

Post #1 (9/7)

We have been working on a series of posts to help us create/maintain a safe and inclusive neighborhood. I am grateful for her partnership.

Here's the first one! We hope you find them thought-provoking and helpful.

Woodlake Neighborhood Watch promotes community safety in many ways. We share information about crime among neighbors and we help foster relationships between neighbors and between the neighborhood and the Durham Police Department. Today, we wanted to kick off a series of posts on *our roles as residents* in promoting community safety -- beyond the basics of locking car doors.

In our first post, we wanted to start a positive comment thread. Please comment by sharing something about Woodlake (or Durham) neighbors, *not related to crime*, that makes you and your household feel safe. Here are some examples:

"Someone I didn't know from Woodlake brought us some needed groceries during the COVID lockdown."

"My neighbor is my kid's emergency contact."

"When I walk around Tahoe Drive, people wave and say hello."

"My neighbor gave me a ride to the pharmacy when I was in a pinch."

Post #2

Woodlake Neighborhood Watch encourages you to report suspicious behavior and crime to Durham Police and to watch@woodlakecommunity.com. In spite of our best intentions, unconscious stereotypes and racial bias can mislead us in interpreting others' behavior, which can put innocent people at risk of harm and make neighbors and guests feel unwelcome. We are asking that you use the following procedures and resources to reduce the possibility of racial targeting and bias in reporting.

If you witness suspicious behavior...

- Focus on behavior. What was the person doing that concerned you, and how does it relate to a possible crime? If the behavior could be described as an everyday activity (walking, sitting in a car), what about it makes you think it's suspicious?
- Give a full description, including clothing or car, to distinguish between similar people. Can you describe this suspicious person in a way that an innocent person will not be mistaken for the person you are describing? Consider unwanted consequences if the description is so vague that an innocent person could be targeted.

- Don't assume criminality because of someone's race.
- Don't assume that someone does not live in Woodlake because of their race.

If you witness a crime being committed...

- Describe the incident before you describe any individuals.
- If you need to describe individuals, use at least two descriptors other than race -- car, shirt, pants, shoes, hair, height. These descriptors help reduce the chance that a different person of the same race will be suspected of perpetrating the crime.

Post #3

Here are a few tips for creating profile-free posts and reports, courtesy of the Neighbors for Racial Justice organization.

Profiling refers to the practice of considering race, among other variables, as a predictor or criteria of criminal behavior. Unconscious stereotypes and racial bias can skew judgment and mislead us in interpreting and predicting others' behavior in spite of our best intentions.

Example: Black youth, driving by houses slowly, possibly casing. Look out for this car!

Tip: Consider what other reasons someone could be driving by slowly, looking at homes. Could this driver just be looking for a house number?

Racial profiling also includes describing people in vague and general terms, which then cast a wide net over innocent people who fit these loose descriptions.

Example: Tan Honda with temporary plates idling near my home, driver claims to be waiting for a friend. Watch out for a teenage Asian male.

Tip: Given such a vague description, do you intend to have the neighborhood scrutinize all Asian teens with suspicion? Not only is it unhelpful, it can be harmful.

Post #4

Racial profiling forces individuals who have engaged in no wrongdoing to endure the burden of proving their innocence to suspicious neighbors and law enforcement. Posting vague descriptions on Facebook (for instance, *Black teenage male*) promotes suspicion of innocent Black teens and puts them in a position of having to defend their right to just be.

Neighbors and visitors of color may report being stopped, questioned, and harassed. In some instances they fear physical harm. This leaves neighbors and visitors of color feeling isolated, angry and distrustful of their own community.

Please ponder these questions before hitting "send" on your next post:

- What harm and frustration might this post cause to an innocent person of color?
- If you don't have a full description that points to a specific person(s) when reporting a crime, could posting a vague description lead to the harm of an innocent person?
- When you walk on the trail, how many people do you pass who fit that vague description? These are our neighbors.

Post #5

Racial profiling can lead to a sense of isolation and segregation and stand in the way of building rich, vibrant, inclusive communities.

Regardless of our race or background, we've all been conditioned to hold beliefs and assumptions about groups of people. Biases cloud our ability to see members of the group as individuals and can distort our view of what is normal, everyday activity versus what is suspicious or potentially criminal. This is not only a potential danger to members of these groups, but can cause us to live in fear and suspicion, creating disharmony in our community.

Evidence shows that racial profiling as a crime-fighting approach is both ineffective and inefficient.

Here are some things to think about:

- How do negative assumptions about people of color affect who you see as "unsafe" or unwelcome in Woodlake and in Durham?
- If you are posting about a crime or safety issue on Facebook, how are these negative assumptions impacting the content of your post, and how could this be divisive in our community?

Post #6

We are including a few questions you can ask yourself as you post to Facebook. If you take the time to ponder the answers, we hope it will be helpful to you as you compose your posts.

- Did you witness or experience an actual crime, or are you posting about something you deem suspicious?
- If you are posting about something you deem suspicious, could the behavior or activity you are reporting be an innocent, everyday activity (walking by, sitting in a car)?
- If the behavior could be described as an everyday activity, what about it makes you think it's suspicious?
- Is it the person's race or appearance that raises your suspicion?
- Can you describe this suspicious person in a way that an innocent person will not be mistaken for the person you are describing in your post?
- Given that an innocent person can be harmed if mistaken for a suspicious person vaguely described in a post, will you still choose to send that information to our neighbors?

Post #7

We invite you to test your own racial and cultural biases. In becoming more aware of our biases, we will create a more inclusive, safer, and welcoming neighborhood, and reduce the possibility of racial profiling on Facebook.

You may find the results for the online test for implicit bias below surprising, interesting, and useful.

While we are often urged to "trust our gut" and if we "see something, say something," there is very little discussion about how our biases influence what we find suspicious.

We all hold biases; it is unavoidable. Having biases doesn't mean you are racist or a bad person. However, when biases are unconscious, they can lead us to make assumptions about people and situations, and it can be difficult to know how much they are influencing what and who we deem suspicious.

Implicit biases are hard to uncover because they don't necessarily align with our stated beliefs. They can be negative or positive, but usually favor our own group. When unexamined, our biases can lead to racial profiling and harm to others and ourselves. The good news is they can be unlearned.

Let's take responsibility and learn about our own biases and how they inform our behavior.

<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/takeatest.html>

Post #8

Posting in haste on Facebook about crime or suspicion increases the chance that we are acting out our biases. The best way to prevent this is to pause before we post, giving ourselves a time-out to consider what we are seeing and how bias may be influencing our reactions.

Please consider these questions as an anti-bias tool to test messages before posting:

- If you are posting on Facebook about a crime or safety issue, could negative biases about people of color affect who you see as “unsafe” or unwelcome in your neighborhood and impact the content of your post?
- If the behavior you are reporting could simply be an innocent, everyday activity, what about it makes you think it’s suspicious?
- Does a person’s race or appearance raise or lower your suspicion?
- If you don’t have a full description that points to a specific person(s) when reporting a crime, could posting a vague description lead to the harm of an innocent person?
- Given that an innocent person can be harmed if mistaken for a suspicious person vaguely described in a post, will you still choose to send that information to our neighbors?

Post #9

You may recognize posts that contain racial profiling, and wonder what you can do to reduce the harm caused by them. Facebook posts or comments which should prompt you to challenge the writer may include:

- blatant hate speech or discrimination, including insults, threats, or derogatory language
- behavior that describes an everyday activity (driving slowly, making a U-turn) that when paired with race become reports of suspicious activity
- vague descriptions of people who may or may not have been observed committing a crime, so that suspicion is cast over many innocent people fitting that loose description
- suspicion that seems to be raised because of the person’s perceived race or appearance.

We rely on users to speak up when profiling occurs. As members of the Woodlake community, we can work together to reduce the harm our bias can cause, keep one another accountable, and create a safer neighborhood for all.

Post #10

What are some good alternatives when posting about crime?

Could it be more useful to alert our neighbors to trends in crime rather than to focus on individual suspicions and accounts?

One way to come together as a community is to remind one another of ways to prevent crime in our neighborhoods.

For example, when laptops are snatched while people are using them in cafes, it may be most useful for people to know this is happening, and to brainstorm ways to hinder potential criminal acts. Suggestions may include attending your unsecured laptop at all times, and being aware of your surroundings.

In Woodlake, we occasionally see entry into unlocked cars. Letting our neighbors know this happened can be useful if it alerts us to a continuing trend, and reminds us not to leave valuables in our cars. If we all heed this warning, we empower and protect ourselves by taking away a crime of opportunity.

Is it more helpful to remind people that they should secure their laptop to the table, or to throw out vague descriptions that won't point to a specific person?

Is it more empowering to our neighbors to urge them not to leave briefcases and backpacks in the back seats of their car, or to suggest that we all should live in fear that crime is everywhere?

The primary goal in sharing our experiences of crime with our neighbors is to keep them safe and enable them to avoid the same fate. What information can we share that accomplishes this in a meaningful way?

Post #11

We have previously mentioned implicit bias, and how it informs the way we communicate about crime and safety. For a quick (under 2.5 minutes long) review on implicit bias, please check out this video from the New York Times/POV.

<https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000004818663/peanut-butter-jelly-and-racism.html>

Creating safety in our community includes checking for our bias, which affects ALL of us. Remembering that bias does not equal racism can make it much easier to look at how our bias impacts our reporting.

If a crime is reportedly committed by a Black male, how do we overcome our learned bias that sees ALL Black males in the neighborhood as suspicious?

If a person suspected of a crime is described as a Latino teen, how do we challenge our acquired bias that connects a Latino teen seen weeks ago to the suspect seen today? Without proof of a direct connection (i.e. same car, etc.), why does our brain want to link the Latino teen from today to the Latino teen seen weeks ago?

When we realize our brains are trained to link random people only because they share a perceived race or heritage, can we make a conscious effort to uncouple those associations?

Our unchecked bias and Facebook reporting can cause harm to the community, especially to people of color. To report without perpetuating the harm please:

- Acknowledge that you harbor unconscious biases.
- Take your time. Before you post, look for triggers and see where stereotypical responses or assumptions are activated.
- Practice strategies designed to break your automatic associations that link a negative judgment to behavior that is culturally different from yours.

Post #12

We invite our community to take a step back for a moment from thinking about ways to alert one another about crime and suspicion, and instead explore building safer communities through community engagement.

In what ways do you contribute to building a stronger, safer, more vital community?

Here some ideas for creating safer communities:

- Smile at people you pass, or offer a greeting, especially to those you have never seen before.
- Share your passions and expertise locally in ways that connect you to your neighbors.
- Make it a goal to know everyone on your street and learn about your neighbors. What do they need from the community, and what can they contribute?
- Instead of watching your neighbors, focus on SEEING them.
- Keep an eye out for one another, but if/when you or your neighbors suspect the wrong person(s) of mischief or crime, be sure to acknowledge the mistake, apologize for the harm, and take steps to avoid repeating the harm it created.

- Support public art and neighborhood beautification projects.
- Take care of our trails and green space. Get involved in community gardening.
- Support vulnerable neighbors and folks in your community who may need a little extra help. Volunteer with Woodlake Cares, neighborhood soup kitchens, shelters, senior centers, or youth organizations.
- When safe to do so, coordinate a group run, hike, or dog walk with your neighbors.
- Post-COVID, organize a neighborhood potluck, BBQ, or block party. Have your neighbors over to share a meal.
- Patronize local businesses; become a regular at your nearest coffee shop.

While social networking via our computers can build a certain sense of community, there is no substitute for face-to-face interactions that build safety by allowing us to know our neighbors, and engage and participate in our community.

Post #13

What does it mean to report crime while not causing further harm by posting crime alerts that include vague descriptions? We invite you to try an exercise.

Sketch the following person: Black man, dark clothing and hoodie, age 18-24, seen attempting to break into several cars.

- Can you identify this exact person and pick him out of a crowd? If not, how is posting the description useful?
- If you see a Black man 18-to-24 years old wearing a hoodie in your neighborhood, will you think it is him?
- If you're wrong, how costly is the error for the man fitting this vague description now that he is linked to a crime?

We are not suggesting that race is never a useful descriptor, but if the description is otherwise vague and would not point to a specific person then it is only creating harm. If you know without a doubt that there is an adequate amount of information in your description to identify the exact suspect who presents risk, then race can be a meaningful inclusion when describing people in your posts.