



Real Estate's 6 Most Dangerous Everyday Situations

If you work in real estate, you undoubtedly do the following tasks all of the time, but did you know that you could be putting yourself in danger? Here's how you can stay on guard and protect yourself.

By [Melissa Dittmann Tracey](#) | September 2010

As a real estate professional, you put yourself at risk every day — you just might not realize it.

Meeting new clients, showing properties, holding open houses, letting strangers get into your car, and even your marketing may be jeopardizing your personal safety.

Such everyday tasks seem harmless, but as some real estate professionals have learned the hard way, these situations can expose you to danger. (Read: [Real Estate Safety Stories: 'How I Stay Safe'](#)).

Real estate is considered by security experts as a high-risk profession, says Robert Siciliano, CEO of [RealtySecurity.com](#) in Boston, and author of *The Safety Minute: Living on High Alert* (Safety Zone Press, 2003).

“The root of the issue is that you have real estate agents with no formal security training who are then meeting with complete strangers at odd times of the day and in vacant homes,” Siciliano says. “Real estate professionals put themselves at risk at so many points. The industry opens itself up to predators.”

Below are tasks common to practically every real estate professional. Learn the risks associated with each and what precautions you can take to stay safe.

1. Entering foreclosed or vacant homes

THE RISK: Foreclosures may attract unexpected house guests — such as squatters — or former home owners refusing to leave. The homes also may be damaged and poorly lit or attract wildlife since it's abandoned, leading to more potential safety hazards.

SAFETY TIPS

Inspect the exterior. Walk around the perimeter before you enter the house and make sure the door hasn't been kicked in and no windows are shattered, suggests Tracey Hawkins, owner of [Safety and Security Source](#) in Kansas City, Mo. Call police if you suspect someone is in the property. (Read: [Be on the Lookout for Clues](#))

Don't confront a squatter. If a squatter is in the home, leave immediately, Siciliano says. Call law enforcement once you've left and allow police to deal with any trespassers.

Use the buddy system. Ask a coworker, spouse, friend, or family member to come with you when you show the home.

Let others know where you are. Before you leave, tell your coworkers, family, or friends where you are, whom you are with, and when you expect to return.

Visit during the day. Visiting homes at night makes it more dangerous, Siciliano says. Try to make appointments during daylight hours only.

2. Meeting with a new client for the first time

THE RISK: Meeting with people you don't know can put your safety at risk. You don't know whether this person could potentially be a criminal, stalker, thief, or worse.

SAFETY TIPS

Meet at the office first. Get them on your territory before you visit any property with them so you can learn more about them and collect personal information about them for your files.

Ask for identification. The public is used to having their identification checked, so don't be reluctant to ask because you're scared you'll offend someone, Siciliano says. Tell clients it's company policy that all clients' driver's licenses are photocopied. "This will significantly reduce your risk because the bad guys don't want to give you their I.D. or get their picture taken," Siciliano says.

Have all clients fill out a customer identification form. You can find an example of this at REALTOR.org. Click on "Prospect Identification Form" under the Office Safety Forms heading. The form asks for car make and license number, contact information, and employer information, and also requests a photocopy of the driver's license.

Introduce them to a coworker. When you meet them at the office, introduce them to at least one other person in your office. Criminals won't like that others have seen them for identification purposes, according to tip sheets provided by the [Washington Real Estate Safety Council](#).

3. Showing a property alone

THE RISK: You're touring vacant properties with strangers.

SAFETY TIPS

Use the buddy system. "There's always strength in numbers," Siciliano says. Whether you bring a coworker, spouse, or even your German shepherd, avoid going alone.

Don't go into confined places. Avoid basements and attics — it's too easy to become trapped. Instead, know the selling points of these rooms and remain in the foyer on the first floor with the front door open as the buyer tours these areas, Siciliano suggests. If you must join them in each room, always stay by the door, leaving doors open so you can flee more easily if necessary, the Washington Real Estate Safety Council suggests.

Walk behind. Let potential buyers take the lead when exploring a home, with you always following behind.

Let others know where you are. Tell them where you are going, when you will be back, and who you're with. Better yet: Share this information while the client is with you so they know someone else knows where you are.

Have an excuse. If you feel uncomfortable, tell the person your "cell phone or beeper went off and I have to call the office" or "another agent with buyers is on his way," suggests the Washington Real Estate Safety Council in their tip sheets. ([Read what one real estate professional said to get out of an uncomfortable situation](#) she experienced at a client's home.)

4. Open houses

THE RISK: You're inviting the public to a property, which is an invitation to anyone, from thieves to those who might want to harm you.

SAFETY TIPS

Promote security in your advertisements. When you advertise the open house, note that identification will be required at the front door and video surveillance will be in use. "The bad guys will be less likely to show up," Siciliano says.

Partner up. When would-be assailants see two people at the front door, they'll be less likely to go in. ([Read one agent's story how the buddy system protected her](#)).

Introduce yourself to neighbors. Let them know you'll be showing the house so others know that you are there.

Watch for patterns. At an open house, note any patterns in arrivals, particularly near the end of the open house. One common scam: Thieves come near the end of the open house, working as a team. They have "buyers" distract the agent as others steal valuables in the home. ([Read what happened to one sales associate](#).)

Stow away your valuables. Never leave your purse, laptop, or wallet unattended on the counter in plain view. Keep them in the trunk of your car. However, always keep your cell phone on you so you can call for help if you need to. Also, before the open house, tell your clients to put away all of their valuables, prescription drugs, and mail.

5. Flashy personal marketing

THE RISK: Marketing materials that contain photos of yourself may attract the attention of criminals. Police have found criminals circling real estate professionals' photos in newspapers and marketing materials ([Read one agent's account of this](#).)

SAFETY TIPS

Avoid provocative photos in your marketing. Low-cut blouses, full-body photos, and looking over your shoulder

in a sexy pose can send the wrong message to criminals. “Why do you have to have photos anyway? What are you selling?” asks Hawkins, who advises against ever using a photo for business reasons; she uses a caricature. “You make a living meeting complete strangers in empty houses. They see your photo and if you’re exactly what they’re looking for — whether that be an older or younger agent, blonde hair, blue eyes, whatever — they know all it takes is one phone call to meet you in a house. A picture can be dangerous.”

Watch what you wear. Only wear shoes that you can run in. Avoid short skirts, low-cut tops, and expensive jewelry. “Predators don’t have the same boundaries as you do. They look at you like that and say ‘She’s asking for it,’” Siciliano says.

Protect your personal information. Use your cell phone number and office address in your marketing so it can’t be tracked back to your home address. Never use your home address or home phone number. Also, don’t reveal to your client personal information about your children, where you live, and who you live with — you can still build a relationship with clients without revealing all of your personal information, recommends the Washington Real Estate Safety Council.

6. Transporting strangers in your car

THE RISK: You’re showing houses to potential buyers and chauffeuring them in your car from house to house. Most people don’t pick up hitchhikers, yet real estate professionals put strangers in their car all of the time and don’t think anything of it, Siciliano says. There’s a risk of being robbed, your car being stolen, and you victimized and thrown to the side of the road.

SAFETY TIPS

Drive separately. Have the client follow you from listing to listing. If you absolutely have to take one car, then you should drive.

Watch where you park. Make sure your car won’t be blocked in and that you park in a place where you’ll be able to get out quickly. Park on the street or the curb, if possible, suggests the Washington Real Estate Safety Council. You’ll attract more attention if you run and scream when fleeing, and it’ll be easier to escape than having to back out of a driveway, experts say.

“Security is all about layers of protection. Open house signage, notation in ads, using the buddy system — everything that you do is an extra layer of security,” Siciliano says. “The more you do, the more secure you’ll be. Do nothing and the more vulnerable you’ll be.”

For more tips, read a collection of [safety stories and tips](#) submitted by your peers ([‘How I Stay Safe’](#)) and learn more about REALTOR® Safety Month at REALTOR.org/safety.

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