



Crime Prevention Fact Sheet

“Reporting Suspicious Activity”

Reducing Criminal Opportunity

October 2008



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Reporting suspicious activity

No law enforcement agency can function effectively without the assistance of responsible residents. The Overland Park Police Department asks that you stay vigilant of people or events in your community that appear suspicious. By reporting suspicious activities, a resident may prevent a traumatic event or help police arrest a criminal. Residents should report suspicious activity and avoid the tendency to ignore or disregard their instinctive feelings. Don't worry about “bothering” the police, and don't worry about being embarrassed if your suspicions prove unfounded.

What is suspicious activity?

Suspicious activity is any event that seems out of the ordinary, or an activity you feel should not be occurring. Knowing your community and its habits will make it easier for you to recognize and report suspicious activity. You know better than anyone else (*including the police*) what is normal for your business or neighborhood.

It is difficult for many residents to call the police based on feelings, instincts or intuition. An individual's instincts generally “kick in” when they observe something unusual, but it may be difficult for them to explain. The inability to clearly express or articulate what is suspicious or unusual is the reason many people will not call the police. Residents must realize they are rarely going to see an entire crime committed from start to finish. Instead, they should look for clues that would be consistent with criminal activity. Body language and mannerisms combined with the environment can communicate suspicious or criminal behavior. Residents should not suppress their instincts or intuition because they cannot articulate or describe an actual crime to the police.

To help demonstrate the point, let's look at a possible neighborhood scenario:

John decides to take a vacation day from work to get some projects accomplished at home. While looking out the front window, he observes a vehicle parked on the street with a young man he does not recognize. The individual in the vehicle is just sitting there, looking around the neighborhood. John recalls an attempted daytime burglary to a neighbor's house several weeks ago, but the young man in the car is not approaching any houses. Several minutes pass, but the man doesn't leave the area. John feels uncomfortable with the situation, but unable to explain any actual “suspicious” activity; he ignores his intuition and dismisses the incident as nothing.

In this instance, John should have called the police. The majority of residential burglaries occur during the day when most houses are unoccupied. The first assessment burglars get of a targeted house will come from the street. This individual is not doing anything illegal, but John “feels” it is unusual for his neighborhood because he has never seen the young man or vehicle before. John should call police for the following reasons:

Police Presence: A response by the police sends a definite message to the individual in the vehicle, “I've been spotted, and the residents in this neighborhood are not afraid to call the police.” All criminals must evaluate the risk versus the reward of committing a crime. When residents are vigilant and call the police, the risk to the potential criminal increases. It further directs the police to the neighborhood when and where they are needed.

Police Contact: Vigilant neighbors can aid police in identifying suspicious individuals. John could have directed a police officer to the young man, and that may have provided helpful information to a detective. When the police are directed to the specific location of an individual, their patrols are more effective in keeping a neighborhood safe. If the encounter turns out to be unfounded, no harm is done. An officer can quickly clear the scene and be en route to another location where they are needed.



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Calling the Police

When residents report suspicious activity, they must understand this is “NOT” a high priority call. Crimes in progress, auto accidents or medical calls will take priority over a request to investigate suspicious activity. Callers should understand they may have to be patient, depending on the activity level in the city at the time the call is placed.

When reporting suspicious activity, the police department would prefer residents to use the **non-emergency line: (913) 895-6300**. This will put the caller in touch with dispatchers who will quickly prioritize the call. If the caller cannot remember the non-emergency number, they may call **911**. This only should be used for emergencies, but it can be used for suspicious activity calls if the caller cannot remember the non-emergency line.

The caller should be prepared to answer a series of questions so the dispatcher can determine the nature and priority of the call. The caller should be prepared to answer these questions:

- **What is the exact location of the activity?** Providing an exact address or cross street ensures the officer’s response is timely. Far too often callers only can provide generalities, causing officers to miss the area and leave without reaching the area of concern.
- **Can you provide a description of the individual(s) or vehicle(s)?** When reporting suspicious persons, begin with general descriptions and work toward more details. A reliable method often taught to new officers is to begin with the head and work down. A general description should follow this format: race, sex, age, height/weight, hair description, clothing, complexion, speech, scars and tattoos. If describing a vehicle use a similar format: Color, make (*Chevrolet, Dodge, Toyota*), model (*Malibu, Charger, Camry*), year and license plate. The license plate is important because this provides responding officers an opportunity to take a sneak peek at what they might encounter.
- **What is suspicious about the person(s) or vehicle(s)?** Many callers feel uncomfortable or are unable to articulate the purpose of their call. Don’t embellish or fabricate a story to make your suspicions sound credible. The caller must explain accurately what they observe, and they may include information the neighborhood has experienced, such as a number of burglaries or other crimes of concern.
- **Do you desire to be contacted by the officers responding to the area?** Callers are not obligated to leave their name or be contacted by officers. The police department would prefer to contact the resident observing the suspicious activity, but it is not required. Callers may request that the officers contact them following contact with the individuals of concern.

When there is a communication gap between residents and the police, criminals have a much easier time working their chosen profession. By working together, and sharing timely information, residents and police officers can disrupt the plans of criminals and aid in their apprehension.

For more information regarding security or for help with developing a security program in your neighborhood or business, contact the OPPD’s Community Oriented Policing Unit at (913)895-6408; email: mike.betten@opkansas.org
To request a presentation from the police department go to “Request a Guest Speaker” at: www.opkansas.org/Res/Police_and_Fire/Police_Department/Speaker_Request/index.cfm