

What Is Crime and How Can It Be Prevented?

What Is Crime?

Crime is breaking the law. Laws are rules and regulations that reflect the values of society and are made by federal, state, and local legislative bodies.

Crime can also be defined as behaviors and acts for which society provides a penalty. Federal, state, and local legislative and judicial bodies determine penalties for people who do things that are illegal or fail to do things that are legally required.

Crimes can involve violence against a person or taking or damaging property. Violent crimes against people include the following:

- **Assault:** An attempt or threat to physically attack a person or an unlawful physical contact inflicted by one person upon another without consent
- **Homicide:** Intentionally causing the death of another person
- **Robbery:** Taking or attempting to take another person's property by force or by threat of force
- **Rape:** Sexual intercourse by force or without consent

Crimes against property include those in which property is damaged, destroyed, or stolen without direct confrontation with the victim. Property crimes include the following:

- **Arson:** Damaging or destroying property by fire or explosion without the owner's consent, or an attempt to do so
- **Burglary:** Unlawful entry into a building or other fixed structure with or without the use of force with the intent of taking something
- **Extortion:** Use of threats to obtain the property of another, commonly called "blackmail"
- **Forgery:** Falsely creating or altering a document with intent to defraud, such as signing someone else's name to a check
- **Larceny:** Taking or trying to take another person's property, other than a motor vehicle, without permission but without the use of force or threat
- **Motor vehicle theft:** Taking or trying to take another person's motor vehicle without permission
- **Receiving stolen property:** Receiving or buying property that is known or believed to be stolen
- **Robbery:** Taking property from a person's immediate possession by force or threat of force
- **Vandalism:** Willful destruction of or damage to the property of another person

The Effects of Crime

All crimes have harmful consequences to the victim and to the community. The victim may suffer primary injuries (arising directly from the crime) or secondary injuries (caused by other people).

Primary Injuries

Primary injuries are a direct result of the crime and may be physical, financial, or emotional.

Physical injuries: These are usually obvious and visible and may include the following:

- Cuts, bruises, broken bones, and other wounds
- Damaged or destroyed property

Financial injuries: Although these are seldom readily apparent, they are often devastating and may include the following:

- Medical expenses
- Lost money or lost or destroyed property
- Legal fees
- Lost income from having to take time off from work to recover from the crime, cooperate with police investigations, and attend legal meetings and court proceedings
- Costs of transportation, lodging, meals, childcare, and other expenses for attending legal meetings and court proceedings
- Lost job or career because of a crime-related physical or emotional injury

Emotional injuries: Emotional injuries, while not always apparent, are often the most severe and long-lasting. Examples of emotional injuries include the following:

- A victim of assault becomes distrustful of strangers.
- A victim of robbery is afraid to be home alone.
- A rape victim is avoided by her family and friends.
- A burglary victim loses priceless family heirlooms.

Secondary Injuries

The victim's secondary injuries are a result of the crime but are not caused by the assailant directly. They are often the result of actions by other people, systems, and agencies. Friends may send subtle messages that the victim could have done more to avoid the crime, or they may withdraw from the victim, unsure of what to say or do. Even family members may become impatient when a victim takes a long time to get over the trauma. Sometimes police investigations or court processes upset victims because they believe that more attention is paid to ensuring the rights of the accused than to attending to the needs of the victim. Sometimes victims are frustrated because they see no progress being made by authorities.

How Can We Prevent Crime?

Community Crime Prevention Strategies

Crime in the community can be reduced through five important strategies that everyone can do:

- **Educate the community about crime.** Hold assemblies or workshops in your place of worship, school, or neighborhood. Plan a crime prevention week for your community, and kick off the event at a worship service. Talk about crime safety tips with older people in your church, synagogue, or temple.
- **Remove or reduce the opportunity for crime to be committed.** Follow safe, commonsense procedures whether you are playing outside, riding in a car, taking public transportation, or even staying at home. Be there for your friends when they need someone to walk home with.
- **Report crimes to the police,** and help make the criminal responsible for his or her acts. Your willingness to report the crime may keep the criminal from victimizing someone else.
- **Serve as a good role model** for younger kids, friends, family, neighbors, and congregation members. If residents in your community see that you are reducing your chances of becoming a victim, they will learn from your good example. Help others learn the rules for safe behavior.
- **Build community support and cooperation.** Work in partnership with law enforcement agencies, civic groups, PTAs, groups in your place of worship, youth clubs, or victims' groups to develop programs and projects that address the causes of crime in your community. If there are no projects you can join, talk to some friends and helpful adults about starting one.