

# Finders, Keepers? Not in New York

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If you lose your wallet in New York City, do you expect to ever see it again? Given the stereotypes that surround the city—all New Yorkers are rude, their city is a den of thieves, they would just as soon step over you than pick you up off the street—you may not. But many people who make New York their home know that its residents are proud of their habit of helping each other out in a pinch.

Students in an urban studies class at Barnard College recently put these competing images to the test when they dropped wallets on the street to see whether or not New Yorkers returned them. The outcome surprised them all. In 132 drops from the Bronx to Brooklyn, the wallet was stolen a mere two percent of the time. The overwhelming majority of New Yorkers returned the wallet or attempted to return the wallet—sometimes going to extreme lengths to help.

Each student in Barnard Professor Gregory Smithsimon's seminar, "The Production, Consumption, and Control of Public Space," received a wallet. In it was an old MetroCard, four dollars, odds and ends, and several of their professor's business cards (in case the person who found it wanted to mail it back). In teams of two, the students chose locations all across the city and set off to conduct the experiment. They headed to Chelsea, Crown Heights, the Upper East Side, a Harlem park, the steps of City Hall, and a Bronx community college. Students planned to "lose" a wallet 20 times in each location—or until the wallets were gone.

In 82 percent of the cases, the wallet was returned. Three percent of the time, someone tried to return it but failed (by asking the wrong person if

they had lost a wallet, for instance). In 13 percent of the cases, the wallet lay where it fell, either unseen or ignored by people passing by. In the remaining two percent of cases, the wallet was clearly taken.

Getting the wallet back to its owner was often a team effort. One group described how “in one drop, a middle-aged white woman, who first noticed the wallet, called out, ‘That lady dropped her wallet!’ which caused another bystander to bend down and pick up the wallet, which was then passed off to two African American girls who ran ahead to return the wallet. This combined effort of four people is an unexpected but surprisingly pleasing result.” In the subway, a man missed his train to run back and return the wallet. New York, it turns out, is actually a good place to lose a wallet.

Where is the riskiest place to lose your wallet? The Upper East Side. Here the researchers had two wallets taken after completing barely half of the drops. One student chose the blocks where the median family income is \$126,000 a year, expecting better-than-average return rates. Instead, he watched as a woman with a bouquet of pink roses “picked up the wallet, did not look around at all, and simply kept on walking.” (In other parts of the city people stopped to look around for the wallet’s owner, asked others nearby, or checked inside for ID.) The student followed the woman with the pink roses to see if she would bring it to a cop, doorman, or store owner, but she kept walking. “Perhaps she was going to wait until she got to her destination before she looked for some sort of information,” he wrote, “or perhaps she simply did not see who dropped it and decided to keep the wallet.” A group of twenty-something men walking up the East Side scooped up the other wallet just as quickly. Wallet-finders from Washington Heights to Crown Heights called to return the wallet, but not the woman with the pink roses.

In the 1990s, psychologist Robert Levine quite famously measured how likely people were to return a pen that was dropped on the street. He

blamed New York's high population density when a mere 30 percent were returned. The Barnard seminar students correctly predicted that an object of more value would make strangers respond more generously, not less. They also found that density could help rather than hinder a good deed. For instance, people were more likely to walk past a lost wallet in Chelsea Market than they were on the street just outside. Inside the privately owned space, pedestrians may have thought a lost item was someone else's responsibility. Outside they were more likely to take responsibility themselves. There are other reasons to think you're safer on the streets: other than the Upper East Side, the only other pilfering occurred in a clothing store in Harlem, where the wallet resurfaced—minus the money. Outside on 125th Street and nearby in Marcus Garvey Park, the wallet was returned every time.

Students said the project taught them a lot about researching, and about New York. "We knew before we even sat down to analyze our data that [the stereotype of New Yorkers] was wrong," said student Ana Almanzar. "I enjoyed it a lot. I have never done anything like it."

Many students hadn't expected to finish the assignment with their wallets still in hand. Through the project they moved beyond conventional wisdom to study how people interact in public space. Will the wallet experiment change others' impressions of Gotham? Maybe, but don't lose your wallet betting on it.

Source: Barnard College

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