Dear Alice,

This is not exactly your usual question, but I pose it because my daughter, who visited a friend at Columbia last winter, was told by that girl that it is not safe to go anywhere off the campus! We are planning a trip to NYC now. My husband, because of this and also the opinion of a guy who once lived on Long Island, insists that we must not plan to walk or take the subway anywhere in the neighborhood of CU, as far away as Riverside Church and St. John the Divine. I suspect unrealistic caution.

Answer

Dear Reader,

You suspect correctly! While the Columbia University neighborhood presents some of the same safety concerns as any other urban area, Morningside Heights is not the wild Upper West Side of Manhattan. Rather, it offers some of New York City's richest educational, cultural, religious, and recreational opportunities. In fact, in 2009 New York City was ranked as the safest big city in America according to the FBI Uniform Crime Report.

Understandably, parents and families are concerned about many issues when sending their children off to college. Unfortunately, violence occurs everywhere, including on or near the Columbia University campus. At the same time, one thing to keep in mind is that, most often, college students who experience violence are assaulted by people they know rather than by a "stranger," as can sometimes be assumed. The concerns about safety may be especially salient for campus-bound women. You may want to visit the websites of Security on Campus or Facts About Columbia Essential To Students (FACETS) to learn more.

There are many ways to increase your safety, whether exploring New York City, New Orleans, Boston, or Boulder. Columbia University's Sexual Violence Response and Department of Public Safety offer various resources including some of the following safety and security tips:

- Trust your instincts? they are usually correct.
- Let roommates, friends, or partners know where you will be, when to expect you, or if you're going to be late or out of town.
- Be aware of your environment at all times, even during the day when lots of people are around. Turn to check out the area around you. Be aware of doorways, the space between cars, and other areas people could hide.
- Attackers may "screen" potential victims by asking for directions, a match, the time.
do not have to answer. If you choose to answer, do so briefly, assertively, and, if possible, make eye contact.

- Sometimes speaking up can put a stop to someone who is annoying you. Try to use short statements to cut off conversations that you don't want to continue ("I do not want to talk to you."). The broken record, saying the same short statement over and over again, can be an effective tactic.
- If you feel threatened, making a scene can sometimes prevent things from getting more dangerous. It is okay to hurt someone's feelings, seem paranoid, or even be wrong. We are usually right when we feel there is something wrong.
- If two or more people are walking toward you, try not to walk between them: move to one side. If you are followed by a car, turn around and walk in the opposite direction. It will take the car longer to turn around.
- If you think you are being followed by foot, check it out by changing your pace or crossing the street. Stay under lights. Go into the street, if you can do so safely. Think of a safe, populated place where you could go, like a store or residence hall. Try not to go home if you think someone is following you.
- Think about routes that you take frequently. Look for stores that are open later, buildings with doormen, and well-lit areas. Also, try to avoid potentially dangerous spots like empty lots and long stretches of unpopulated areas.
- Plan ahead. If you are going out, especially at night, think about how you will get home or if you can stay with someone you trust. Consider traveling with a friend or in a group.
- Avoid walking (and exercising) alone ? have a friend, roommate, or partner join you. At the Morningside Heights campus, if you cannot find someone to walk with you, call Columbia Public Safety at x4-2797 from a campus phone or 212-854-2797 for an escort. For the Medical Center campus, call x5-8100 or 212-305-8100 twenty-four-hours-a-day for an escort. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to call for an escort ? your safety, well-being, and peace of mind are priority number one.
- When taking the bus or subway, stick with well-lit, and preferably well-peopled, bus stops and subway platforms. When riding the bus, sit near the driver. When riding the subway, avoid the isolated sections of the platform, such as the ends, and avoid the empty or fewer-peopled subway cars. Don't sleep on the bus or subway. Also be aware of who gets off the bus or subway with you. Head directly to a public place, such as a store, restaurant, or residence hall, if you feel that someone is following you.
- Be an active, safety-conscious student: notify Columbia's Facilities Department at x4-2222 or 212-854-2222 (Morningside) or x5-4357 or 212-305-4357 (Medical Center) about broken lights, emergency call boxes, windows, doors, locks, etc. in campus buildings. You can also request a facilities request online [6] for the Morningside Campus.
- Report all crime(s) or suspicious activity to the police immediately by calling x4-5555 or x99 from a campus phone or 212-854-5555 on the Morningside Campus, 212-305-7979 on the Medical Center Campus, or 911 off campus.

[Some of this information was adapted from crime prevention material supplied by The National Crime Prevention Council, Washington, D.C., Copyright 1995.]

Free shuttle service (with Columbia ID) is available between the Morningside Heights, Manhattanville, and the CU Medical Campus. Visit the shuttle website [7] for more information and a current schedule. You can also learn more about the emergency services available to Columbia affiliated individuals by visiting the Go Ask Alice! Emergency page [8].

Thanks for reminding everyone about the importance of being smart about safety. If each of
us is active in violence prevention, we can help to create a safer society.

Alice!
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If you are in an urgent situation, please visit our Emergency page to view a list of 24 hour support services and hotlines.

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