

Crime lurks outside airports, rail stations

By Gary Stoller, USA TODAY

July 12, 2011

Frequent business traveler Jim Shriner says it's too risky to walk through neighborhood streets outside the Philadelphia and Newark airports.



By Eileen Blass, USA TODAY

Grime just down the street from 30th Street Railroad Station in Philadelphia.

"I would not venture out alone on foot into either of these areas," says Shriner, who lives in Lithia, Fla., and is a vice president in the health care industry.

Shriner, like other veteran travelers, knows the risk of becoming a crime victim often increases once he leaves the confines of an airport or central train station and goes into surrounding neighborhoods — where travelers routinely pick up or return rental cars, refill gas tanks, buy provisions and check into hotels.

An exclusive neighborhood study done for USA TODAY by crime-forecasting company CAP Index shows those instincts are right — and criminologists are not surprised.

STORY: Crime risk near airports exceeds national average, study says

The CAP Index study finds that the likelihood of crime is nearly eight times higher than the national average outside Philadelphia airport and nearly five times higher outside Newark airport.

The likelihood of crime exceeds the national average outside 28 of 29 big-city airports in the study and outside all 26 central train stations, says CAP Index, which uses statistics, demographics and computer modeling to determine the likelihood of crime.

Of the 29 airports, about half have surrounding neighborhoods where the likelihood of crime is more than four times higher than the national average. Of 26 central train stations, 21 have surrounding neighborhoods where the likelihood is more than four times higher.

CAP Index President Jon Groussman says his company's analysis of law enforcement and clients' loss data shows a large number of crimes are committed in such neighborhoods.

"You are clearly getting into a more elevated risk potential" when you enter a neighborhood with a crime likelihood at least four times the national average, he says.

CAP Index says its crime-risk determinations are 70% to 90% accurate. Like other probability formulas, CAP Index's methodology has its limitations, company officials acknowledge, because it does not take into account various variables, including police force size, amount of security equipment being used and current events.

Rosemary Erickson, a criminologist and security expert, says CAP Index is "extremely useful for predicting crime," and travelers should heed its findings for neighborhoods outside airports and central train stations.

The areas outside airports and central train stations have a higher likelihood of crime because they're often poor neighborhoods and are probably not as effectively policed as some downtown areas, says Lewis Yablonsky, emeritus professor of criminology at California State University-Northridge.

Though airports may have a heavier police and security presence than nearby streets, they aren't immune to crime. During the first five months this year at New York's JFK airport, for example, 912 crimes were reported to police, according to Port Authority of New York and New Jersey statistics.

Erickson says the areas around airports and train stations aren't the most desirable to live. Many are low-income areas with high unemployment rates — "signs of social disorder" and higher crime rates, she says.

In southwest Philadelphia, for instance, the neighborhood outside the airport falls under the jurisdiction of police district 12 — one of the two "most violent" of 21 districts, according to a 2007 Philadelphia Police Department report. There were 3,580 crimes in district 12 reported to police last year, ranking the district 13th in total number of major crimes, according to Philadelphia Police Department statistics.

Last year, Philadelphia police busted an alleged prostitution ring that operated from hotels near the airport. Many robberies, assaults and a murder of an alleged pimp in December 2009 were related to the ring, police said.

Where the hot spots are

Hotels and motels near other U.S. airports have also been crime scenes. Police in Burbank, Calif., last year said prostitution and criminal activities were increasing in hotels near Bob Hope Airport.

At a motel near Virginia's Richmond airport in April 2007, Gary Post of Broadway, Va., was murdered while unloading his vehicle with his two adult sons. The men had driven to the motel for an inexpensive room before their flight the next day, police said. They were approached by four men with semiautomatic weapons attempting to rob them.

Several frequent fliers say they're wary of the neighborhood outside Los Angeles International Airport. Dallas-based Ted Mitchell, who works for a software company, calls the neighborhood "awful."

According to CAP Index, the likelihood of becoming a crime victim outside Los Angeles International is nearly four times more than the national average.

The likelihood of crime is even higher — more than seven times above the national average — in the neighborhood outside the airport in Ontario, Calif.

Of all neighborhoods near airports and central train stations in CAP Index's study, none has a higher likelihood of crime than the one outside Houston's Amtrak station on Washington Avenue. The crime likelihood there is nearly 11 times higher than the national average.

A review of the Houston Police Department's online statistics for crimes within a half mile of the Amtrak station indicates that during the first five months this year, more than 200 crimes were reported to police, says CAP Index Vice President Stephen Longo.

The crimes included two murders, three rapes, two robberies, 16 aggravated assaults, 15 auto thefts, 14 burglaries and more than 150 thefts, Longo says.

Frequent business traveler Richard Szulewski of Germantown, Tenn., says he thinks the risk of crime is greatest at New York's Penn Station.

"I consider myself quite vigilant, yet I always feel like I have to be on my highest guard at all times," says Szulewski, a health care development manager.

Tourists there "could easily be crime victims of pickpocketing or bag theft." But, he says, "there is typically a large, armed police force present."

Outside Penn Station, located on Manhattan's west side, the likelihood of crime is nearly seven times the national average, CAP Index's analysis shows.

Like Szulewski, many frequent business travelers say they are most concerned about theft.

Rebecca Carranza of Barrington, Ill., was a theft victim last year while returning a rental car to an off-airport facility outside Memphis airport.

An employee of the rental company stole her new iPhone out of the rental car she was returning, she says.

"The surveillance tape showed the employee taking it out of the car and putting it in his pocket," says Carranza, a manager in the educational publishing industry.

Frequent business traveler Mitch Fong of Mill Valley, Calif., says he's never been a crime victim in an airport or train station, but he's concerned about areas outside them.

"I would say that the areas around most major airports are not the best neighborhoods in most cities," says Fong, a vice president in the financial-services industry. "I am definitely on high alert whenever I am just outside most major airports."

Some safety tips for travelers

Frequent business traveler Paul Tamburelli of Peoria, Ariz., says he's never been a crime victim while traveling and offers some safety tips.

"Keep your wits about your surroundings; don't wear flashy jewelry; and know where to go and where not to go at all times," says the vice president in the transportation industry. "Don't attract unwanted attention to yourself or make yourself look like an easy mark."

Regardless of location, "Vigilance is the most important factor in preventing crime," says Jennifer Welch, a flight attendant in Hillsborough, Calif. "A little situational awareness goes a long way in ensuring you don't become a victim."

Erickson says travelers should "always look for warning signs" outside airports and train stations. If a neighborhood has graffiti, litter, iron bars over doors and windows or homeless people on the streets, a traveler shouldn't walk or get out of a rental car in the neighborhood, she says.

"If it doesn't feel safe, you probably shouldn't be there," Erickson says.