Trust

The Suzy Lamplugh Trust is the only UK charity entirely devoted to providing everyone in society with the practical support and personal safety guidance they need to reduce their fear of crime and develop skills and strategies for keeping themselves safe.

<http://www.suzylamplugh.org/>

The National Crime Council

The National Crime Prevention Council's mission is to be the nation's leader in helping people keep themselves, their families, and their communities safe from crime.

<http://www.ncpc.org/>

Houston Police Department

http://www.houstontx.gov/police/crime_prevention.htm

The University of Texas Police Department

<http://www.mdanderson.org/utpd/>

Appendix D: References

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