RESIDENTIAL SAFE ROOMS:
A List of Considerations

1. It is probably unlikely that anyone would want to construct a complete and new safe room unless they were building a new house.

2. Modifying an existing room is much more common. Here are some primary factors to consider:

    a. Select a suitable room in the house, ideally with solid masonry walls and upgrade the doors and windows to buy time until help can arrive.
    b. Remember fire safety as well as protection from adversaries. Select and use fire resistant/fire retardant materials whenever possible.
    c. Your primary objective is to BUY TIME: Time to delay an attack and cause an adversary to abandon the attack; and/or time for assistance to arrive.
    d. How much time do you need to "buy"? In many ways this is specific to local contexts, but as a goal 60 minutes is a good target.

3. The first step is to select the room that will become your safe room. Look for as many of these characteristics as possible:

    a. The room should be as "deep" inside the home as possible; i.e., as far away from doors and normal access points as possible.
    b. The room should have access to utilities (electricity, phone and water) if possible.
    c. The room should be close to sleeping areas.
    d. It should NOT be where people would have to leave their beds and transit across the home (through the living areas, past the main entrance, etc.) to reach the safe room.
    e. It needs to be a room that guests either don't use, or one that you don't care what others who may see it think about its looks.
    f. Most common choice: An upstairs or interior bathroom.

4. Be both creative and cunning: Remember your objective – to slow an adversary and delay or deny that adversary access into the safe room. That means your priorities need to be the most likely points of access (doors, windows, exterior walls, vents, ceilings and crawl spaces).

5. Before you start, decide and agree that appearance of the safe room is not a factor you care about. Your safe room needs to be functional, not attractive.

6. Begin by REINFORCING the existing structure, especially the most likely points of access.

    a. Simply adding a layer of 3/4 inch plywood to interior walls and doors creates a significant new barrier.
    b. The door(s) needs a strong, physical barricade such as a 2" x 4" board that slides into a permanent structure on either side of the door frame (this is in addition to a strong deadbolt lock). Two of these barricades (one high and one low) are even better!
    c. Windows will need to be permanently closed and barricaded, or removable solid covers (solid "shutters") will have to be constructed to cover windows. These covers will need a locking barricade similar to that recommended for the door. Bars are NOT sufficient for safe room windows, as hazardous substances can be introduced between the bars and through broken glass to force you to leave the safe room.
    d. Other potential points of access (vents, attics, crawl spaces, etc.) large enough for a person to get through (think small, skinny, flexible, motivated people!) need to be blocked in a manner similar to that described for doors and windows.
    e. Remember to consider points of vulnerability too small for a person, but through which smoke or other hazardous substances could be introduced (vents, etc.). These need to be permanently closed; or, rapid-install plugs or covers need to be ready inside the safe room.

7. Reality check: What if you can't add plywood to the walls and permanently close the windows of a safe room (the structure doesn't allow for it, the landlord forbids it, etc.)? Don't abandon the concept! Use the principles and do the best you can. For example, if you can't add plywood and 2x4 barricades to the interior door, consider replacing the door with a stronger (perhaps metal) door, upgrading the hinges, and adding the strongest one-inch throw deadbolt lock you can find. Or, if you can't cover or barricade the window, then bars may be the next best choice (at least they can keep a person out of your safe room). Everything you can do will buy you some time, and every minute the adversary is delayed brings that adversary closer to abandoning the attack.

8. After your safe room is constructed, you need to equip and stock it. These things should ALWAYS be in the safe room:

    a. Communications: A means of communication other than the landline telephone system; such as a cellular phone, satellite phone, two-way radio, etc.
    b. At least a 24-hour supply of medicines used by everyone who lives at the home.
    c. First aid kit.

d. One gallon of water for each person who lives at the home.
e. High-energy, non-perishable food supplies.
f. Battery powered commercial (broadcast station) radio.
g. Flashlights.
h. Extra batteries.
i. Diapers (as necessary).
j. Entertainment for small children.
k. Toilet facilities (even buckets and toilet paper, although odor-absorbing or odor-removal products will be very much appreciated)

9. In addition to safe rooms there are a number of basic target-hardening steps that can be taken at any home:

a. Are exterior doors of solid core and/or contain steel facing?
b. Do exterior doors fit and close snugly without gaps or "give"?
c. Are there steel/glass security storm doors?
d. Are door hinges well secured and, if not located on the inside, protected against the removal of the hinge pins?
e. Are all locks on exterior doors double cylinder dead bolt (with at least a 1" throw)?
f. Are all exterior doors equipped with auxiliary locks?
g. Have strike plates been used and securely fastened with deep-set screws?
h. Do all windows have screens or storm windows which can be locked from the inside?
i. Are all of the windows and doors protected either with iron bars or an alarm system?
j. Are all window and door protections equipped with quick release fire escape devices?
k. Are window air conditioners bolted and secured against removal?
l. Do all windows have adequate window coverings (curtains, drapes, shutters) to prevent someone from seeing inside?

10. Finally, remember that the most common risk at home is fire. Don’t create a secure environment that is also a fire trap. Make sure that there are easily-manipulated exit mechanisms on all protected doors and windows and escape devices for upper floor windows.

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