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Authors
Cowan, Greer
Liu, Pearl

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Rethinking Safe Transit Spaces for Women and Gender Minorities

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Greer Cowan, MURP
Pearl Liu, MURP

Issue

Sexual harassment on public transit, which disproportionately affects women and gender-expansive people (those who don't conform to traditional gender roles), causes riders to feel unsafe and to shift their travel behavior. To address this issue, transit agencies need more data and information about gender-based harassment occurring in transit environments, which to date is limited.

This research presents findings from a survey of riders of the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) Muni system about their perceptions of safety and experiences of harassment. As part of its Safety Equity Initiative, the SFMTA supported this research intended to develop a better understanding of the prevalence of harassment on the Muni system and to offer targeted recommendations to ensure all riders, regardless of their gender expression or identity, feel safe while riding Muni.

To date, only a few California transit agencies have collected data on gender-based harassment on their systems. But with the recent passage of Senate Bill 1661 in February 2022, the largest agencies in the state will now be required to document harassment incidents by gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity to start developing policies to improve rider safety. In light of this legislation, the methodology used here plays a role in catalyzing future research for agencies across California.

Study Approach

The researchers surveyed 1,613 Muni transit riders to explore their travel behaviors, experiences with gender-based harassment, and perceptions of safety on Muni. The survey was distributed via the Transit app and a Muni Alert sent through email and text messaging. It ran from Feb. 16–March 31, 2023 and was available in five languages (Chinese, Spanish, Tagalog, Russian, and English).

Findings

- Gender-based harassment on the Muni public transit system in San Francisco is pervasive and perceptions of safety are low. Sixty-seven percent of all respondents experienced some form of harassment in the last six months. Verbal harassment was the most common, followed by non-verbal harassment, including unwanted sexual gestures, stalking, indecent exposure, public masturbation, etc. Physical harassment was the least common, but 36% of the sample still reported having experienced it. More than two-thirds of respondents (68%) always or often felt safe during the last six months while riding Muni during the daytime, but only 32% felt safe at nighttime. Muni riders felt the least safe on train platforms, at bus stops, and in station elevators.
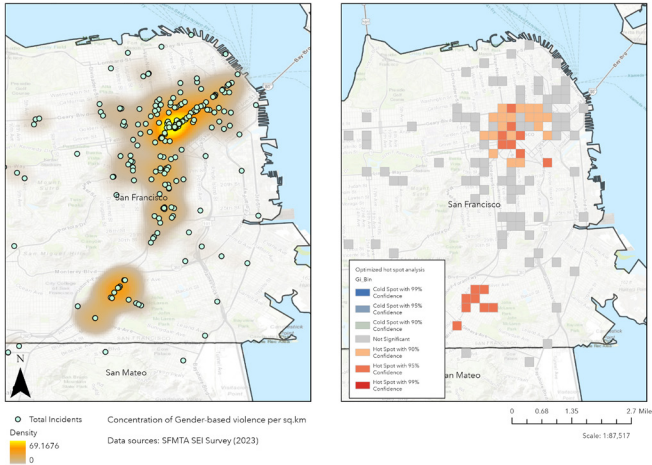
Figure 1. Hotspot analysis of gender-based harassment incidents in San Francisco.

Conclusions

Based on the study's findings and analysis, the researchers recommend:

- Offer more frequent service on Muni lines where harassment is most prevalent and add frequent transit service throughout the day. The analysis revealed that harassment is most prevalent on the L Taraval Bus Owl, J Church, K Ingleside Bus, and 9 San Bruno lines and stops in downtown San Francisco and the Mission neighborhoods.

- Target Market Street for safety improvements, as routes and stops there have the densest gender-based harassment incidents.

- Install more lighting and improve bus-related infrastructure and facilities. Many respondents reported harassment at stations and stops and said that increased lighting would make them feel safer. Transit riders felt the least safe at bus stops, and, in general, the bus (compared to the train) where respondents experienced the most harassment.

- Publicize how to report harassment incidents and what happens upon filing a report. Many individuals do not know how to report harassment and do not believe action will be taken based on their report.

- Engage with community members to understand how best to implement transit ambassador programs or police patrols. Transit ambassadors and police patrols were popular potential safety improvements, but the perception of their effectiveness varied by respondents' race/ethnicity.

- Certain populations are disproportionately affected. There were statistically significant differences in perceptions of safety and experiences of harassment between different groups: women versus men, gender minorities versus cisgender people, those who have access to a private vehicle versus those who do not, and white versus non-white riders.

- There is a concentration of harassment incidents in downtown San Francisco and Mission Terrace — men, women, and gender minorities have all experienced the most harassment incidents in those areas (Figure 1).

- Women and gender minorities experience harassment in more dispersed locations than men. Incidents of harassment for men mainly concentrated in downtown San Francisco, whereas women and gender minorities had harassment hotspots in multiple locations.

- Riders are often reluctant or unaware of how to report these incidents, and feel that reporting will not improve safety or reduce harassment on Muni.

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