Safety Matters

Crime rates and arrests have been on the decline in Collier County, and most residents say they feel safe in their community.

By the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation

Collier County residents enjoy a high quality of life for a number of reasons, and top among them is living in a safe community. The majority of residents say they feel safe, and the statistics bear that out with decreasing arrests and crime rates.

That was the general consensus reported in the Collier County Community Needs and Assets Assessment, funded by the Richard M. Schulze Family Foundation to analyze the community’s strengths and weaknesses. The goal of the assessment is to share findings that allow community leaders and residents to develop priorities and strategies to address identified needs.

According to the Community Assessment, more than 80 percent of participants say they are satisfied or very satisfied with the safety of their community, and 82 percent are satisfied or very satisfied with emergency services. A majority—75 percent—say they feel safe in their communities at night. And this is great news.

For drivers and pedestrians, however, that sense of security drops. While 73 percent indicated they feel safe driving around town, many cited concerns about distracted or intoxicated drivers. An even smaller percentage, 63 percent, feel safe walking or biking.

Statistics back up driving concerns. During the past five years, traffic accidents increased by about 50 percent, resulting in more injuries and fatalities. “Both crashes and fatalities have been increasing at higher rates in Collier County and Southwest Florida than in the State of Florida,” according to the Community Assessment.

Of particular importance is the steady decline in crime rates and arrests since 2008, according to official Collier County statistics. The majority of Part 1 Uniform Crimes reported to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE) and FBI—homicide, motor vehicle theft, larceny, breaking and entering, and robbery—decreased from 2016 to 2017. The exceptions were sexual assault and aggravated assault.

Sexual assault rose 18.5 percent from 65 in 2016 to 77 in 2017. According to Collier County Sheriff’s Office (CCSO) statistics, aggravated assault has steadily risen, beginning with 529 in 2013, and increasing to 703 in 2016, and again to 722 in 2017. These types of violence aren’t typically random attacks, though.

In 2017, “nearly 68 percent of the aggravated assaults we responded to were taking place in a residential setting as opposed to a park, school or place of business. This suggests that the majority of aggravated assaults are domestic-violence related,” said Collier County Sheriff Kevin J. Rambosk.

Do you want to learn more about how safety in our community is being addressed by local leaders? The public is invited to attend a free community forum hosted by the Schulze Family Foundation to discuss the topic on Monday, Feb. 11, 5 p.m., at the Headquarters Library on Orange Blossom Drive in Naples.
What’s Working?

The City of Naples has also seen a steady decline in crime and arrests for years, including for Part 1 Uniform Crimes. “I’m not 100 percent sure why, but we’re obviously happy,” said Naples Patrol Operations Capt. John Barkley. The city has a manageable population of 22,000, but it consistently swells due to tourists coming into the city to work, seasonal visitors, for regional draws such as the mara, Fifth Avenue South and the hospital, and during a host of special events, from art and wine festivals to holiday extravaganzas. “We attract a lot more just the residents into the 12-square-mile city, he noted.

One reason for the decline in crime and arrests is due to close coordination between partner agencies—the sheriff’s office, city police departments and with the Lee County Sheriff’s Office, said Barkley, through formal, regular meetings and one-on-one investigations. “Criminals don’t know jurisdictional boundaries,” Barkley said. “When you’re sharing resources, it benefits the whole community. We work cooperatively to solve this stuff and that’s what makes a community safe as a whole.”

Another effective tool has been community policing and outreach, say Barkley and Rambouillet. Police and sheriff’s deputies reach out to the public during monthly Coffee with a Cop gatherings at local coffee shops to give tips on safety, listen to concerns and spread the word about free home and business security surveys.

Naples police will knock on a door at 12 a.m. to notify a resident who has left their garage door open inadvertently. Barkley dispenses the “9 p.m. Rule”—make it a routine to step outside and double-check that valuables are removed from your car, that your vehicle is locked, and that the garage doors are closed and locked.

Other make-sense measures are contributing to a safer community. More residents are installing security systems with motion-sensor lights and cameras. “It’s been a huge factor for us working crimes,” Barkley said. There is also a heightened sense of awareness: “People are becoming more active. If they see something, they contact law enforcement.”

Despite traffic congestion, emergency response times meet standard benchmarks, said Collier County Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Chief Tabatha Butler. Collier County EMS ran more than 44,000 calls and transported 29,000-plus patients to the hospital last year. Keeping up with population growth is a challenge, but Butler’s department closely monitors 5- and 10-year plans for adding ambulances and stations to meet those demands.

The city is equipped with specialized hazmat, dive, marine, and backcountry rescue teams, and high-caliber firefighters and paramedics whose training exceeds basic standards, said North Collier Fire Control and Rescue District Chief James Cunningham, “which is why the community is so safe.” His biggest concern is keeping up with population growth because funding through ad valorem tax is capped by state law at 3 percent, though the call volume went up 8 percent in 2017 and the costs for services increased by 5 percent. Fire and emergency medical crews work to maintain efficiencies while reducing duplications. “We get success through collaboration and coordination,” he said.

To outwit congestion, Cunningham said he’s used a number of strategies to maintain efficiencies while reducing duplications. “We get success through collaboration and coordination,” he said.

The island has 8-foot-wide shared-use paths on heavily traveled roads, plenty of street lighting and lots of eyes on the streets as people head to the parks and beaches. Traffic and medical calls increase during season, when the population swells upwards of 40,000 to 50,000. “We call it the simple factor—the more people, the more issues. Our call volume increases, but we don’t see a major influx of crime,” Schettino said.

Collier County Public Schools works creatively and aggressively to make the schools a safe environment for its 48,000 students. Addressing the social and emotional wellbeing of students through a system-wide program begins in kindergarten and continues throughout students’ high school careers. “We come in every day and do everything we can to keep the community and parents up to speed on prevention,” said CCPS Administrative Director of Security & Environmental Management Tim Kutz.
On the Road

A 50 percent increase in traffic accidents countywide can be blamed on several contributing factors: a steadily rising population, a seasonal influx of out-of-town visitors and tourists who aren't familiar with local roads, speeding and distracted driving.

Traffic accidents are on the rise in Collier County, and many fatalities are linked to the failure to wear seat belts. Collier County Emergency Services ran more than 44,000 calls last year.

North Collier Fire Control and Rescue District is equipped to handle a wide range of emergencies, from hazmat spills to marine rescues.

Traffic injuries to pedestrians and bicyclists. Traffic enforcement initiatives.

We continue to perform special traffic enforcement initiatives. Traffic disputes working in teams in marked and unmarked vehicles.

The Coalition spearheads a “Lights for Bikes” program to give bike lights and reflective vests to low-income workers who depend on their bikes for transportation.

The vision of the master plan, expected to be finalized soon, “is to provide a safe, inviting and convenient bicycle and pedestrian network throughout Collier County that delivers mobility, economic, recreational and quality of life benefits for all residents and visitors.” These issues are being addressed in Golden Gate and Immokalee with “Walkable Community” plans.

The coalition is advocating for the passage of a state law that would make texting and talking on a hand-held cellphone while driving a primary offense for which a driver can be pulled over and ticketed. Such proposals have failed in Florida. Texting bans are law in most states, except four, including Florida. “Distracted driving is exponentially increased and pedestrians and cyclists are at the biggest risk,” said Avola. A distracted driver may be able to correct in time to avoid running into another car, but perhaps not an unseen pedestrian. “They might notice they are going to hit a car, but they will have already hit a cyclist,” she said. All of the progress that’s made with infrastructure improvements and driver education “has been eaten up by distracted and irresponsible driving,” she said.

Currently, texting is considered a secondary offense—police need some other reason to pull a motorist over. Chief Schiattano on Marco Island would also like to see a ban on texting and driving. “One thing we learn on Day One in the academy is that what reduces seat-belt safety and to participate in initiatives, such as “Click It or Ticket.”

For example, our Traffic Unit is committed to promoting and reaching out to develop new efforts to increase steps to address safety.

The coalition continues to work with homeowners associations and more.

Here is some terrific news: According to the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, only seven counties in the state have a lower crime rate than we have here in Collier County, and all of those counties are located in rural areas of the state.

The good men and women of CCSO will continue to focus on building and maintaining the relationships that Collier County Emergency Services has with its neighbors, partners and residents.

Traffic accidents and traffic fatalities have been increasing at higher rates in Collier County than in the rest of Florida over the past five years. CCSO is taking increased steps to address safety on the county’s roadways as part of a proactive approach to ensure that enforcement innovations to reduce injury-related crashes and traffic fatalities throughout Collier County.

We work with hotels, restaurants, and state traffic laws to provide a safe, inviting and convenient bicycle and pedestrian environment. CCSO will continue to promote "Lights for Bikes" to give bike lights and reflective vests to low-income workers who depend on their bikes for transportation.

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The group also disseminates information on safety and state traffic laws in English and Spanish. "We work with hotels, restaurants, and have offered it through the hospital—anyone who has a population of commuter cyclists,” Avola said.

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Don’t make it easy for burglars and miscreants to turn you into a victim. Here are tips for home and personal safety provided by the Collier County Sheriff’s Office, Naples Police Department and other sources. Most steps are simple and commonsense, but they are easily forgotten and often go unheeded until it’s too late. Review this list to refresh your memory or learn new ways to ensure your own safety.

✔ How safe is your home or business? Contact the sheriff’s office or police department to have a crime prevention specialist make recommendations for improving security.

✔ When you’re on vacation, have your home monitored by friends, neighbors or property management. Put home lights on timers. Place a hold on newspaper and mail delivery. City residents can notify the Naples Police Department by submitting a “Home Watch” form.

✔ Keep your doors and windows locked, even when you are home. Turn on your alarm if you have one.

✔ Remove wallets, handbags, keys and electronics from your vehicles and lock your car doors. Theft from unlocked cars is an epidemic in Southwest Florida. If you are forgetful, establish an after-dinner or early evening routine for locking and closing garage doors. They can be used as a weapon if someone tries to hurt you. When walking to your car in a parking lot, don’t use the remote fob to unlock it from a far distance; wait until you are close enough to get in.

✔ Your life is more valuable than your property. If someone wants to rob you, give them what they want.

✔ Keep credit card information in a safe spot in case your cards are stolen.

✔ Never put your purse in front of the shopping cart.

✔ Be aware of your surroundings.

IDENTITY THEFT

✔ Do not carry extra credit cards, your social security card, passport, or birth certificate except when absolutely necessary.

✔ Do not give out personal information on the phone, through the mail or over the internet unless you know who you are dealing with. Avoid disclosing personal financial information when using public Wi-Fi connections.

✔ Never click on links sent in unsolicited emails or in emails from someone you haven’t heard from in a long time or don’t frequently correspond with (their address book may have been hacked). Use firewalls, anti-spyware and anti-virus software to protect your home computer.

✔ Shred or tear up all paperwork with financial and personal information on it before throwing it in the garbage.

✔ Keep your personal information in a secure place at home.

✔ Monitor your credit report regularly.

HELPFUL PHONE NUMBERS

Collier County Sheriff’s Office ........... 239-774-4434
Crime Prevention Bureau ............. 239-252-0700
Victim & Senior Advocacy Unit ............ 239-252-0230
Naples Police Department ............... 239-213-4844
Marco Island Police Department ........ 239-389-5050

Members of the Naples Senior Center learn new skills in the computer lab. Visting prevention specialists also gave presentations on scams and identity theft.