

Parking Lot Security

Security Planning for Families

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Parking lots come in all shapes and sizes from the gigantic high-rise or subterranean multi-level structures to the flat lots of a small retail strip-center with only a few stores. While parking lots provide a great service by allowing us access to retail and office centers, they sometimes create a substantial risk. What determines the relative safety of a parking are governed by three factors. They are 1) the nature of the parking lot, 2) the crime history, and 3) the location.

Nature of a Parking Lot

A parking lot is best described by the design and how and when it is used. The crime rate of a parking lot can be affected positively or negatively by its' design. Large high-rise or subterranean structures can have poor visibility because of walls, pillars, and elevation changes. Large flat parking lots attached to a regional mall can offer a car-thief great visibility to watch for security and great escape routes. The time of day, traffic, and the use of the parking lot makes a difference to its' relative safety. As you can imagine, late at night some parking lots can become remote with no available witnesses to watch over the area. A parking lot outside of a nightclub will have different problems than a lot adjacent to a day-use only professional office building. At nighttime, lighting is an important condition that allows us to see potential threats and thereby deters some criminals. You should be able to see and identify someone at 100 feet. If lighting is inadequate, park somewhere else.

Property Crime

The most common crime in parking lots is theft or vandalism. Where else can you find such a selection of automobiles left unattended--it's a thief's dream. The most frequent crimes are auto vandalism and auto burglary. Thieves think nothing about smashing out your car window to steal a stereo, a portable telephone, or some item left on the seat. What they need is a little time and no witnesses. Some parking lots are notorious for auto thefts and auto burglaries. Sometimes the explanation is that they are located adjacent to excellent escape routes such as freeway on-ramps or major high-speed thoroughfares. See our site on Auto theft Facts (www.crimedoctor.com/autotheft1.htm). Flat parking lots are preferable to thieves because of ease of visibility and ease of escape. Multi-level pay lots offer some deterrence because of the access control and the requirement to pass the video-monitored toll booth upon exit. Valet parking is considered safer because the attendant goes out into the lot for you to retrieve your car. Another benefit is that unauthorized persons stand out in this special

parking area that is supposed to be accessed by attendants only. If you are a woman alone, consider using valet parking at hotels and where available, especially at night.

Remember these parking lot security tips:

- Park only in a well-lighted and a highly-visible location
- If you cannot see 100 feet at night, park elsewhere
- Park in higher traffic areas of the lot, if possible
- Move your car during the day to improve its' location
- Remove all interior valuables from plain view
- Lock your doors and roll up all windows
- Use a highly-visible steering wheel or brake pedal locking device
- Use a car alarm and alarm decals, if possible
- Use valet parking for greater personal security, if available

Violent Crime

The most common violent crimes committed in urban parking lots are stranger-on-stranger purse snatch and strong-arm robbery, and occasionally carjackings and abductions. If you think about it, we are all strangers in a large parking lot. Violent criminals can blend in with the rest of us and get in close proximity fairly easily. Criminal predators can walk right by us and we will allow it because of the public setting. Next time you go to a large shopping center sit in the parking lot for a few minutes and observe how easy it would be for a criminal predator to approach and attack you or your family. Shoppers often walk to and from their cars totally consumed by their thoughts and thinking about what they are going to do next. Next time, watch shoppers as they approach their cars fumbling for their keys. They will turn their backs and attention completely away from those nearby to load their shopping bags into the car, and get children and infants installed inside the vehicle. Most shopping center and parking lot abductions and carjackings (more information at www.crimedoctor.com/carjacking.htm) occur precisely at this point.

Parking lot robbers are usually opportunists who look for the easiest person to victimize. They cowardly prey on older persons and women most often and prefer to attack them away from witnesses or security officers. These predators like to hang out in the parking lot looking for potential victims. They will pretend to talk on a telephone or watch from inside a car. They will try to get close to their intended victim before they strike. Most victims have said that they never saw the robber approach. You must stay alert at all times. If you see a suspicious male approaching you, change directions. If he appears to follow, look him in the eyes and yell at him to STOP. However, do not stand your ground and confront him. Get out of there, if you can. Run toward other people and point him out. You can always apologize later, if you are mistaken. If no other people are close by, go into the closest store or office building and call the police.

Family Security Plan

To protect yourself or your family in this setting the best defense is awareness. Awareness will allow you to anticipate the potential danger and plan ahead for the next time you go to a parking lot. Planning includes selecting a safer time to shop (daylight) and arranging not to shop alone, if possible. You can plan where to park (i.e. not next to a large enclosed van) and park in high traffic areas. You can plan to scan the area for suspicious males before parking and exiting your vehicle. You can also plan not to park or exit your vehicle if suspicious males are in the area. Families should agree in advance to exit and enter their vehicle quickly and lock the doors. Families should be trained to look around their vehicle before approaching and retreat if anyone suspicious is loitering in the area. They should be trained to return quickly to the shopping center and alert mall security or call the police. This all becomes second nature after a while. A little awareness (educated-paranoia) is healthy and can keep your family safe.

- Be aware and alert to male predators in the parking lot
- Plan when to go and where to park. Closest is not always best
- Do not get out of the car if you see suspicious males. Follow your instincts
- Upon return, scan the area around your car as you approach it
- Teach your family to enter and exit the care quickly and lock all doors
- Yell at anyone following you, without stopping to confront him
- Return to the store or office if anyone looks or acts suspicious
- Call the police or notify security of any suspicious activity