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Fact Sheet: Personal Safety

Crime can happen anywhere at any time. It is important to be aware of your surroundings and to secure your belongings. Those working alone are particularly vulnerable to crime, especially at night. It is highly recommended that nobody travel alone in field areas, even during personal leisure time. Major concerns include:

- Theft
- Aggressive Encounters
- Assault

Preparation and Training

- Check-in procedures are essential for lone workers. Be sure someone is aware of where you are going and what time you should return. This is especially important if visiting a home. If confidentiality is an issue, leave addresses and names in a sealed envelope to be opened only in case of emergency. Maintain an emergency response procedure. For example, you may want to have a designated person call halfway during an interview to check-in.
- Have emergency numbers memorized or programmed into your fully charged cell phone.
- You must have written permission of the property owner, or controlling agency, to conduct research on their property.
- Abide by all posted signs/placards. If an area is posted to be off limits or closed, and you do not have permission by landowner or controlling agency, you may not access the area.
- Obey any restrictions on sample (rock, plant, animal, etc.) collection. In National Parks, it is illegal to perform any sample collections without special permits. If you collect, you could face fines or jail.
- Inform community leaders that you will be conducting research in their area. Communicating with these leaders may inform you of unexpected local events, customs, and hazards that may impact your work. Non-profit organizations doing community outreach can also be a resource for specific information on neighborhood issues and can facilitate contact with community leaders.
- Consider informing the police about your research activities, so that they are aware of your presence.
- If you are planning to travel internationally, familiarize yourself with local customs, political/economic tensions, laws, security concerns, and other potential hazards.

- Be aware of local laws on photography. In many foreign locations it is illegal to photograph sensitive locations. You may be legally detained for doing so.

General Safety

- When possible, work in groups of two or more.
- Always lock your vehicle.
- Do not leave valuables in vehicles in plain sight.
- Do not pick up hitchhikers and do not hitch hike.
- Wear conservative clothing and limit jewelry.
- Do not wear shoes or restrictive clothing that hinders your ability to run or may restrict breathing (scarves, ties, etc.).
- Do not approach people who are loitering especially in confined areas (elevators, stairwells, etc.).
- Walk on the exteriors of sidewalks away from potential hiding spots.
- Minimize the amount of money you carry and practice discretion while handling money.
- Do not allow strangers to use your phone.
- If you do not have access to a lavatory, use facilities at a public building such as a police station or government office.
- Exercise caution in taking photographs, always ask permission before photographing people.
- Try to diffuse any aggressive confrontations by explaining your research project. If that is ineffective or you feel uncomfortable, leave the area immediately.
- Consider your wording choice when describing your research to members of the public. Words that you may use in publications may give the wrong impression or sound offensive to community members. For example, the phrase “introduced species” may give someone the impression that you are releasing a species as part of an experiment, a better phrase to use would be “invasive species”.
- Do not confront anyone that appears to be committing a crime. Remove yourself from the situation and alert authorities from a safe location.
- Be conscientious to landowners when working in your field location. Do not intentionally damage or disturb vegetation, livestock, or natural formations.

Interviews and Surveys

- Try to conduct interviews and surveys in public locations, like a library or restaurant.
- Anticipate any potential aggression triggers (e.g., interview subject matter) and set expectations before any face-to-face interaction.
- Do not continue if a subject becomes aggressive.
- Do not touch somebody without express permission, even if done in a consoling manner.
- Ask permission before writing, photographing, or recording anything.
- Avoid distracted behaviors (cracking knuckles, checking phone, etc.) that may agitate your subject.

- Do not conduct an interview in the subject's vehicle.

House Calls

- Make every effort to schedule the visit and return to your accommodation during daylight hours.
- Anticipate your escape options, if the situation becomes volatile.
- If you feel unsafe, immediately leave the situation.
- Do not enter a house if the person you are there to see is not present, they seem to be inappropriately dressed, or under the influence of drugs or alcohol.
- Make sure you only bring what you need into a home, as you may have to leave quickly.
- Keep your cell phone on your person rather than in a bag.
- Ask that animals be secured before entering.

International Concerns

- Keep in mind gender, race, and sexual orientation status may have legal or cultural restrictions in some areas.

Emergency Response

- If you are a victim of a crime in the U.S., contact local emergency services immediately.
- If you are the victim of a crime overseas, contact the local emergency services to report the incident and get immediate help. Contact your international assistance provider and U.S. Embassy or Consulate, for assistance navigating the local processes. Request a copy of the police report. In some countries, reporting a sexual assault can result in the person reporting being arrested.

References and Additional Resources

- [Travel advisories](#) are presented by the U.S. Department of State. [Additional information](#) regarding handling crimes that occur overseas.
- MIT's International Assistance Provider: International SOS (membership number 11BSGC000066) tel.; +1 215 942 8478; [International SOS](#)
- Adapted from *Personal Safety Fact Sheet*, by University of Maryland: Department of Environmental Safety, Sustainability & Risk (<https://essr.umd.edu/about/research-safety/field-research-safety/planning>) with permission.