Are you mug-proof?
April 4, 2011

Are you the perfect target? Your behavior could be putting you at risk to be a criminal's next victim.

As spring approaches and the mercury rises, typically so does crime. People tend to be out on the street and more lax, which creates opportunities perfect for criminals to strike, said Arthur Lurigio, a professor of psychology and criminal justice at Loyola University Chicago.

It's never a person's fault if he or she is attacked, criminologists and self-defense instructors say. But they say there are behavioral cues -- like appearing distracted and unprepared, traveling alone in dark or desolate areas and ignoring your gut when you feel something is not right -- that can increase your risk of becoming a victim.

Experts say there are precautions people can take to lower their likelihood of being victimized.

"Except in rare cases, you wouldn't say people are chosen randomly to be victims of crime because criminals -- though opportunists -- they also want to be successful," Lurigio said.

Criminals are going to hone in on people they see as vulnerable, he said.

Appearing distracted or drunk can increase a person's chances of becoming a crime target, experts say.

Being out late at night and in isolated or high-crime areas also are factors.

" Anything that takes away your ability to perceive what's going on around you: being on your cell phone, texting, listening to an iPod, they all take away your senses and you're concentrating on something that's taking you away from being alert in your surrounding environment," Lurigio said.

Looking or acting like a tourist can grab the attention of criminals, said Tod Burke, a criminal justice professor at Radford University in Virginia and a former police officer.

Tourists aren't as familiar with their surroundings, and the unlikelihood they would travel back to testify against a robber only makes them more of a target, he said.

Criminals may be eyeing you if you look unprepared, he said. A telltale sign is fumbling around in your purse or having your hands in your pockets searching for keys.

Simply having your hands in your pockets also could signal vulnerability because it can make you less likely to be able to fend off an attacker, he said.
Just as criminals are thinking about whether you're an easy target, you should do the same, Burke said. "If I were going after someone like myself, what would make me vulnerable?" he said.

Dianne Parra, 27, protects herself by texting her fiance or parents when she's leaving work. Then they know when to expect a call from her that she safely reached her car.

"As soon as I'm ready to get off the train, I have my keys in my hand and my phone in my pocket," said Parra, a radio promotions manager who lives in Franklin Park. Just in case, she puts her keys between her fingers -- her friends call it "The Wolverine claw" -- and her finger on the panic button of her keychain when she walks to her car from her Blue Line stop.

Experts disagree about how effective panic buttons are because it's questionable whether people will pay attention if the alarm is activated.

They warn that carrying pepper spray and talking on your cell phone also can give a false sense of security because the spray can backfire and the cell phone can be a distraction.

To lessen your risk of being a possible crime victim, experts suggest walking with purpose and making eye contact with people passing you to let them know you see them.

It's also practical to arrange for a ride or cab ahead of time if you know you're going to be out late at night alone or if you've been drinking, said Martha Thompson, self-defense instructor and director of IMPACT Chicago.

Even your stride and pace can project confidence, she said. Walking too fast makes you look frightened, she said. Shuffling your feet, Burke said, could indicate submissiveness.

"Whether or not you're carrying anything, have a ponytail or wear high heels is really less important than how you project," Thompson said. The main idea is to be aware of your surroundings, body language and how you are presenting yourself, she said.

"When you walk with your head down, you're not only distracted -- sometimes criminals detect that as you're timid or vulnerable," said Chicago Police News Affairs officer John Mirabelli.

If you're sensing danger, pay attention to your instincts, Lurigio said. "If something doesn't feel right, it's better to give the indication you're being rude than to be a victim of a crime," he said.

Stephanie Polcyn, 24, believes in safety in numbers. When she gets off the Brown Line after work and heads home in Roscoe Village, she said she always turns off her iPod and takes a look to see who's around her.

"If there's a bunch of people who get off the 'L' with me, I try to keep in step with them so I'm not by myself," she said.

Not all people go out of their way and take actions to protect themselves. Men, in particular, sometimes don't take action to safeguard themselves.
Mark Sokolowski, 30, said he lives in a safe neighborhood -- Lakeview -- and typically goes out on weekends with a group of people. "Maybe if [I'd] ever been mugged I would approach that differently and actually take precautions," Sokolowski said.

Even so, young men are more likely to be crime victims because they're out more and often carry themselves with a sense of invincibility, Burke said.

"By letting their guard down as well, they make themselves more vulnerable," he said.