



Knowledge is  
power: reclaim  
the streets and  
stay safe

# Are you entering a RAPE ZONE?

New research reveals attackers seek out specific places to prey on lone women. Sharon Wright finds out how you can identify and avoid the danger areas – and *always* feel safe on the streets.

■ Your heart is racing, your palms start to sweat. You try to walk fast without breaking into a run, fighting the rising panic that always comes when you have to walk along this route. Maybe it's a quiet street or a stretch of waste ground next to your path home. You imagine a rapist or attacker behind every bush, in every shadow. But perhaps this is your only route – you can't always avoid frightening places or be home before dark.

What you can do is learn exactly what makes a place a potential rape zone. Recent research has revealed there are certain areas or rape hotspots where attacks really are more likely to happen. According to environmental criminologist Dr John Eck, who has carried out research for the US Department Of Justice, 60 per cent of crimes happen in just 10 per cent of places – and 84 per cent of emergency calls are made from just 4.4 per cent of streets.

"When I've interviewed attackers they've all known where the crime blackspots are locally," says PC Peter Woodhouse, Architectural Liaison Officer with West Yorkshire Police, who specialises in helping local authorities to identify high-risk areas. "They pick out sites from where they have the best chance of escaping without being seen."

Forensic clinical psychologist Dr Ludwig Lowenstein agrees: "The attacker is a predator – like a wolf after a sheep. He carefully picks the spot where he is going to attack, a place where he's least likely to be disturbed and where there are plenty of good places to hide."

But before you vow never to set foot outside of the front door again, it's well worth learning that there are steps you can take to make your local area safer. "While knowing what makes places risky means you can avoid those areas," says Woodhouse. "It also means you can get

them made safer, so you have more freedom to move where you want."

What, then, makes a potential rape zone? According to Woodhouse, there are key physical factors experts agree spell danger for women anywhere...

## Beware of bars

Although many women instinctively feel safe with lots of people around, Home Office statistics published this year revealed 40 per cent of violent assaults are committed under the influence of alcohol, so very often happen in streets near pubs and clubs. "If you are going to be around these areas at closing time, make sure you're with somebody, or book a taxi," advises Geoff Thompson, author of self-defence guide *Dead Or Alive: The Choice Is Yours* (Summersdale, £14.99). "I know this curtails your freedom, but try to think of it as you think of a seatbelt. You're not paranoid about crashing every time you get in a car, but you always put on your seatbelt 'just in case'. Areas near bars, between 11pm and midnight, are risky for women alone."

## Bright lights

You may feel safe if a street is lit, but some types of streetlight can actually stack the odds in an attacker's favour. Watch out for bright, high, orange streetlights. A recent study by research centre The Lighting Institute reveals attackers are more likely to succeed near these lights because they throw long shadows where criminals can hide and they only show people in silhouette, so it can be hard to make out who's walking towards you. Also, watch out for where the street lighting suddenly thins out – for example, on badly lit side roads near a busy main street – because it takes your eyes time to adjust to the darker light. Many local authorities are now investing

in newer sodium lights, which don't cast stark shadows at the edge of the road.

## Litter and graffiti

Litter and graffiti may not seem threatening but, according to Dr Eck, in areas where smaller crimes like these go unnoticed, there are likely to be more unsavoury characters around. They're a sign residents don't keep a close watch over the area. So, criminals feel it's less likely someone will step in to intervene if an offence is being committed. Areas with well-kept gardens, on the other hand, tend to have lower crime rates. In such places there are likely to be neighbourhood watches and twitching net curtains, and so a much higher likelihood attackers will be disturbed.

## Safe as houses?

Having houses nearby can also give a false sense of safety. Many developments are designed to be inward-looking and present blank walls to the outside world. So if there are no doors or windows overlooking your route, it's lurker-friendly. The same goes for areas where houses are spread far apart – there are still long, lonely stretches of road to negotiate. "Criminals are more likely to strike if their target seems unaware, so be on your guard in areas like this where you may be lulled into a false sense of security," says Thompson. "Just be aware of your surroundings – a criminal may well back off because you've made it clear you've noticed them."

## Alley alert

Research by criminologists Paul and Patricia Brantingham of Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada, revealed attackers particularly favour areas where there is no route of escape via side routes, once a potential victim >

< has started walking. Footpaths or alleys, where there is no way out other than to go straight forwards or back the way you came, are high risk places for attacks. Subways, a classic example of this, are being closed down throughout the country. "Always walk on the outside of the pavement," suggests Thompson. "You'll be less vulnerable to attackers hiding in doorways." Walk on the right side of the road, facing oncoming traffic to avoid curb crawlers.

### Multi-storey menace

Even public places like train stations and car parks can be risky if there is no way security guards or staff can see you. Underground stations where there are no guards on duty, or overland stations where the platforms and footpaths are deserted or screened by fences or vegetation are danger areas. So are old-style, multi-storey car parks with poor lighting and no CCTV cameras in operation.

"On the whole, multi-storey car parks are a no-no," says Thompson. "If you have to use one, make sure you park under a light, but try to avoid regularly parking in an old style multi-storey if you're often there alone - someone may be watching to learn your routine." Multi-storey car parks are slowly being improved across the country thanks to an Association Of Chief Police Officers Secure Car Park Award scheme. Safer car parks have narrowed entrances and exits with barriers to stop speedy getaways. Creepy corners are eliminated with good lighting and mirrors and help points

**"The best protection is other people. Busy areas are less risky. Trust your instinct - if it doesn't feel safe, take a different route"** PC Peter Woodhouse, West Yorks police

have camera links to security officers. In such revamped car parks, incidences of thefts, muggings and assaults have dropped by up to 90 per cent.

### Parks and wasteland

Most women instinctively realise paths lined by bushes are not safe, especially after dark. They create dark spaces and make perfect hiding places. Steer clear of parks, wasteland or recreation grounds if there are no others around. Liz Clark who heads the organisation Women's Self Defence has worked with hundreds of women who've been attacked. "Time and again, attackers get their opportunity because a woman has taken a shortcut," she says. "You may think 'it won't

## "What I wish I'd known"

■ Liz Clark (right), 32, from north London, runs the organisation Women's Self Defence. She set up her first course five years ago, after being attacked...

"It was 2pm on a bright, sunny day and I'd gone for a walk in the local park. I wandered off onto a quiet path. I guess somewhere at the back of my mind, I knew it was fairly isolated. Suddenly, a man came up behind me asking for the time. I looked at him and felt uneasy. He was about six foot tall and well built. Before I knew it, he'd pushed me over and pinned me down. For a few seconds I was paralysed by fear - I couldn't shout, scream or move. I knew he was going to rape me and I couldn't believe it. When he slammed my head against the ground, anger



overcame the shock. I began to kick, scratch and fight back with every bit of strength I had. He was yelling at me, telling me he'd kill me and then he started to undo his trousers. This left one of my arms free, so I grabbed the back of his head with that hand, wrenched my other arm free and poked my fingers in his eyes. I didn't let go until he ran off. Very luckily some passers by heard me screaming, called the police and came to help. An investigation was conducted but my attacker was never

caught. The experience left me living in fear until I finally decided I couldn't let it ruin my life. In fact, the attack inspired me to set up my classes.

"My key advice is to avoid places where no one else is around. I've spoken to hundreds of other victims and, nine times out of 10, it happens because they decide to take a risk. They take the shortcut across the park or walk down the lonely alley to save a 20-minute trek, when their instincts are telling them not to.

"My would-be rapist must have been loitering in the park, waiting for someone like me to head into that quiet area. It's so important to be aware of your surroundings, know the places to avoid and always listen to your gut feeling - it's far more valuable than you know."

happen to me' but it really is worth taking the long way around or getting a licensed taxi. Ninety-nine per cent of the time you do have another choice."

"Ultimately, the best protection is other

people," says PC Woodhouse. "Busier areas are less risky. Trust your instincts. If somewhere doesn't feel safe, then try if you can to take a different route."

### Time to take action

So what if you have to walk through what you believe is a dangerous area on the way to or from work? The first thing you can do is find out where the high-risk places are near you - and if the area you're worried about is one of them. You can get specific information on where local attacks have happened by attending Neighbourhood Watch meetings or your local Police Authority Forum. Your police station will tell you when and where these are held. And, if

you find yourself with no option but to walk alone through a frightening area, there are measures that can be taken to make those places safer in the future.

Women in Milton Keynes, for example, have successfully campaigned to improve safety on the notorious Redways - the leafy paths that criss-cross the town, away from the roads. A series of rapes and assaults on the footpaths in the 1990s prompted them to demand action.

"We'd all read the news reports of horrific attacks," explains Jenni Ferrans, 27, a PA who's part of the Milton Keynes Women's Forum. "The Redways were badly lit, pedestrian-only footpaths - so there weren't even cars passing by and attackers could hide in the bushes and just grab women who walked past."

Local women stepped up complaints to fully organised protests. "We started letter-writing campaigns to the local press," says Ferrans. "There was a groundswell of support from women in the town and hundreds joined a Reclaim The Night march. After that, the authorities had a blitz on cutting the vegetation back from the Redways. We also >



< encouraged women to report faulty streetlights to the council and we kept lists of what we could do. Keeping up the pressure had an effect. The routes are safer now because of the action local women have taken."

Geraldine Boothman, a local authority planning consultant, agrees complaining does yield results. "You don't have to put up with being frightened," she says. "If you can identify something like the need for CCTV in subways or cutting back vegetation at the entrance to your block of flats, get in touch with your council and ask them to take action. Be prepared to be persistent – offer suggestions and have confidence in what you think and say." And the more people you can get to back you up, the better. "If your local council get half a dozen letters or calls, they're likely to take notice," she says. "Find out the names of your local councillors and enlist their help. You can get their names and numbers by ringing the general enquiries number for your local council, listed in the Yellow Pages. If you don't see results, contact your local MP." One letter to an MP is seen to represent the views of 100 other constituents who didn't make the effort to write.

You can get extra help pinpointing danger spots from a new scheme from the Urban Design Alliance (UDA) called Placecheck. "This gives you the specifics of what you need to check in your area, to make sure it's safe – for example, making sure streetlights work and bus stops aren't in isolated areas," says Robert Cowan of the UDA. "We also provide information on which organisations can fix those problems. You don't need a formal group of people – getting a few friends or neighbours together will do. Using Placecheck questions, you assess your neighbourhood for safety by taking a short walk around."

You can also have a say in preventing these 'danger zones' being built in the first place if you make yourself heard at the planning stage, says PC Stephen Town, Architectural Liaison Officer with Bradford Police. Under a strategy called Secure By Design, he tells developers where the potential crime zones are in their plans and opposes them if necessary. "Women can get involved by pointing out their safety worries," he says. "If you know a new shopping centre is being planned near you, call your planning department and find out when the public can comment.

## 5 ways to reduce the fear factor

**1** "Do a mini risk assessment of your journey," advises Ann Elledge of the Suzy Lamplugh Trust. "For example, you might think

'Right, I'll be going home after dark and I know that walk from the station can be a bit creepy. If there's a taxi outside, do I spend £2.50 on it, or do I take my chances? If I have to walk, maybe I'll carry a personal attack alarm'.

These are extremely useful – if used properly. You bring it up as near to the assailant's ear as possible. The ones we sell have the highest decibels allowed and can stun a man long enough for you to get away. Carry the alarm in your hand anywhere you don't feel 100 per cent safe. Bear in mind they don't work by bringing

people running to the rescue (people ignore all sorts of alarms these days). But they can help you save yourself."

■ *Cosmo readers can buy an alarm at the reduced price of £8, inc p&p, from the Suzy Lamplugh Trust. Call 020 8876 0305, quoting Cosmo.*

**2** Ring or visit your local council offices and find out the names of people in charge of lighting, street safety and planning. These are likely to come under Environmental Services. Your main council number is in the Yellow Pages under Local Government. Contact your councillors and enlist their help in cutting through red tape. Many councils have a website listing councillors and services.

**3** Write to your local newspaper and ask them to highlight your

and others' worries about dodgy areas. This can be a short cut to getting the authorities to act quickly – they don't want bad publicity.

**4** Get together with others. Petitions or letter-writing campaigns have more impact than a single complaint. Be specific about your worries and what you want done.

**5** Call 020 7665 2210 or visit [www.placecheck.com](http://www.placecheck.com) for Placecheck's tips on how to go about improving an area and who apart from the police and council, has the money to help. For the latest edition of *Placecheck: A User's Guide*, send £1 and an a/s to UDAL, c/o Engineering Dept, Institute Of Civil Engineers, 1 Great George St, London SW1P 3AA.

Architects and planners can factor out a lot of crime in their developments. Where crime's easy, you get lots of it. Where it's hard, you get less." And under Section 17 of the Crime And Disorder Act local authorities are obliged to do all they reasonably can to prevent crime and disorder.

Do remember that, statistically, you're very unlikely to be attacked in the street. Your chance of being the victim

of any kind of stranger violence is just 1.5 per cent. But as Thompson points out, the fear itself is debilitating. "Worrying about having to walk through a frightening area regularly is enormously stressful," says Thompson. "But if you want to change something enough, then you can. Just imagine what it would be like, to feel safe and confident every step of the way home. It really is worth speaking up." □