

Is Burlington Safe?

This year, among visitors and admitted students choosing to attend UVM, one of the most important questions that arises is whether Burlington is safe. The short answer is, yes. Though as with most things in the complex world of the 21st century the answer requires more detail to be fully informative.

Burlington is the “smallest big city in the country” – the smallest of the 50 largest cities in each respective state. As a result, we have all the benefits and challenges of being Vermont’s largest “metro” area. For years, Burlington has ranked among the safest small cities in the nation by many measures. We have enjoyed a low violent crime rate in part in exchange for a slightly higher property crime rate – more items stolen from cars, for example, fewer armed robberies or “muggings” at ATM machines.

Over the last few years, Burlington has been challenged by national trends such as increasing drug addiction (and the drug dealing that comes with it), increasing mental health challenges, inadequate housing and services for those in need, and systemic difficulties holding offenders accountable. At the same time, we have experienced city police staffing shortages and well-publicized public policy decisions about police matters making public safety a far more prominent issue.

Make no mistake, by national standards Burlington remains a safe city, even compared to cities of similar size and character. The chances of a random violent crime remain extremely low, as violent crime is perpetrated against those the perpetrator knows. The chances of theft, including theft of or from a car or a burglary to a home are slightly elevated by local standards. The most recent FBI data from 2022 show property crime, including larceny, above the national average, while burglary (theft by entering a home or business without permission) was below the national trend. Overall violent crimes, including felony assaults and robberies (stealing from a person using force or threat), occur at half or below half the national rate.

While there are always risks, a little bit of vigilance goes a long way to mitigate them. We advise our students and employees on how to reduce risk: Do not leave valuables (or anything at all) in your car and take the keys with you; lock your door and first floor windows; be mindful of your surroundings; mind your drinks – choose moderation and monitor your glass to ensure no foreign substances are introduced; when walking at night, always travel with a companion and keep cell phones charged and handy; report suspicious activity and crime when it occurs; do not engage anyone who is threatening or harassing or appears in crisis; and strongly consider an adage that has never been truer: “nothing good happens after midnight.” And, we remind our community members regularly: always have the CATSafe app at the ready.

For years I’ve fielded calls from prospective parents of college students at UVM, Champlain, St. Michael’s and other local institutions. Often those parents’ careers or interests intersected public safety in some way. They ask about relative safety and which neighborhoods were the ones their student should avoid living in or visiting. That answer was consistent: there are no “bad” neighborhoods and no substantial risks if their student shows the vigilance outlined above. Those answers remain true today, though the need for careful vigilance is greater than it has been in recent memory.

I am often asked what employees, parents, and students can do in addition to practicing vigilance and prevention to impact safety. Our safety landscape is inextricably linked to many of our legislated policy choices. If you have concerns, be sure to share them with the local City Council and State legislators.

Our safety team on campus works hard every day to ensure that students, faculty, and staff have the best tools and training available to enhance safety on and around campus. Safety is the top priority for the university. For more detail visit www.uvm.edu/dsc.

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