

# VOICES OF STUDENTS

Some of the precautions students take to stay safe alone

"Ignore people. Be calm, and be strong."

"I don't have to take precautions, because I never go out alone. I always bring a friend because I'm too scared."

"I hold my keys in between my fist."

"Pretend I'm on a call, look non-approachable."

*\*according to an Instagram poll*



# STAYING SAFE

Tips on staying safe when walking or shopping alone



**AVOID WALKING ALONE**

CARRY SOME SORT OF PROTECTION (PEPPER SPRAY, KEYS, ETC.)



**KEEP A FRIEND ON THE PHONE**

SHARE YOUR LOCATION WITH SOMEONE YOU TRUST

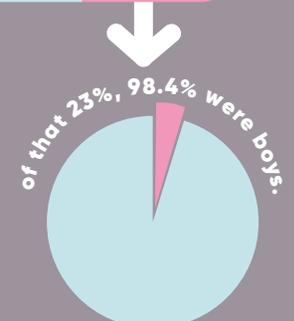


*\*information from youthvillage.co*



## HAVE YOU FELT NERVOUS TO WALK ALONE OR BE ALONE IN PUBLIC?

*Instagram poll of 330 votes*



# PANICKED & POWERLESS

Hoping to bring awareness to safety concerns, female students share their unreported incidents of harassment and discomfort when in public alone

by lauren west  
\*names changed to protect identities

Then-eighth-grader Emily Jones\* could feel a pit growing in her stomach the moment a male stranger looked her up and down as she walked through Oak Park Mall.

Despite being creeped out by his odd glance, Jones continued on with her shopping day, dismissing the look as something that “just happens to women.”

After walking into Aerie — a female undergarment and leisure wear store — it didn’t take long for Jones to find the same man standing before her in the store’s entrance.

That previous gut feeling crept back into her stomach. What is he doing here? Is he actually shopping? Why is he in a bra and underwear store by himself?

As she reached for a shirt on the display table, she felt a hand grab her backside and immediately froze. He disappeared from the store before she could process what happened.

To this day, Jones can recall the sick feeling that overcame her from the moment he first looked at her to the moment he entered the store. According to a google survey of 87 female East students, 93.1% have experienced this same gut feeling of predatory behavior when stepping into public alone — tense, panicked and powerless.

As female students continue to experience unsafe situations of harassment and discomfort when alone in Kansas City, they are left vulnerable and often feel uncomfortable reporting their incidents, as they did not escalate to a worse outcome.

“This is absolutely a current and pertinent issue right now for lots of different reasons,” District Police Officer Anthony Woollen said. “Number one is we as adults and parents can do things proactively so that our [own] kids and here in this East community we don’t have victims. Another reason is because we are moving towards summer time

in which there’s a lot less parental oversight and a lot more freedom.”

Woollen stresses the importance of victims reporting these situations, even if they don’t escalate to anything serious. If another person can learn from someone’s situation, it could prevent a repeat situation.

“If we don’t talk about it and somebody goes through a similar situation that doesn’t know how to react then we are doing females a detriment,” Woollen said.

For Jones, she felt powerless when it came to reporting the situation because it happened so fast. She feared that authority wouldn’t believe her, as she had no evidence other than a general idea of what he looked like.

“I only told a couple of my friends because I felt ashamed,” Jones said. “I felt like there was no proof. I didn’t want to make it a big deal because it’s not like something worse [had] happened to me.”

Now a senior, Jones looks back on the situation and understands that it wasn’t her fault, but she still doesn’t believe she would have handled it differently.

WOULD YOU FEEL MORE COMFORTABLE IN PUBLIC WITH A FRIEND OR ESCORT?

Instagram poll of 227 votes

90% YES

10% NO

“It’s really sad to say, but if a guy [wants] to do something, I honestly think they are going to do it, and there isn’t really a way to stop them from doing it,” Jones said. “Unless you have another man there I don’t think there’s much you can do. Obviously you can carry around pepper spray, but in my example how could I have used it on him by just feeling uncomfortable.”

Woollen recommends that in any situation you feel your safety is at risk, whether you are being followed or spoken to inappropriately, you

should immediately notify the police. Whether it’s a 911 call during the incident or a phone call to the non-emergency line — 913-642-6868 — afterwards, making the police aware of your situation even if it did not escalate to anything serious is still helpful for them.

“That’s the way we catch burglars because someone looks outside their house and thinks that’s not normal,” Woollen said. “That’s the only way we catch those people is someone who is bold enough to reach out.”

Although Jones’ incident happened years ago, according to the same Google survey, 89.4% of female students at East feel uncomfortable shopping at Oak Park Mall. Jones has become more aware of her surroundings since her incident, and she advises other women not to shop alone. Fellow senior Sidney Harris\* agrees.

After attending a dance competition from 7 a.m. to 12 a.m. in downtown Kansas City, Harris’ mother headed out to the parking garage and was planning to pick Harris up at the front of the venue. Harris waited inside the venue until the waiting area began to clear out the night, forcing her to exit the building.

As she waited for her mother’s car, Harris saw a police officer lock the venue up and Harris was left standing alone with no people, cars or open stores in sight — except one man who was rapidly approaching her asking personal questions like “What’s your name?” and “How old are you?” Unsure of how to respond, Harris answered truthfully and began to panic as he said he wanted to take her clubbing.

“At this point I was getting more scared because I could tell he was not really getting closer to me but had his intentions set,” Harris said. “As he was talking I saw headlights pull up and I had no idea if it was my mom or not but I started slowly jogging away and saying, ‘Bye, have fun.’ It was my mom’s car luckily, and I started bawling because I was

so scared.”

After the incident, Harris reflected on what she would’ve done if her mom never came. For both Jones and Harris, processing an unsafe situation in the moment can make it hard to know how to react. Because of the situation, Harris now carries pepper spray everywhere she goes and has become more alert when she is by herself in public.

According to Woollen, proactive safety precautions can range from taking self-defense classes to being aware of your surroundings. Staying off your phone when walking into stores, knowing the quickest exit from your car and how to get to the nearest police station are all examples of proactive safety to practice. Reactive safety precautions refers to the different self-defense weapons such as pepper spray, car keys and whistles. Woollen advises that anyone who owns self-defense weapons should follow proactive safety precautions, such as calling 911 and finding a crowded area, before using reactive safety precautions.

Although both of these situations happened in popular areas for East students outside of Prairie Village, Woollen feels the community needs to understand these incidents can happen anywhere.

“Though perceptions on underage drinking and stuff like that start to change, it’s still some of those thoughts that ‘It ain’t gonna happen here’ still exist,” Woollen said. “And that’s the other part to this article is we have got to admit that it doesn’t matter who it is or where we live, the potential is there.”

These unsafe feelings don’t pertain only to surrounding Prairie Village communities; in the same Google survey 24.7% of female students have found the Prairie Village Shops unsafe, whether that be from suspicious vehicles lurking at night or catcalling.

When returning home for spring break, East alum Tatum Meyer was shopping in a Prairie Village boutique searching for a college

formal dress. Upon leaving the store, Meyer immediately noticed a man sitting on the bench outside the store.

Meyer noticed his slumped posture immediately perk up as she made her way to her car. The man was already a few steps ahead of her, making his way to his own car parked conveniently across from Meyer’s. Meyer watched the man enter his car with his eyes locked on her, and before she stepped into her driver’s seat she saw a bag of sealed Hot Cheetos on the hood of her car.

Meyer’s heart began to race as she recalled the stories she’d heard of girls being lured to the front of their car to remove a strange item that wasn’t theirs. The same gut feeling Jones and Harris experienced had kicked in for Meyer. She immediately got into her car, locked her doors and avoided eye contact. While other cars filled the parking lot, Meyer waited for an opportunity to back up, and as soon as she began reversing, the man across from her began frantically waving his arms and pointing to the hood of her car.

Meyer recalled how visibly upset the man was that she did not grab the Cheetos, and wondered how the situation could have gone differently for her safety if she had not been as careful to get out quickly. When she was finally able to back out, she made sure the man didn’t follow her home.

“It was scary for me because I was completely by myself, and it was also the middle of the day,” Meyer said.

As scary as the situations can be when reacting, Woollen can guarantee that there are women who have been victims at shopping areas and never said anything.

“If you are able to reach one person that goes through a situation and is a victim, they should disclose and tell about it,” Woollen said. “There is never a time that legitimates when a female should be a victim.”