

Choosing a Safer Apartment Community in Georgia: What the Lawyers at The Crime Victim Law GroupSM Tell Their Family and Friends

Criminals who prey on apartment dwellers take advantage of poor security at these complexes. A burned-out light bulb can turn a breezeway or stairwell into a perfect haven for a criminal; dark parking lots and unfenced areas can aid both the entry and escape of criminals. Inadequate locks on doors and windows can let criminals into your residence, and leave little or no trace of evidence for the police.

Whether you live in a Georgia area considered safe or more risky, it's worthwhile to protect yourself by following a few simple rules when choosing your next residence or making some easy adjustments that will make you a bit more secure at your current residence.

The Apartment Search

If you are considering living in an apartment, you should first learn as much as possible about:

- the location and history of the apartment property
- the people who live and congregate on the property
- the location and physical integrity of the individual apartments you're considering
- the management and maintenance staff

FACT: The vast majority of violent apartment attacks occur at properties that allow non-violent property crime and loitering to go unchecked.

Search Rule # 1 – *Location: Know as much as you can about the community.*



You know the old advice about what three things are most important when buying a house? LOCATION! LOCATION! LOCATION! This is just as important when choosing an apartment.

As apartment communities go, your safety depends primarily on WHERE you live. This is less about zip codes or school districts than about WHO else lives in the area, WHO is attracted to the area, WHO congregates in the area, and HOW these people spend their time.

CRIME HISTORY is the #1 predictor of future crime. Ideally, you would go to the local police department and obtain copies of reports of crime for all of the apartment properties you're considering. But, in most jurisdictions it would take months to get these, and you probably don't have that kind of time. Instead, you can and should ask the leasing staff of any community you're considering, to **allow you to review the incident reports and police reports they have on file for at least the previous 3 years.** If they tell you they don't keep these reports or refuse to let you see them, you should mark this community off your list of possibilities.

“Curb Appeal” Does Not Guarantee Safety – while those newly planted pansies and shiny balloons may get you into the leasing office, be aware that these are marketing strategies, first and foremost.

Do all of the Vehicle Control Gates work? Are they often damaged or out of order? Is there a record of repair available for you to review? Controlled Access Gates Do Not Guarantee Safety. Many properties advertise the presence of vehicular control gates in order to attract new tenants. Make sure they work properly!

“Courtesy Officers” are not the same as security guards – in fact, most landlords specifically attempt to disclaim any responsibility for their tenants’ safety in the language of their lease. Do not be fooled. Most landlords give free or reduced rent to off-duty police officers whose main job is to hand out tenant letters and eviction papers – and to help protect the landlord’s property from getting damaged. And, most landlords tell their tenants not to report crimes to the courtesy officer but to call 911, directly.

Search Rule # 2 - *Consider the Property’s Parking Lots*



Walking alone from your car to your apartment or mailbox may put you at risk. Consider where you would be parking on a prospective apartment property and make sure you would be able to do the following to keep yourself safe:

- Back your car into a parking spot or in a position that eliminates as many blind spots as possible as you get out of your car
- Have a clear line of sight to your apartment or mailbox from wherever you park.

Search Rule # 3 – *Review the Overall Condition of the Property*

Walk around the complex during the day. Note how all the buildings are maintained. Are the grounds manicured? Are common areas neat? Is trash lying around? Are the laundry areas secure and clean? If there are luxuries such as a pool area or weight room, are they also well-maintained? The answers to these questions will give you an initial understanding of how the landlord and the residents treat the property.

Also, tour the property at night with a property or leasing manager or courtesy officer. This should be arranged ahead of time. The vast majority of violent crime at apartment communities happens at night. If the management team is unwilling to be on the property after dark, you can be sure they are concerned about safety – and you should be, too. If you are able to tour at night, notice whether people are loitering in the common areas and whether there seem to be people “hanging out” who don’t live on the property. Again, unchecked loitering is often a sign of more serious criminal activity.

Search Rule # 4 – *Be Picky about Your Location within an Apartment Building*

When speaking with leasing agents, be clear that you will only consider an apartment that is located at least on the 2nd floor. It may make moving in more difficult and you may not want to climb stairs every day. But, **ground floor units are most common for assaults and rapes**. Most burglaries and stranger-on-stranger assaults are crimes of opportunity - and most criminals don’t carry ladders. The more difficult it is for an assailant to enter your window, the more likely he is to move on to another apartment.

Search Rule # 5 - *Ask the police*

Find out what county the apartment community is in and contact the police department that serves that community. Many larger departments – like DeKalb County and City of Atlanta - have crime prevention specialists who can give you information about particular properties that receive more calls for police assistance. Detectives in smaller police departments will often also have similar information, especially about problem properties.

Search Rule # 6 - *Check for Offenders in the Area Online*

Search by address on the [Sex Offender Registry](#) for any registered sex offenders in a given neighborhood.

Search Rule #7 - Ask Your Prospective New Neighbors a Few Questions

While you are there looking at the property, try finding a person coming or going. Here are 3 questions that take less than 30 seconds to answer.

1. Does management respond quickly to an issue?
2. Are you aware of any crimes on the property?
3. Do you plan to renew your lease?

Making Your Existing Home SAFER

The last few rules of our Apartment Safety Guide provide some information to make your CURRENT home safer- no matter where you live. In neighborhoods people consider safe, a false sense of security sometimes prevents people from taking easy and smart precautions.

Be Safer Rule # 1 – Do Not Rely Solely on Your Landlord’s Locks to Keep You Safe

You may need to get a new deadbolt lock. Keys that have been returned after rental use may have been duplicated previously and you cannot be sure that management actually changed or rekeyed your locks before you moved in. If you do change the lock, you should make management aware and provide them with a copy of the key in case of emergency.

You should also consider enhancing your window locks – even if you don’t live on the ground floor. Hardware and home improvement stores sell many inexpensive options that could greatly increase the efficiency of the locks that are already present.

Be Safer Rule # 2 - Being Safe Can Be Cheap

In addition to replacing your lock, there are a number of other affordable ways to make your apartment safer for less than \$80. Over the course of a 12 month lease that’s only about \$7 per month.

- **Battery operated burglar alarm** - \$30-50 - Piercing loud- an alarm immediately takes away the most important factor to an assailant - the element of surprise.
- **New Deadbolt Lock** - \$12-25 - Your own key, for your own safety.
- **Pepper Spray** - \$8-25 - Don’t just have one for your purse. Hammer a nail near the door and hang the pepper spray out of the reach of children. Keeping it near the door will give you easy access to it in the event an intruder is trying to force their way in.
- **Police Grade Mini-Flashlight** - \$20 or less. Use it for getting out of your car or removing something from the trunk of your car. Light is not the friend of an assailant, use it to your advantage.
- **Land Phone Line** - \$30 a month or less. While most of us all use cell phone, a landline gives emergency responders an EXACT address of a 911 call. Cell phones offer approximate locations at best. If an intruder were to approach the door, simply picking up the phone and dialing 911 and setting the phone to the side will send police to your address.



Be Safer Rule # 3 – Beware of Strangers

Spot an unfamiliar face? Be on guard and watch their body language. Most non-domestic apartment assaults resulting in a rape or shooting are committed by an assailant the victim does not know.

While some of these recommendations seem like common sense, it is very easy to get too comfortable and put off implementing these quick and easy steps that could save your life. If you or someone you love has been the victim of a violent crime, we understand the pain and psychological damage that can follow. We also understand all of the legal implications and are here to help you- contact us anytime.