

HENNEPIN COUNTY AGING INITIATIVE

Community Focus Group Project: Safety, Vulnerability and Preparedness

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Hennepin County

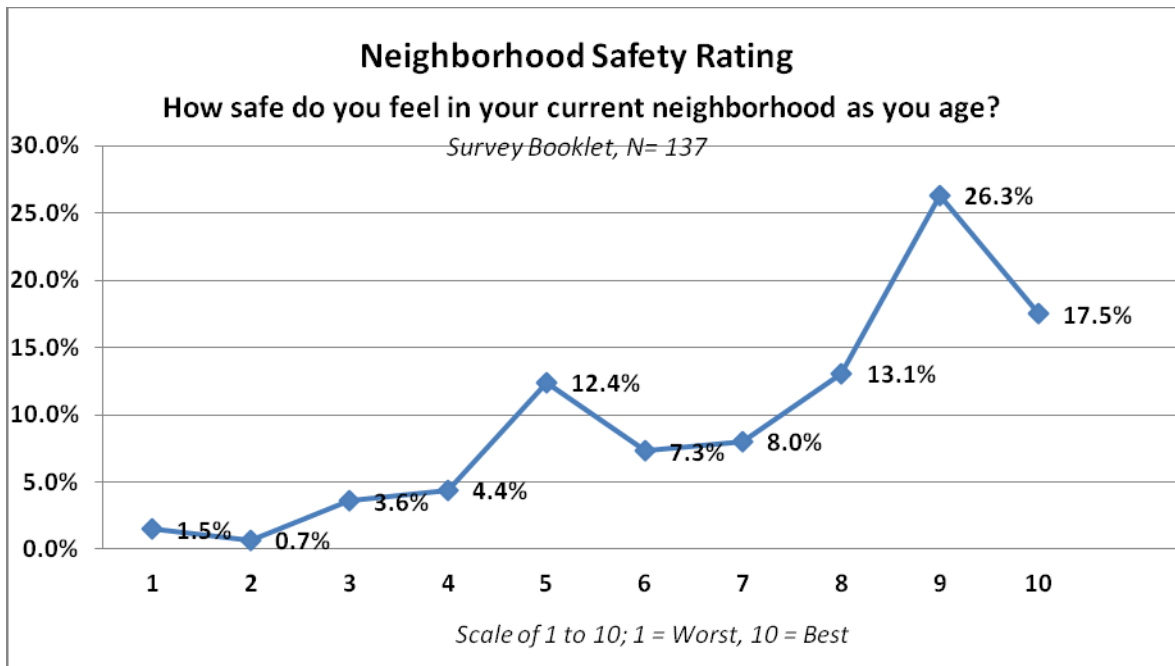
Research, Planning & Development Department

SAFETY

Safety Preview. In the focus group discussions, we found safety to be of concern in a variety of ways, some beyond the questions we asked about neighborhood and housing safety. Concerns were raised about political climate, immigration issues, maintaining public safety in smaller, exurban communities. Neighborhood safety ratings were overall fairly positive, although they varied by geography. On average, people rated themselves at about “6” in emergency preparedness; we heard little information beyond taking shelter in bad weather, or calling 911, suggesting more could be done to promote emergency preparedness. In addition, more could be done to educate this age group about identity theft, how to report neglect or abuse, and about the importance of making legal arrangements prior to a crisis or emergency. Providing low or no-cost help to encourage people to make such arrangements would increase the numbers of those prepared before a crisis strikes.

In written questions and in group discussions, we asked questions about safety – in their homes, neighborhoods and public spaces, and about potential elder abuse, identity theft and other types of possible victimization. Participants provided a range of helpful views on ways to improve neighborhood and public safety and to make neighborhoods more “senior friendly.”

Rating of neighborhood safety. Written questions asked participants to rate, on a scale of 1 (worst) to 10 (best), how safe they feel their current neighborhood is as they age. As the table and graph below indicate, the majority of participants rated their neighborhood safety fairly high; 50 percent rated it as “8” or above. Not surprisingly, these ratings varied by location. The lowest ratings were for urban areas, higher for suburban and exurban areas.



Concerns about crime and vulnerability. While these ratings of neighborhood safety are fairly high, we did hear in a number of focus groups concerns about increased crime overall, affecting people's perceptions of safety in their own neighborhoods and beyond. Several noted that increasing physical vulnerability is a significant concern, and a greater concern as people age.

"Because you're more vulnerable. You always see people beating up old people, you can't move as fast when you're older, so it's scary...they have no qualms about pushing you down."

"You know, safety is an issue too. You know, I used to think I was big and bad, but now, you know, at night, you know, I'm scared to walk to the street to go a hotel. The world has really changed now, you know, and just going to the bus stop is — a challenge. Is a challenge, yeah, because, you know, I'm not biased or anything like that, but I see a couple young kids, man, got them pants sagging and stuff like that, you know — you know, I've got to admit, the first thing that runs through my mind is they're going to rob me. I mean, it's not constantly on my mind, but I think about it, you know."

"See, I was born and raised in North Minneapolis, and I didn't used to fear the streets. You know what I'm saying? But I'll tell you the truth, hell, I'm scared. Every time I walk them streets ...Every time I walk down the streets, I'm looking around, and I'm checking out my surroundings....Things have changed. It's changed."

"My neighborhood is -- keeps getting hit with a lot of burglaries so I worry about an intruder into my home. I do a lot right now to protect my house so that people will think I'm home and not barge in when I'm not there I do worry about being in my house too though because I'm afraid every day when I come home that somebody's broken in or that they will break in. I worry when I walk around at night, I always make sure nobody's peeking around the corner or I don't know. It's scary."

Many pointed out they while they feel safe walking in their neighborhoods in the daytime, they are reluctant to go out at night.

"[I] Don't think it's safe to walk from the car to the apartment building. Worry at night, dark. Don't like to walk in neighborhood."

"Mine is walking the three blocks from the bus stop to my house, which is three blocks off of a main street, after dark. Yes, in winter, ice and crime and dark and so on.

"Sometimes walking from the bus stop, I've almost anywhere I've lived, I've had people ask me if I needed drugs, or they need a cigarette, or they want bus fare, or money."

Enhancing safety. In several groups there were comments about the importance of knowing others in the neighborhood, which makes neighborhoods feel safer.

"In the neighborhood, they should talk more about it. Because only one person cannot help, cannot change. Association. Work together."

"I'm a firm believer in getting to know your neighbors. I think that is the best insurance policy you could ever have and invest in. So many people are afraid to knock on the neighbor's door, they think that's a problem. I don't have any problem with that. I want to know who lives around me."

“Just like through the Block Club program through the police department, just making people more aware of people in their homes and helping them stay in their homes by just having more contact with the neighbors and more eyes watching them. And I just think that would be helpful to keep people that are kind of stuck at home feeling more connected to their neighborhood.”

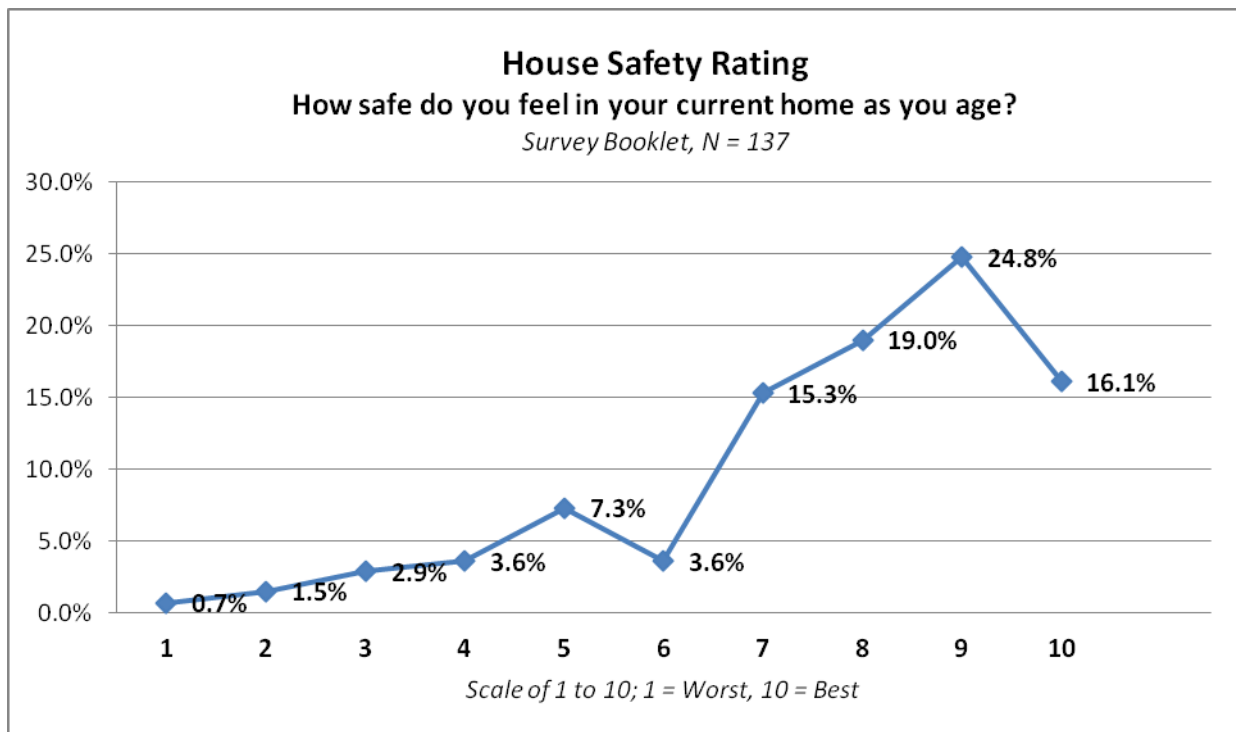
There were also discussions about using common sense or street savvy to avoid becoming a victim of crime. Concerns were also expressed about becoming more vulnerable with age.

“The thing about not going out and looking like I have too much money on me — I don’t want to carry a fancy purse. I feel safer if I put it in old envelopes and carry, you know, one of these used bags, recyclable bags or something. I just don’t want to look like I have much. I mean, so —Just kind of streetwise. Being cautious. No Bloomingdale’s bag on one shoulder. Dress down.”

“And, you know, being physically more vulnerable as you age, it’s a concern, and you have to be aware of your surroundings and you have to make sure that you’re not putting yourself in a situation where you might be at risk. But it shouldn’t be a risk to just take the bus to go

Relationships with police officers came up as issues in several of the focus group discussions. There are perceptions that different racial or ethnic groups are treated differentially. There is hesitation to call police if family members have had previous issues with police. A policy of charging for police calls was also reported as a deterrent.

Housing safety. We asked participants to rate the safety of their current housing. In a pattern similar to the neighborhood ratings, most rated their current housing as very safe. Ratings on average were **7.68** on a 10-point scale, with 50 percent of participants rating their housing at 8 or higher.



Most expressed concern about steps, both outside and within their homes. Most recognize that they might have to consider moving to a location without stairs.

“It is a problem, I have stairs. And it is hard to get in and out of the tub with my knee. Where the elders live, there are bars and no stairs and very nice and not a problem.”

“I’m 64, and for some reason, it’s like when I’m just taking a — because I live mainly on one floor, but the laundry room is downstairs, and sometimes I’ll just be like taking a basket of laundry down the stairs and I’m just kind of like what if I fell.”

“When I think about where I might want to be in ten or fifteen years, it’s not in my house with all the steps. It would be in a place where it was easy to walk.”

Enhancing home safety. It was noted by many that staying in one’s home might depend on relatively simple remodeling choices. In at least one group it was suggested that Hennepin County could encourage this.

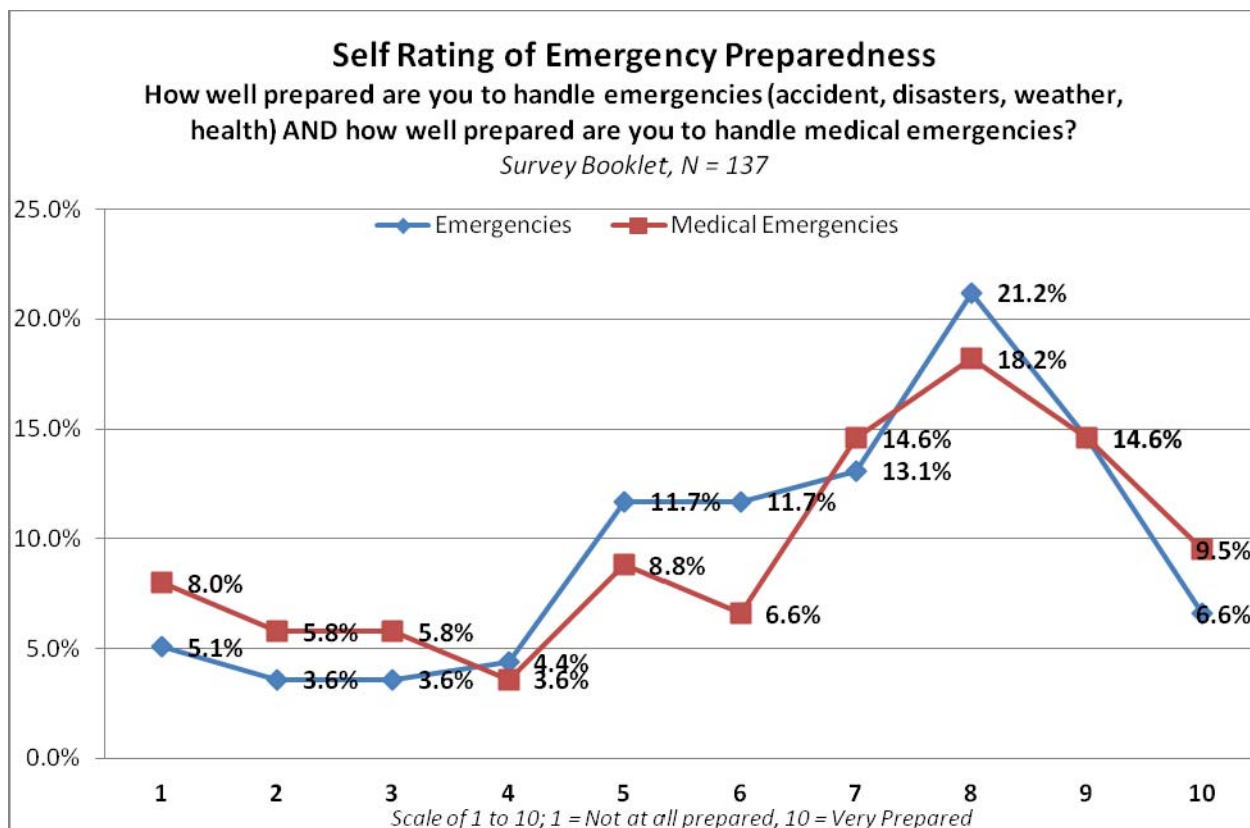
“There are a lot of things we can do in our houses to make them safer, and that I think is something where the county could help. A lot of people try to help. The university extension has done a lot with that. But there’s simple things. I’m going to put a new bathroom in the basement, and I’m putting grab bars everywhere and I’m not going to have little slippery surfaces, and, you know, you can add railings and all that kind of stuff. So there are little things you can do yourself.”

[The County can help by] “...promoting, providing information, and [helping] finding somebody to do it that you know is good at it and is honest and is going to be a good person.”

Many others, however, expressed interest in, if not specific plans to, find more “friendly” housing as they age. They are hopeful to avoid steps, but also downsize upkeep and chore responsibilities

“Our house is not conducive to aging well. We’ve got stairs, and so for my mom we had to do major renovation to the bathroom that’s next to her bedroom. And so as we age we probably need to find a place that’s like all on one level, you know, and has handicap accessibility, you know, just in case we’re no longer able to move like we move now.”

Emergency preparedness. We asked participants questions about how well prepared they are to handle emergencies. Below are responses to two written questions, asking for a rating of preparedness to handle emergencies, and medical emergencies.



On average people rated their level of preparedness at **6.6** for emergencies, and **6.4** for medical emergencies. In focus group discussions, the vast majority could identify the appropriate actions to take when weather threatened. Participants were less sure what would be required or what they could do to prepare for other kinds of emergencies. Most know that calling 911 in a medical emergency is the correct thing to do, but no one volunteered information, specific training or other actions they might take if subject of or witness to a medical emergency. Few of those living alone reported taking steps or awareness of ways to insure they would be found in case of accident or medical emergency.

Neglect or abuse issues. Most participants in the focus group discussion felt they know how to report neglect or abuse. More than 70 percent answered this written question affirmatively; a large number said they would call 911. Others thought they could discover the appropriate place by searching on the internet, or asking someone they know who is knowledgeable about services. Some wondered if this was featured on the County website in an easy to find location, others said they would go to their culturally appropriate providers (social service organizations) to help make a report. Some did express concerns about their increasing vulnerability to abuse or victimization.

“I think older people are targeted too. My mother, the sweet mother that she was, she got her purse stolen at a grocery store twice. People take advantage of — you can read about it in the newspaper — financially people try to take advantage of older people when they don’t have an advocate, somebody looking out for them. So people, if they are isolated and by themselves too much, they can be targets for crime and other bad things that can happen.”

“Well, I think there are layers — I would call it layers of vulnerability. I mean, you’re vulnerable because you’re an older person, you’re vulnerable if you’re disabled, you’re vulnerable if you’re

gay or lesbian, you're vulnerable if you're a person of color. I mean, you start stacking all those on top of each other, and you're really in probably the most vulnerable position you could be in."

Legal arrangements. We asked a written question in the survey booklet, about whether or not participants have made legal arrangements "to address your financial obligations if you are unable to do so?" Fifty, or 34 percent, of participants indicated they have done so. In the focus group discussions, quite a few reported "thinking about it," but not acting, or as one put it, "It's been on my New Year's list to do...this living will and do my power of attorney, and eventually I'm going to do it." Concerns were expressed about the costs of developing legal documents, as well as about access to high quality, unbiased information about rights, laws and options.

A number of people pointed out that they have done so as part of a "package" working with a lawyer to draw up a will, health care directive, and durable power of attorney. In many of the groups, particularly the lower income and immigrant groups, few people have done so and many expressed concerns. In at least five groups, the issue of cost came up.

Others raised issues about trust, and identifying a person who would have the power of attorney or able to make decisions for the health care directive.

"Who can you trust? You think you can trust a family member, you know, you're picking the right one that might be your favorite, or this one might have certain qualifications or something. But I've seen it happen. My mama, she didn't have no money. She had ratty underclothes and — where is her money going, you know? She don't need to pay no rent...so where's her money? She can't spend it. She has dementia. Well, why do her shoes have holes in them? And she has diabetes, so she has to have perfect shoes, you know. So you have to really watch."

"My problem is with the power of attorney and all like that, I don't have anybody that I could trust. There's no one in my family that I could trust to take care of things like that. The friends and family that I do have, have their own issues going on, and I really don't want to get involved with that. So you know, if you're alone, what do you do?"

The GLBT group had an extended discussion about legal issues and particular issues affecting their community.

"I think if a marriage amendment goes through — we're screwed. We're back to ground zero about what rights people will have. If your partner of 30, 40 years is dying in the hospital, if you want to pay for a burial, is you want to visit the if they're in ICU, you know, all that is up for grabs again. And even if you do everything right legally, the paperwork, there's no guarantee. It may mean nothing, because next of kin trumps."

The group could recount instances where legal arrangements were not upheld.

"I think this is a GLBT issue that we should make a point of, because I know when our kids were little, and before we could do a second parent adoption in Hennepin County, we got durable power of attorney and we did wills, we did everything that was possible legally to do, and we were still told if you got a conservative judge who could just throw everything out the window."

In several of the groups, suggestions were made about how residents could be encouraged to make legal arrangements before a problem or crisis occurs.

“That is something where workshops on doing that and having the forms available and someone to help you at all the libraries and that sort of thing probably would be useful. Even on Election Day. I mean, they could have somebody in a room off to the side saying, you know, ‘Have you thought about a healthcare directive or a durable power of attorney?’ And, you know, you could go there and get some assistance.”

Making senior friendly neighborhoods. In the focus group discussions, we asked people to identify things that make a difference in making neighborhoods safer and more senior friendly. There were numerous suggestions.

“Sidewalks. Some places they exist, some places they don’t, and that would be helpful.”

“In Hennepin County there are no sidewalks in the elders areas. If you go out...the main streets they have sidewalk and more safety and majority of Somali where they live in this area they go to (Somali) malls. That area also is not safe. It's not safe even the news they getting killed, they get harmed so the seniors they couldn't go.”

“Lighting, instead of being on a pole way up here somewhere and making all sorts of weird shadows and interfering with the feeling in the neighborhood, if it could be down lower and not glaring, that would help make the streets safer.”

“I really want to hone in on plowing and having the county — and the county does have roads that they do plow. It’s not just the city. The county needs to make sure that if they identify an area of the city where the people over 65 are and where they live and whose roads are accessible. That needs to be communicated to the transportation department some kind of way that this is a serious thing if they need emergency services in the winter.”