



“Where do older ACT women feel unsafe, and why?”

Introduction

There is a growing body of research showing a strong connection between health and wellbeing and the design and structure of cities. The built environment can be a major determinant of lifestyle and health, and can magnify health disparities and compound existing health conditions, especially among the elderly and other vulnerable groups (Marmot et al. 2010). Safe environments in cities are important because they reduce the risk of injury, and increase the perceptions of safety, which promote access and support active living.

Perceptions of personal safety, as well as actual safety, influence the extent to which public spaces are used. Women, particularly older women, are likely to modify their behaviour to avoid safety risks and this has repercussions for their use of public spaces eg they go out less at night, return home earlier, or go out at night only with an escort.

Urban planning is an important issue because it has the potential to encourage or inhibit the social participation of older women. Urban design affects the accessibility of essential services such as health care and other general services such as shopping centres, banks, post offices and public transport. This is because older women are more likely to be pedestrians and so require access to close public transport and to the design of neighbourhoods and facilities which promote safety in and around their home and from their home to essential facilities.

Fear about safety plays a part in the way older women use public space, whether they use it at all, and if so, when they use it and what locations they use. The impact, whatever the cause, on their use of public spaces has implications for the planning and design of public spaces.

Access to adequate transport is also an important determinant of older women's economic and social participation. Lack of access to transport can limit older women's ability to participate and can also isolate them within their communities. Research has consistently shown that women's experience of safety in public transport is different from that of men. In particular, the issue of safety has been a main factor in women's decisions about using public transport and/or going out at night. (Bell, W., "Women and Community Safety",

September 1998. Paper presented at the conference *Safer Communities: Strategic Directions in Urban Planning*, p.3 at <<http://www.aic.gov.au/conferences/urban/bell.pdf>>, viewed 16 July 2005.)

Research in Canada of the findings from the use of Safety Audits about the design of urban spaces for women's safety are summarised as follows:

- The planning and design features of some environments can and do contribute to women's perception of personal risk in a city.
- Sensitive design and planning can contribute to women feeling safer.
- Although women are fearful of areas of their environment, especially at night they felt that they could not influence environmental design decision-making processes.
- Urban planning and design do not create problems of violence to women but a recognition of the dangers and the implications for women's use of the city could do much to create a safe environment.

Research in Australia and overseas shows overwhelming evidence that older women are fearful of particular situations including:

- modes of transport other than the car;
- going out at night;
- use of public transport, in particular travel at night;
- the situation at either end of a public transport journey i.e. waiting at a bus stop or walking to a parked car;
- the use of city centre car parks particularly at night and if multi-storeyed; and
- open spaces and pathways (alleyways and underpasses).

Background to safety audits

The Women's Safety Audits are a tool which is concerned with perceptions of personal safety - specifically, how safe women feel as individuals in public spaces and living environments. They recognise that women know when and where they feel unsafe in public spaces and why.

Women's safety audits have been defined as 'a process which brings individuals together to walk through a physical environment, evaluate how safe it feels to them, identify ways to make the space safer and organize to bring about these changes' ([WACAV \(Women's Action Centre Against Violence Ottawa-Carleton\), 1995, p. 1](#)). Safety audits raise questions about the ways that our communities are planned, designed and managed, about how local decisions can add to, or detract from, women's safety.

WCHM saw safety audits as an effective community development tool, especially because they can involve those who are most vulnerable – not only 'women', but those with disabilities, or who are elderly. At their most basic level, women's safety audits are a tool to identify safe and unsafe spaces, and how unsafe spaces can be improved. But women's

safety audits can also show that locals without any particular urban planning expertise can turn their everyday understanding of insecurity in public spaces into recommendations for concrete action.

Older women as the focus

The ACT has one of the fastest-growing populations of people aged 60 years and over in Australia. This is expected to grow from 15.8% in 2010 to 19.6% by 2020, and to 22% by 2030. And while living arrangements for men and women up to the age of 65 years is similar in the ACT, it varies in later years, and women are more likely to live alone in their old age, due to a greater life expectancy and the experience of widowhood and divorce. Research shows that living alone may be linked to the development of depression, as well as increased isolation and reduced participation in community life.

Evidence also shows that for independence and a good quality of life, interaction with the local community is important for health and wellbeing - older women who are socially isolated tend to experience illness and poor health more often. The way in which older women are viewed by wider society, and how this is different for men, also impacts upon women's experience of the ageing process.

So WCHM decided to conduct an Older Women's Safety Audit Project in the ACT which focussed on seeking input from older women to discuss their safety concerns and ideas about how to make public spaces safer and thus more frequently used by older women.

Older women's use of public spaces is characterised by a higher use of shopping centres, parks, pathways, residential areas and public transport settings (because they are less likely to use cars to access them than men). Overall the project aimed to highlight the way urban planning decisions about the physical and social environment affect older women and their ability to feel that they can engage safely with these public spaces, and to identify any suggestions or solutions from older women to these issues.

Methodology

The project was carried out in four phases—a literature review, an online survey, focus groups and the safety audits.

The literature review was undertaken to provide a baseline analysis of what safety audit activity had been undertaken nationally and internationally and to identify best practice to inform the project. The literature review specifically looked at strategies to address women's safety issues including the use of women's safety audits.

The online survey was developed based on the literature findings and findings from previous consultations with ACT women by the Women's Centre for Health Matters (*an Older Women's Roundtable in 2009-10* and *an Older Women and Social Connectedness project in*

2010-11). WCHM ran the online survey to hear opinions of older women in the ACT and surrounding regions to guide our work in undertaking the audits. The online survey was used to have older women identify particular areas of focus for the safety audits, as well as to support WCHM to develop targeted and specific questions for the safety audit tool. A total of 102 responses were received to the survey from older women in the ACT.

At the completion of the online survey, four focus groups were held with older women from different areas of the ACT. These focus groups were led by WCHM using four key guiding questions relating to safety in public spaces. This information was recorded and then later transcribed and analysed.

The final safety audit locations were identified based on the findings from the online survey and the focus groups about women's views of public areas that were considered to be unsafe or where women felt unsafe. Twenty-three older women participated in the Audits which took place during September – November 2011. Some of the features that women were asked to keep in mind while doing the audit included:

- feelings about safety;
- who's around;
- finding their way around;
- location of public telephones, public toilets and automatic teller machines (ATMs);
- location of public transport (bus and taxi);
- safe and adequate car parking;
- lighting and visibility;
- types of activities; and
- maintenance and upkeep of public spaces.

Results of the Survey

Places where women reported feeling unsafe

Sixty-five percent of respondents said they felt unsafe in public toilets. This is relevant to older women's inclusion as research suggests that if public toilets are not available at public transport terminals and in city centres (within walking distance) some women will not travel at all.¹

Fifty-eight percent surveyed said they felt unsafe at bus interchanges and 48 percent in major public car parks. Particular spaces pinpointed by respondents included: Belconnen mall and public parking in Civic and parking areas at the Canberra hospital.

¹ Hanson J., Bichard, J., and Greed, C. (2007) *The Accessible Toilet Resource: Manual*, London: University College London, Bartlett Graduate School of Architecture in Author Unknown 2007, *A Place For Everyone? Gender Equality and Urban Planning*. A ReGender Briefing Paper, retrieved 29 May 2011, <<http://www.oxfam.org.uk/resources/ukpoverty/downloads/placeforeveryone.pdf>>

When asked why they felt unsafe in these spaces, many of the respondents highlighted feeling unsafe because of lack of lighting, feeling unsafe after dark, the perception of feeling unsafe because of the stories one has heard or because of what one hears in the media, and having a lack of people in some areas.

The final sites chosen for the audits were:

- Civic Car Parks around the ACT Legislative Assembly and Museum
- The Floriade public event
- The Canberra Hospital (travelling from the Woden Bus Interchange
- Woden Bus Interchange
- Belconnen bus interchange and community bus station
- Village Creek Precinct

Factors which contributed to older women feeling unsafe

Public places where older women felt unsafe had certain characteristics in common. Older women said they felt unsafe in places which:

- are dark and have poor lighting
- have large deserted spaces
- poor access to and from a location, or within the location, or have obstacles to access
- have a lack of signage or signage that is easy to understand (not large enough and unclear)
- are isolated and unused or poorly maintained
- are not visible to others or nobody watches over them (there is no natural surveillance)
- have no access to help
- have inadequate security
- have entrapment and hiding spots
- areas which encourage users or groups of users who are perceived as threatening or 'unsafe' (people in the area who appear to be under the influence of drugs, people begging for food in the area)

Older women with disabilities also identified feeling vulnerable in shopping centre car parks which often allocate distant spaces for disability spaces which disadvantages women if they are leaving city premises late at night.

Where do older women feel safe?

Not all public places felt unsafe to older women. Feelings of safety in public places changed over the course of a day. Fears for safety were worse at night. Seventy percent of respondents said that they feel safe on ACT public transport.

How have older women responded to feeling unsafe in public places?

Some strategies that older women told us they use when they are fearful of their safety are to walk confidently, walk close to houses so people could hear them call out, avoid eye contact with men, avoid walking in open isolated areas, avoid going out alone at night, avoid parking in undercover car parks and avoid going out to Civic at night. Many women ask security to walk them to their car if they have to leave a public space, such as the hospital or shopping centre, after dark.

Principles from the Audits

Safe, accessible footpaths

The particular needs of older pedestrians and people with disabilities need to be considered in path design. Walking is a very popular activity, but mobility problems are frequent among older people.

- Ensure that all major paths are accessible by ensuring the width, slope and type of surface are appropriate for people with a physical disability and those using wheelchairs, prams and trolleys ((because women are often carers).
- Provide good walking routes along predictable paths of travel, including approaches to health centres, car parks and shopping centres etc.
- Ensure durable, non-slip surfaces and even paving.
- Provide continuous footpaths, uninterrupted by variations in surface material.
- Keep paths clear, accessible and free of obstructions such as vegetation and tree debris.
- • Ensure a smooth transition from ramps to roads for people using wheelchairs or prams. Ramps should be at least as wide as the footpath or marked crossing point to eliminate squeeze points at transition areas.

Safe car parks

The location and design of car parks can have a significant impact on the safety and quality of public spaces. The presence of other pedestrians, and other well used buildings has the potential to increase natural surveillance, which improves safety and feelings of safety. All car park layouts and locations require careful and considered design, taking into account principles of natural surveillance and sightlines, lighting requirements and direct access by pedestrians to specific destinations.

- Ensure car parks for older people and people with disabilities are close to maximise natural surveillance and visibility and ensure that there is safe and convenient pedestrian access.
- Locate disabled parking in highly visible areas that are convenient to shops, public transport and other facilities.
- Design stairwells on car park perimeters to be open or see-through to assist informal surveillance from external public areas.

Safe, visible transport stops and interchanges

Public transport settings are particularly vulnerable and safety at bus stops and bus interchanges was highlighted as an issue as a result of their importance and their location relative to key areas of use such as shopping facilities and health related centres. There is therefore a need to promote safety at bus stops, taxi ranks and bus interchanges because the locations of bus interchanges and taxi ranks away from major activity areas such as shops reduced the feelings of safety.

- Ensure that all set down and pick up points are located, designed and managed to promote user safety by placing them in areas of high activity, with surveillance from passers-by, good maintenance and lighting.
- Avoid locating interchanges at different locations from the main activities of users.
- Locate public transport stops in active locations, close to and clearly visible from surrounding development such as shops and houses. Avoid isolated locations.
- Locate public transport stops within a comfortable walking distance for older people from services that they use on a regular basis.
- Use railings and gentle gradients in the approach to public transport stops, that recognise the access requirements for older people and people with limited mobility.
- Ensure stops are adequately lit for night use.
- Display clearly legible service information.
- They should also provide public telephones, rubbish bins and toilets within close proximity to the public transport stop.

Safe places to cross streets

- Ensure the standard provision of light-controlled pedestrian crossings along streets adjacent to shopping precincts, schools, childcare facilities, retirement villages, parks, stores or other predictable pedestrian destinations.
- Locate the crossings as close to the direct line of travel as possible.

Signage

- Consistently use large letters, strong colours, clear contrasts, non-reflective surfaces, simple graphics and standard international symbols on maps. These symbols are particularly useful to people who use English as a second language or cannot read.
- Illuminate signs that are essential for night use.
- Provide maps to assist in directing pedestrians so they feel safe and confident using public places that are unfamiliar.
- Design signage that is easy to see, read and understand.
- Signage should contain current and relevant information to encourage use, particularly the use of public facilities after dark.
- Locate signs at entrances and near centres of activity.
- Provide clear and regular signposting to highlight main pedestrian routes.

- Provide signage that indicates where to go for assistance, the location of public phones, taxis, tram and bus stops, and other public facilities.
- Clearly indicate closing hours at entrances to areas of public use.
- Provide directional signage to locate public facilities including toilets, telephones and taxis ranks.
- Provide current passenger information about routes and timetables at public transport facilities, and ensure information is legible and easily understood.

Safety after dark

In order for women in particular to gain safe access to public spaces after dark, to easily interpret the environment they are in so that they know where they are, what is ahead, and how to leave the space and where to find help if needed, the following were highlighted as important:

- Good lighting makes public places and paths visible and inviting at night. It also encourages their use and assists in natural surveillance.
- Identification of safe routes.
- Better signage and other information.
- Access to security.

Safe public open spaces

- Locate parks, play areas and public open spaces so they are visible from adjoining buildings such as roads, houses, streets and schools.
- Ensure footpaths and parks are well maintained, that routes have good sightlines to entrances and exits, that landscaping is pruned to ensure that sightlines are clear and that there are opportunities for surveillance.
- Pathways and road crossings near to retirement accommodation etc should be safe and suitable for older people. Avoid having public areas or pedestrian pathways near retirement accommodation etc that are unsafe or unsuitable for older people such as badly maintained footpaths that may cause falls and injuries.

Public facilities

- The use of public facilities such as public toilets, telephones, automated teller machines (ATMs) and cycle parking can increase people's vulnerability or sense of vulnerability in public spaces, especially at night, so the design, location and management of these facilities must be taken into account when assessing preferred locations.

Safe public toilets

- These need to be located in highly visible and accessible locations to promote their use and enhance people's perception of safety.
- Locate public toilets adjacent to high traffic areas rather than in isolated areas.
- Design approaches and entrances to public toilets to be highly visible so that people cannot loiter or enter them unseen.

Shopping Centres

The entrance and exit to shopping malls was an important component of achieving improved perceptions of safety for women as major users.

- This includes better physical security measures (including safety and security features) maintenance, and signage.
- Using security cameras to monitor the entry to shopping centres do not promote the safety of people outside, just the buildings.

Summary

While ACT urban planning is making places more supportive of walking and cycling or using public transport, this project showed that older women would use public spaces more if they perceive public spaces are safe. Planning and designing safe public spaces for older women means creating public spaces with features that enhance women's safety and feelings of safety, and detract from features that cause women's insecurity and feelings of insecurity. Planners, designers and architects need to place special focus on lighting, landscaping, visibility, potential hiding spots, signage, security personnel, proximity to other public spaces, proximity to emergency services, and access to public transportation. In order to ensure Canberra is an age friendly city, there needs to be consideration of the issues and suggested changes which were highlighted by older women in the project to make a safer physical environment including:

- pedestrian, wheelchair, walker, pram and mobility scooter friendly walkways to facilities - this means low, wide sidewalks
- outdoor seating in parks, transport stops and public spaces
- well-designed roads with safe crossings for older pedestrians close to facilities with high use
- buildings with lifts, escalators, ramps, wide doorways and passages, adequate signage and non-slip flooring
- car parks that allow easy entry and exit and are well lit and close to the entry for facilities with high use
- transport stops and exchanges which are clearly visible from the street

Next steps

There is a need to consult existing communities to ensure that the most direct and potentially safe routes are identified and that the design and materials are appropriate for special needs groups such as mobility impaired people. This will ensure that local public spaces are planned and designed according to the specific safety needs of women (and girls).