

# Preventing Public Disorder

This guide is one in a series of crime prevention publications designed to equip current and potential Safe City partners with low-cost tools to assess their crime problems and to develop strategies to address them. Other guides in this series include vandalism, car crimes, retail burglary, panhandling, and shoplifting.



**Safe City** is a model community-based initiative that aims to reduce crime, build awareness, and develop communities into safer places to live, work, and shop. Community partners in cities across the U.S. modify the model to best suit their needs and resources. The goal is to leverage existing resources by building collaborative relationships between law enforcement, businesses, residents, government leaders, property managers, and community organizations. This approach maximizes the tactical, financial, technological, and human resources available to address a community's crime problems. The Safe City model promotes partnerships and technical solutions as instrumental building blocks for success. These partnerships are further strengthened by individual retailers taking ownership over the crime and disorder problems occurring in and around their businesses.

Safe City has partnered with the Urban Institute, a non-profit policy research firm, to develop a variety of crime prevention strategies for use in retail settings, many of which are inexpensive and easy to implement. For more information about the Safe City program, please visit [www.mysafecity.com](http://www.mysafecity.com). For more information about the Urban Institute's justice policy research activities, please visit [www.urban.org/justice](http://www.urban.org/justice).

## Understanding Public Disorder

An array of concerns can be categorized under the umbrella term "public disorder," some of which are not technically unlawful criminal acts. Common public disorder problems experienced by retailers involve unwanted individuals engaging in a variety of inappropriate activity, such as trespassing, loitering, disturbing the peace, public urination, public intoxication, or sleeping on or around a business' property.

### Public Disorder Patterns

Types of people who engage in public disorder include area residents, students, transient persons, people looking for work, and juveniles. Juveniles with few alternatives for non-school activities are a common cause of disorder. By congregating in retail areas, they often cause disruption and unease among legitimate shoppers.

Understanding some of the reasons why individuals create disorder in retail areas is an important step in thinking about solutions to the problem. Convenience is likely a common factor for all individuals contributing to disorder in retail areas. Proximity to schools, fast food restaurants, public housing areas, parks, or bars make a retail area the likely subject of trespassing, loitering, and other public disturbances. In some communities, retail shops may be viewed as the only form of entertainment available. Furthermore, organizations serving indigent populations, such as a drug treatment center, homeless shelter, health clinic, blood/plasma donation center, hospital, or food kitchen, may increase a retailer's exposure to loitering, suspicious

activity, public substance abuse, or sleeping or urinating in public. Businesses located in disadvantaged areas are susceptible to disorderly activity, particularly if the property is not well maintained.

A business' physical design may also create an atmosphere that invites or encourages disorderly behavior. Retail areas with chairs, benches, or other comfortable places to sit or lean will increase the likelihood of individuals loitering, trespassing, or causing further aggravation. Businesses with public telephones, video games, or fully accessible public rest rooms also create opportunities for public disorder.

### Addressing Public Disorder

Official police reports under-document many acts considered disorderly because there may be little actual illegal activity. Nevertheless, calls for service by citizens and businesses are usually an accurate reflection of disorder and the extent to which it affects area businesses.

A variety of both immediate and long-term changes can be made to your business environment to discourage disorderly behavior. Immediate changes include removing benches and alcoves that facilitate loitering, or limiting the number of youth in a store at one time. Long-term changes may not produce immediate results but will be more effective over time in addressing the underlying causes of disorder. Some examples include collaborating with other community members to restrict alcohol sales or establishing a public education campaign about available social services and agencies.

## Using this Guide

This guide is designed to help you and your partners understand and address the public disorder problem affecting your business area and to help promote dialogue among retailers, police, and community stakeholders about these issues. Keep in mind that when implementing these strategies you should tailor your solution to the unique nature of your crime problem and business environment.

Other guides in this series address vandalism, retail burglary, car crimes, panhandling, and shoplifting.

## Quick Tips

Here are a few guiding steps that can help prevent public disorder:

- 1 Measure your public disorder problem.
- 2 Identify business practices that may make you vulnerable to public disorder.
- 3 Choose a practical strategy to reduce public disorder and try it.
- 4 Measure your public disorder problem again to assess the impact of your strategy.
- 5 Modify your strategy if necessary.

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## Defining Your Problem

**Before implementing a strategy** to prevent public disorder, it is important to define the nature of the particular public disorder problem for your area. Although there are many methods you may use to address public disorder on your own, a community-wide response that incorporates other area businesses, agencies, and public services is beneficial to address any underlying community problems which may be related to public disorder. Community partners should consider the questions that appear below. Answers to these questions will help you understand the problem affecting your business area so that you can select an appropriate response strategy.

<b>Questions to Ask:</b>	<b>Example Responses:</b>
<b>What kind of public disorder is most problematic for your business?</b>	Two forms of disorder are most problematic for my business: rowdy individuals in the store and people loitering around the outside of the building.
<b>What day of the week, month, or season is disorderly behavior most prevalent?</b>	Unruliness is most frequent on Thursday, Friday, and Saturday nights. The loiterers are around Monday through Friday during warm weather months.
<b>What time of day is disorderly behavior most problematic?</b>	People tend to loiter outside the building during the day, while other issues occur in late evenings.
<b>Have customers complained that the disorder problems dissuade them from shopping at your store?</b>	It is not clear whether the disorder problems are affecting sales. However, customers have complained to the store managers about the disruptive shoppers.
<b>Are there individuals responsible for chronic disorderly activity? If so, how many individuals?</b>	The disorderly behavior typically happens in groups of four to five, and multiple individuals have been documented as being problematic outside the store.
<b>Do the chronically disorderly individuals share any particular demographic or other characteristics?</b>	Groups within the store tend to be college aged students, possibly from the nearby campus. The individuals loitering outside tend to be adult males, and some may be homeless.
<b>Is your business located near areas where disorderly activity is likely to occur?</b>	Yes, the business is located a couple blocks from a college dormitory. There is also an unemployment office and counseling center nearby.
<b>Are other area businesses having public disturbance problems? If so, are they similar to your problems?</b>	I have not spoken with businesses outside those that share our parking lot, but the ones nearby are affected by the same individuals.

# Developing Response Strategies

**After you've worked** with your partners to define the public disorder problem for your area, you are ready to develop a response strategy to prevent it. The following are strategies that can be used for common public disorder scenarios. Do not forget that situations vary and that yours may require a tailored response. In addition, be prepared for potential implementation challenges, such as unanticipated costs and delays in both the implementation and impact of your crime prevention strategy.

It is important to measure your disorder problem before and after initiating a response. Doing so will tell you whether the response you selected is effective. Proof of effectively reducing disorder (or any other crime) can be useful in persuading other area businesses to join the collaborative efforts to reduce crime throughout the community. Your

measurement may also provide evidence that the strategy is not reducing disorder as you expected, suggesting an adjustment to the response is in order. While you may note improvements immediately, it is advisable to wait at least a few months after implementing a response to see whether it has had an impact. The following table outlines ways that you can measure the state of your disorder problem, outcomes that will indicate whether the disorder problem has improved, and possible data sources.

When measuring outcomes it is important to note that a temporary increase in reporting of incidents to police may represent a positive outcome, indicating that community members are paying greater attention to disorder. However, reported incidents should decline over time as the number of disorderly individuals decrease.

Measurement	Data Source	Strategic Response	Outcome
<b>General loitering</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of individuals loitering</li> <li>Number of customer/employee complaints</li> <li>Number of reported disorderly incidents</li> <li>Value of repair or maintenance</li> <li>Day/time of incidents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local police</li> <li>Business records</li> <li>Personal observation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Post "No Loitering" signs throughout property</li> <li>Remove benches, chairs, or other areas to rest</li> <li>Remove protection from weather, such as bus shelters or similar structures</li> <li>Broadcast "muzak" or classical music</li> <li>Establish "mug shot" book of chronic loiterers</li> <li>Keep property clean of litter or other discarded items</li> <li>Install call-out only public telephones or remove phones altogether</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fewer chronic loiterers</li> <li>Fewer complaints</li> <li>Fewer reported incidents</li> <li>Decreased cost (\$)</li> </ul>
<b>Disturbing juveniles</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of disturbing juveniles</li> <li>Number of truant youth reported to police or school</li> <li>Number of complaints</li> <li>Value of repair or maintenance</li> <li>Day/time of incidents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local police</li> <li>Business records</li> <li>School records</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish policies to limit number of youth in the store at one time</li> <li>Report truant youth to police or schools</li> <li>Ban troublemakers from property by establishing a "no trespassing" list</li> <li>Broadcast "muzak" or classical music</li> <li>Secure perimeter to limit pedestrian access</li> <li>Install call-out only public telephones or remove phones altogether</li> <li>Remove vending or video game machines from store</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fewer chronic disturbing juveniles</li> <li>Fewer reported truants</li> <li>Fewer complaints</li> <li>Decreased cost (\$)</li> </ul>
<b>Rowdy customers</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of disturbances</li> <li>Number of customer/employee complaints</li> <li>Day/time of incidents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local police</li> <li>Business records</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen alcohol sales rules by eliminating single serving container sales and increase fines for sales to minors</li> <li>Promote responsible drinking habits through a public awareness campaign</li> <li>Establish and post policies and sanctions regarding acceptable public behavior, such as reserving the right to refuse service to any individual</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fewer disturbances</li> <li>Fewer complaints</li> </ul>
<b>Individuals looking for work (day laborers)</b>			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Number of individuals seeking work</li> <li>Number of complaints</li> <li>Level of concern of customers or employees</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Local police</li> <li>Business records</li> <li>Survey</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work with city to establish formal day labor policies, such as establishing a specific location for laborers to wait for work</li> <li>Impose time restrictions (such as 6 am to 2 pm only) on individuals looking for work</li> <li>Establish and promote policies and sanctions regarding acceptable public behavior among day laborers, such as littering or public drinking</li> <li>Modify landscaping to improve surveillance or dissuade individuals from loitering</li> <li>Install call-out only public telephones or remove phones all together</li> <li>Improve lighting in parking lot and building exterior</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fewer individuals</li> <li>Fewer incidents</li> <li>Fewer complaints</li> </ul>

## Measuring Your Problem: An Example

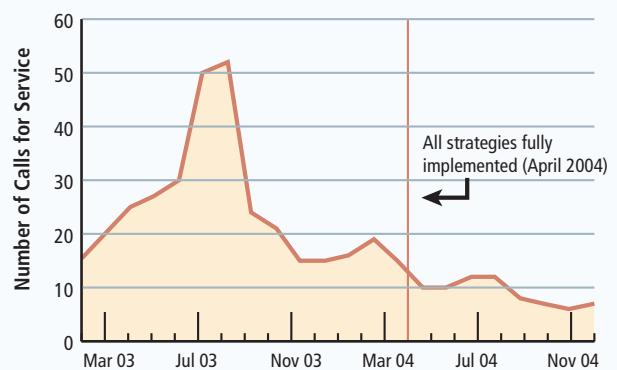
**There are 15 businesses** in the Washville Shopping Plaza: a post office, an unemployment office, a counseling service, one large discount retailer, an appliance retailer, one home improvement retailer, one video game store, two clothing stores, an ice cream shop, one hair salon, one casual family restaurant, and several fast food restaurants. At a meeting of the Washville Shopping Plaza Board of Directors, the group discussed the upcoming spring and summer seasons and the issues that warmer weather presents to their shopping plaza. Increased numbers of individuals loitering at the Plaza, especially youth out of school for summer vacation, was the greatest concern. The manager of the video game store suggested the Washville Board of Directors talk with members of a nearby business district who recently addressed similar concerns in their retail area.

At the next meeting, business district members shared their experiences and responses with the Washville Board of Directors. The business district members also suggested that Washville measure their problems before initiating a response so they could calculate changes; the district failed to do so and regretted it.

The Washville Board of Directors decided to introduce several initiatives they learned from the business district members. First, they hired a trained security professional/outreach worker to patrol the Plaza during business hours. His responsibility was to document any problematic incidents, and to talk with and refer individuals to services or agencies that could assist them. The outreach worker was also responsible for maintaining a "mug shot" book of chronically troublesome individuals who needed to be reported to police if found on the property. Second, the Plaza began broadcasting "muzak" throughout the property as a deterrent. Third, the Plaza's benches were removed because they tended to attract few legitimate users. Finally, prominent signs were designed and posted along the exterior of the buildings outlining the Plaza's policies on inappropriate behavior and sanctions against individuals violating those policies.

Taking the business district's advice, two Washville Board of Directors members volunteered to lead a data collection effort. They worked with the local police to obtain a list of all disturbance-related calls for service in the Plaza for the past twelve months and then again through at least six months after all the strategies were implemented. The number of public disorder calls were tabulated and graphed (shown below). There was a noticeable drop in call volume after all strategies were fully implemented, particularly when comparing the summer and fall 2003 months and those for 2004.

**Washville Plaza Public Disorder Police Calls for Service**



## How Other Communities Prevent Public Disorder

Here are examples of how other retail establishments addressed public disorder in their communities.

### **Avenue “E” National City, California**

Avenue “E” of National City experienced a disproportionate concentration of dilapidated buildings, quality of life concerns, and gang activity, resulting in increased drug activity and public disturbances. Neighborhood stakeholders, including property managers/owners, business owners, community residents, and police, worked to increase neighborhood ownership. Stakeholders and police began regular meetings to educate the community on the importance of addressing signs of disorder, and suggested modest responses to address the environmental issues affecting the neighborhood, such as repairing buildings, trimming trees and brush, or cleaning up litter. During the first year of the intervention, there was a 61 percent reduction in calls for service (*1100 “E” Avenue Community and Community Leader Re-Education Project 2000*).

### **Harbor Plaza Santa Ana, California**

Property managers and business owners of the commercial district, Harbor Plaza, reported a loss in business revenue, which they attributed to an increase in criminal activity near the plaza. Analysis of the problem revealed a high number of homeless and transient people in the area, and that these individuals were responsible for an increased number of crimes against merchants. Nearby residents were also increasingly victims of crime, while deterioration threatened the neighborhood. The plaza property managers and business owners enacted a multiphase program to address the problem, including: removing persons illegally camping along the river; removing aggressive panhandlers; implementing environmental changes; and instituting an educational campaign for plaza employees and customers. Merchants noted a significant decrease in transients, an increase in the number of shoppers, and an increase in revenue. As a result, property crimes decreased by 40 percent within three months (*Harbor Plaza 1993*).

### **Elden Street & Alabama Drive Herndon, Virginia**

An influx of foreign-born residents, mainly from Central and South America, congregated at a local 7-Eleven convenience store to look for contract work each day. Businesses and residents reported various quality-of-life concerns related to the workers – loitering, littering, property damage, and public urination – to police. The town leaders, police, local agencies, and community groups worked together to establish a day workers center at an old police station. The town also established an anti-solicitation ordinance. After the day workers center opened, the police hours required to manage the loiterer problems at 7-Eleven dropped dramatically, with police foot patrols reduced from an average of more than one per day to fewer than one foot patrol every other day. Likewise, calls for trespassing and suspicious persons declined by nearly 50 percent (*Day Laborer Problem Solving 2006*).



## Additional Resources

- Your Local Police Department
- Your Local Safe City Partnership
- Center for Problem-Oriented Policing: [www.popcenter.org](http://www.popcenter.org)
- Public Safety Education Unit: [www.pseu.info/publicdisorder.shtml](http://www.pseu.info/publicdisorder.shtml)
- Mayor of Vancouver, Canada Survey on Public Disorder: [www.mayorsamsullivan.ca/public-order-survey-results.html](http://www.mayorsamsullivan.ca/public-order-survey-results.html)
- Australian Institute of Criminology, Situational Prevention of Public Disorder: [www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/01/rpp01-02.html](http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/rpp/01/rpp01-02.html)
- National Crime Prevention Council: <http://www.ncpc.org>
- Small Business Administration: [www.sba.gov](http://www.sba.gov)
- National Retail Federation: <http://www.nrf.com>
- National Restaurant Association: [www.restaurant.org](http://www.restaurant.org)
- National Association of Convenience Stores: <http://www.nacsonline.com/NACS/default.htm>

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