

# **Why it pays to deal with loitering before it becomes a problem**

By

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To most property managers, loitering is a common nuisance that is easily overlooked particularly when precious time and resources are being consumed by much more serious and pressing problems. Unfortunately when these problems involve criminality and/or related repairs, unstructured loitering is frequently a cause.

Unstructured loitering is a very popular activity amongst a youthful demographic that is fraught with social and behavioural risk. It typically occurs in public or publically accessible “free-style” settings where ownership is weak and two or more of the following risk factors are present.

## **Convenience**

Loitering is most likely to occur in convenient and known locations in areas where ownership is weak, or during times of limited or weak control. This can include walkways, hallways, stairwells, poorly observed places, schools, community centres, parks etc. or any combination thereof. Examples of these types of environments include school hallways when classes are in session (private – weak ownership) or playgrounds after dusk (public – weak ownership).

Convenience may not be a factor where loitering occurs in an out-of-the way location where control is non-existent. In such cases, loiterers will be prepared to travel farther or overcome significant barriers on the property due to the prospect of gaining full control. This could be deep inside a naturalized area or the roof of a building, for example.

## **Comfort**

Comfort is a relative factor that distinguishes one setting over another according to its ability to provide for the comfortable passage of time. Comfortable settings must first and foremost be able to physically support loitering as a long-term activity. This generally requires an excess of space or a lack conflicting traffic where space is at a premium, such as a sidewalk.

Comfort also encompasses the availability of basic creature comforts. This can include intentional comforts such as a park bench, or improvised seating arranged in socially conducive settings – such as logs, ledges and/or walls. Heat can be another source of comfort, and can be intentional or unintentional – such as when derived from a ventilation source.

## **Concealment**

Concealment offers basic cover for persons found at or near grade or operating on a specific level or floor. It typically takes the form of physical objects such as landscaping and/or structures and can

partially or completely obscure the surrounding area. Indeed, complete concealment may actually inhibit loitering by hiding potential areas from loiterers' attention.

Loiterers can benefit from directional concealment when the area is located away from the general direction of travel. They can also exploit elements of the environment to disguise their purposes. This is known as purpose concealment and occurs, for example, when perpetrators stand in a bus shelter for the purpose of dealing drugs or use a telephone booth to avoid suspicion. Because it happens in the open, it is not readily controlled.

### **Canopy/cover**

Canopy extends beyond the basic forms of concealment and offers a level of overhead protection from the elements and/or prying eyes. It can take constructed (overhang) or natural (forest) forms, and typically serves to give loiterers within the space a heightened sense of security. Cover is a complete form of canopy, typically provided by a roof system (e.g. gazebos), but may simply be the "cover of darkness". The sense of cover provided by a roof system may be reduced by the volume of a space.

### **Loitering as a risk**

Unstructured loitering typically occurs in at risk environments that are susceptible to opportunity crimes. These environments hold wide appeal to a youthful demographic and those seeking crimes of opportunity. This frequently results in them becoming high risk rallying points, which when combined with loitering, serves as an incubator for delinquent tendencies to come out.

This can result in criminal activity and a number of associated risks. These risks can include increased fear amongst the general population which, if severe enough, can lead to avoidance behaviour; desensitization to the presence of strangers/furnishing of an excuse; purpose concealment with respect to staging or engaging in a criminal act; and economic loss.

### **The Know Loitering Matrix**

The Know Loitering Matrix was developed as a space and design assessment tool for the purpose of assessing and understanding the potential of loitering as a risk. It therefore takes the basic form of a risk management matrix.

### **Using the matrix**

The matrix was developed from the perspective of the undesired loiterer hence it fundamentally regards space as either private or publically accessible with the only other distinction being weak or strong ownership. This creates four distinctive types of space which, for all intents and purposes, is commonly divided into private, semi-private, semi-public and public space.

Risk is then factored into the matrix attributed according to the number of risk factors present with convenience typically a factor for any given location and cover being common to most internal applications.

Convenience, comfort, concealment, canopy/cover					
N a t u r e	Risk factors	1 factor	2 factors	3 factors	4 factors
	Space-ownership				
	<b>Private-strong</b> (eg. school library)	Remote	Unlikely	Possible	Limited appeal/capacity
	<b>Private-weak</b> (eg. school hall between class)/ <b>Semi-private</b> (eg. Apt. hallway)	Unlikely	Limited appeal/capacity	Somewhat likely	More likely than not
	<b>Publically accessible/semi-public - strong</b> (eg unpaid fairzone Transit Terminal)	Possible	Somewhat likely	Likely	Very likely
	<b>Public accessible – weak</b> (eg. school grounds after hours)/ <b>Public</b> (eg. park)	Limited appeal/capacity	More likely than not	Very likely	High

Source: Cst. Tom McKay, Peel Regional Police

The insights gained from the Know Loitering matrix can be used to predict and mitigate loitering and its related problems. This natural gas pipe offers a degree of comfort at a convenient, publically accessible location. The presence of graffiti on the concrete and pipe itself bears testament to its more likely than not label.



## Achieving risk reduction

Risk is best reduced at the planning stage by assessing designs for their unstructured loitering potential then minimizing risk factors where they are found. This can include minimizing bench-like surfaces and alcoves; controlling access, strengthening the ownership presence or fundamentally changing the nature of the space.



The drainage channel located to the right developed a significant loitering problem when area youth sat on the edge of the armour stone necessitating the relocation of the safety fence to its edge. The loitering problem was predictably “very likely” to occur despite its unlikely appearance, as in addition to comfort the armour stones offered, the location offered convenience as it was located next to a walkway and achieved “cover” during the hours of dark.

The Know Loitering Matrix should also be used to encourage and support the development of structured loitering areas. Structured loitering areas should be designed to have a rating of somewhat likely (yellow ) or less (green).

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