

A group of teenagers, mostly seen from behind, are standing on a city sidewalk at night. They are wearing backpacks and looking towards a subway entrance in the background. The entrance has a sign that reads "Washington D'ac". The scene is dimly lit, with some lights visible on the buildings and the subway entrance.

# Safety Guidelines for DC Teens: Know Your Rights & Stay Safe

This comprehensive guide provides essential safety information for high school students (ages 14–18) in Washington, D.C., with a focus on understanding your rights during interactions with law enforcement, especially on public transportation. Developed in collaboration with Win with Black Women DC, these guidelines aim to keep you informed, prepared, and safe. Knowledge of your rights as a minor can make a critical difference in challenging situations. Remember: these aren't just suggestions—police ARE arresting minors, so take these guidelines seriously.

# Identification & Rights Awareness

Carrying proper identification and understanding your fundamental rights as a minor is your first line of protection. Your school ID isn't just for campus access—it's a crucial form of identification that can help in various situations, including encounters with law enforcement.

As a minor in the District of Columbia, you have special protections under the law that adults don't have. These protections include the right to have a parent or guardian present during police questioning. This is not optional—it's your legal right. Law enforcement officers should contact your parents or guardians before conducting any formal interview.

Keep your school ID in an easily accessible but secure location in your wallet or backpack. Consider having a small, waterproof ID holder attached to your backpack for quick access. Remember that your student ID can also help verify your age and student status, which might be relevant during certain interactions.



## School ID Placement

Keep your ID in a consistent, easily accessible pocket of your wallet or backpack. Consider using a lanyard or retractable ID holder for quick access.

## Minor's Rights

You have the right to have a parent/guardian present during questioning. Police must make reasonable attempts to contact your parents before formal interrogation.

## Documentation

Consider keeping a small card with emergency contacts and basic rights information alongside your ID. Some advocacy organizations offer printable "know your rights" cards specifically for minors.

# Emergency Preparedness & Communication

Maintaining reliable communication channels is essential for your safety. A dead phone battery can quickly turn an inconvenient situation into a potentially dangerous one, especially when navigating public transportation or unfamiliar areas of the city.

## Phone Management Strategies

- Maintain at least 50% battery when leaving home or school
- Carry a fully-charged portable battery pack in your backpack
- Know how to activate power-saving mode on your device
- Consider investing in a case with built-in battery backup
- Keep a physical list of important phone numbers in your wallet as backup

## Emergency Contact Setup

- Program ICE (In Case of Emergency) contacts in your phone
- Memorize at least two emergency contact numbers
- Set up emergency contacts in your phone's built-in emergency feature
- Share your location with trusted family members through phone services
- Consider apps specifically designed for teen safety with emergency features

100%

Battery Level

Aim to start your day with a fully charged phone

2+

Memorized Numbers

Know at least two emergency contact numbers by heart

3-5

ICE Contacts

Set up multiple In Case of Emergency contacts in your phone

In addition to maintaining your phone, establish check-in protocols with parents or guardians. Let them know your expected travel routes and arrival times, especially when using public transportation. Many families find that regular check-in texts when arriving at destinations provide peace of mind for everyone.

# Smart Travel & The Buddy System

Navigating Washington, D.C.'s public transportation system—including Metrorail, Metrobus, and circulator buses—requires awareness and smart planning. The buddy system isn't just an elementary school concept; it remains one of the most effective safety strategies for high school students, especially in urban environments.



## Plan Your Route

Before leaving, determine your exact route including which bus/train lines, transfers, and approximate times. Use the WMATA app or Google Maps to plan efficiently.



## Travel Together

Whenever possible, travel with classmates, friends, or siblings. Even one companion significantly increases safety and provides witness support if needed.



## Share Your Journey

Let parents/guardians know your route, expected arrival time, and who you're traveling with. Consider using location-sharing apps for real-time tracking.

When using Metro stations, be particularly mindful during less crowded times. Position yourself near station managers or in well-lit areas while waiting. On buses, sitting near the driver provides an additional layer of security. For walking portions of your journey, stick to well-traveled routes even if it means walking a slightly longer distance.

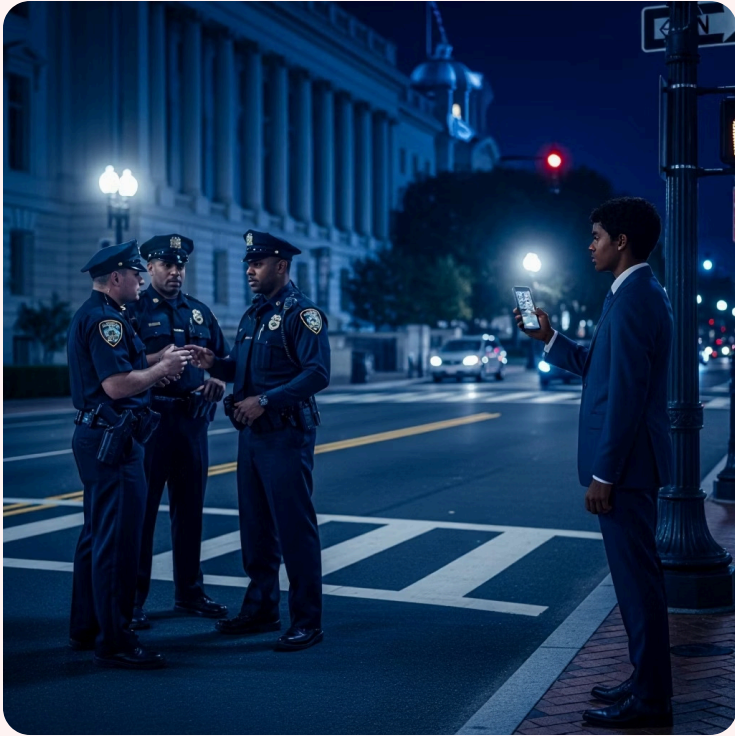
Remember that the perception of safety can change quickly as daylight diminishes. What feels comfortable at 3:00 PM might feel very different at 6:00 PM in winter months when it's already dark. Adjust your travel habits seasonally, and always have a backup plan if you miss a connection or if service is delayed.



Evening travel requires extra precautions. If you must travel after dark, ensure you're with companions, stick to well-lit routes, and maintain regular check-ins with parents/guardians.



# Recording Police Interactions



You have the legal right to record police interactions in Washington, D.C., including those involving yourself or others. This right applies to minors as well as adults and extends to encounters with regular police officers, Metro Transit Police, and other law enforcement officials. Recording can provide crucial documentation of the interaction and may help protect your rights.

However, your personal safety should always take priority over documentation. If recording would escalate the situation or put you at risk, focus on complying with officer instructions while mentally noting details of the encounter instead.

## Recording Best Practices

- Hold your phone steady and keep a reasonable distance
- Announce calmly that you are recording for documentation
- Try to capture badge numbers and officer names if visible
- Record continuously rather than starting and stopping
- Include time and location references if possible

## When Not to Record

- If recording would delay compliance with lawful orders
- When it might escalate tensions in an already volatile situation
- If it prevents you from focusing on your own safety
- If you're in a position where handling your phone might be misinterpreted

## After Recording

- Back up the video to cloud storage as soon as possible
- Share the footage with a trusted adult
- Consider providing it to community legal aid organizations
- Note the date, time, and circumstances in a separate document

If you're unable to record safely, look for witnesses who might be able to record or observe the interaction. Sometimes simply saying, "I notice there are people watching and recording this interaction" can help ensure the encounter remains professional. After any significant police interaction, document the details as soon as possible, including officer names or badge numbers, what was said, and any actions taken.

# Navigating Public Transportation Safely

Public transportation in Washington, D.C. includes Metrorail, Metrobus, DC Circulator, and other services. Understanding the differences between transit employees and law enforcement is crucial for navigating these systems safely.



## Fare Compliance

Always have your valid student SmarTrip card ready. Fare evasion can lead to unnecessary interactions with fare inspectors or transit police. Keep your card in a consistent, easily accessible location.



## Know Who's Who

Fare inspectors check for payment but cannot arrest you. Metro Transit Police and regular police officers have full arrest powers. Learn to recognize the different uniforms and authorities.



## ID Verification

You only need to show ID if there's reasonable suspicion of a crime. If asked for ID without apparent reason, you can politely ask, "May I ask why you need to see my ID?"

## Understanding Search Limitations

Law enforcement needs specific legal grounds to search your belongings on public transportation. While security measures exist throughout the system, your constitutional protections remain in place:

Backpack/Bag Searches	Officers cannot search without a warrant or specific exceptions. You can calmly state: "I do not consent to a search." Never physically resist, but make your non-consent clear.
Removal Requests	If asked to exit a vehicle, you can respectfully ask: "Am I free to go?" or "Am I being detained?" These questions help clarify whether you're legally required to comply.
Pat-Downs	Officers may conduct a quick pat-down only if they have reasonable suspicion you're armed. This is limited to checking for weapons, not a full search.



When on Metro or buses, position yourself strategically. Sit near the driver/operator when possible, stay in cars with other passengers, and be aware of emergency call buttons and exit locations.

# Managing Police Encounters

Encounters with law enforcement can be intimidating, but knowing how to conduct yourself can help ensure these interactions proceed safely and protect your rights. For high school students in D.C., understanding both how to cooperate and how to assert your rights is essential.



Keep your responses brief, direct, and specific to the questions asked. Avoid volunteering additional information or explaining circumstances unless necessary. Your tone matters—remain respectful but firm about your rights. Hostile or confrontational behavior can escalate situations unnecessarily.

"I'm a high school student and a minor. I would like my parent/guardian contacted before any questioning. I respectfully invoke my right to remain silent until they arrive."

Even in stressful situations, try to note important details: officer names or badge numbers, time and location, what was said, and any witnesses present. This information can be valuable if you need to file a report about the interaction later.

# Understanding Searches & Your Rights

One of the most common areas of confusion for teens involves when and how law enforcement can legally search your person or property. Knowing the boundaries of legal searches can help you navigate these situations while protecting your rights.

The Fourth Amendment protects against unreasonable searches and seizures, and these protections extend to minors. However, there are specific circumstances where searches may be permitted. Understanding these distinctions can help you respond appropriately if faced with a search request.

⊗ Never physically resist a search, even if you believe it's unlawful. Instead, clearly state "I do not consent to this search" to preserve your legal rights while complying physically for your safety.

## Pat-Downs

Officers may conduct a quick pat-down over your clothing if they have reasonable suspicion you're armed. This is limited to checking for weapons only.

## Bag/Backpack Searches

Generally requires a warrant or your consent, except in specific circumstances. You can state: "I do not consent to a search of my belongings."

## Phone Searches

Your phone is protected from warrantless searches. Officers cannot legally force you to unlock your phone or go through its contents without a warrant.

## Who Has Authority to Conduct Searches

CAN search with proper authority	CANNOT search without a warrant
Police Officers	National Guard troops
Metro Transit Police	Private security guards
Homeland Security Officers	Fare inspectors
School Resource Officers (limited)	School administrators (with exceptions)

School environments have different search standards than public spaces. While school officials can search belongings with reasonable suspicion related to school rule violations, this authority is not unlimited. School resource officers, who are actual police officers, generally need to follow standard police search requirements.

Remember that consent is a choice. If an officer asks, "Mind if I take a look in your bag?" they are requesting your permission. You have the right to decline politely. However, if they have legal grounds to search regardless of consent, they will typically inform you of this fact.



# Special Transportation Safety Tips

Public transportation in Washington, D.C. offers tremendous freedom and mobility for high school students, but it also presents unique safety considerations. These specialized tips will help you navigate the Metro system and bus networks with confidence while minimizing potential risks.

## Strategic Seating

On buses, sit near the driver. On Metro trains, choose middle cars during off-peak hours as they tend to have more passengers. Avoid empty cars or sitting near exits where someone could quickly grab items and run.

## Situational Awareness

Keep one ear free from headphones to hear announcements and stay aware of your surroundings. Minimize phone use that might distract you from potential issues developing nearby.

## Exit Planning

Always know which stop comes before yours so you can prepare to exit. Have a contingency plan if you miss your stop or if a station is unexpectedly closed. Know alternate routes home from different stations.

## Emergency Protocol if Arrested

While following these guidelines should help prevent most problems, it's important to know what to do in a worst-case scenario where you're detained or arrested:

1. State clearly and repeatedly: "I'm a minor and I want my parents contacted immediately."
2. Invoke your right to remain silent beyond providing basic identifying information.
3. Request an attorney in addition to your parents.
4. Do not sign any documents without a parent and lawyer present.
5. Avoid discussing your case with anyone else, including other detainees.

"I am exercising my right to remain silent. I want to speak to my parents and an attorney."

This simple statement invokes multiple legal protections and should be your go-to response if detained. Repeat it as necessary if questioning continues.

After any serious incident, document everything you remember as soon as possible, including officer names, badge numbers, what was said, and any witnesses.

# Community Resources & Quick Reference

Having immediate access to support resources can make a critical difference in challenging situations. This reference guide provides essential contacts and phrases to remember when navigating Washington, D.C. as a student.

## Emergency Contacts

Service	Number/Website
Emergency	911
DC Public Defender Service	202-628-1200
Legal Aid Society of DC	202-628-1161
Metro Transit PD	202-962-2121
Free DC	<a href="https://freedcproject.org/rights">freedcproject.org/rights</a>



## Key Phrases to Memorize

- "Am I free to go?"

Clarifies whether you're being detained or can leave.
- "Am I being detained?"

Forces officers to declare whether you're legally required to stay.
- "I'm a minor – I want my parents called."

Invokes your special protections as a minor.
- "I do not consent to a search."

Preserves your rights while still complying physically.
- "I want to remain silent and speak to a lawyer."

Invokes your Fifth Amendment protections against self-incrimination.

These guidelines are provided for educational purposes to help protect the safety and rights of high school students during law enforcement encounters. Share this information with friends, family, and trusted adults in your community. Consider creating a small pocket card with these key phrases and emergency contacts to keep with your ID.

Remember: Knowledge is power, community is strength, and you have rights even as a minor. Being informed helps keep you safe while navigating Washington, D.C. as a student.

For more comprehensive information and resources, visit [freedcproject.org/rights](https://freedcproject.org/rights) or contact Win with Black Women DC for additional support, workshops, and community advocacy opportunities.