

# Public Transit Safety Among University Students

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## Research Topic

Many people face sexual harassment during different parts of their public transit journey, while waiting at stops, being onboard a transit vehicle, or walking to/from a bus stop or railway station. Sexual harassment in transit settings affects female riders disproportionately. Sexual harassment, broadly defined, is “any unwanted attention including lewd comments, leering, sexual invitations, threats, displaying pornographic material, being followed or pictured, and public masturbation.” Scholars identify three categories of sexual harassment crimes in public spaces and transit environments: 1) verbal; 2) non-verbal; and 3) physical.

While sexual harassment is an all-too-common experience on transit, it is often overlooked in research and policy circles. Some studies indicate that sexual harassment in transit environments often goes unreported, and thus remains largely invisible to transit operators. A 2017 Washington Post article titled “Why the #MeToo movement is a public transportation issue” argued that instances of sexual harassment commonly happen on public transportation. Despite its prevalence, scholars and transit agencies do not have a rich understanding about the extent, type, sites, and socio-physical determinants of sexual harassment in transit environments, how these concerns affect transit ridership, and know even less about effective strategies to tackle harassment. As such, transit agencies and transportation professionals should focus on how to prevent sexual harassment, while also examining how it affects different subgroups of transit riders differently.

## Study

With the help of university administrators, we sent a 51-question web-based survey to students with transit passes at three local campuses: University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA), and California State University, Northridge (CSUN), and received back 1,284 completed responses. We focused on university students because this group is typically more transit-dependent than the general public, and possibly because of their age, more vulnerable to victimization from sexual harassment than other adults. Additionally, we conducted interviews with local transit operators to understand their awareness of transit harassment on their systems and their efforts to combat sexual harassment in transit settings.

## Main Findings

- Sexual harassment during the transit journey is a common experience among college students from all three campuses: 72% of respondents using the bus system and 48% of respondents using the rail system reported having experienced at least one type of sexual harassment behavior in a transit setting over the last three years.
- Gender is a clearly important factor affecting harassment. Statistically significantly higher percentages of women than men reported being affected.
- Race/ethnicity was another significant factor affecting victimization. Latino and Asian students are more likely to report victimization from non-verbal harassment; white students are more likely to be victims of verbal harassment; and Latino and white students are more likely to have experienced physical harassment. However, incidents of physical harassment were significantly smaller than incidents of verbal harassment.

- Time of day matters. For men and women, perceptions of safety on the bus and rail systems were significantly lower during nighttime; statistically higher numbers of women than men never felt safe or did not use the bus or train at night.
- Particular aspects of the physical and social environment of a transit setting influence students' perception of fear and safety. Poorly guarded or empty transit settings, and the presence of intoxicated people and drug use were statistically associated with lower perceptions of safety among students on both the bus and rail system, regardless of time of day. Poorly illuminated bus stops were also indicated by respondents as one of the top reasons for reduced perceptions of safety.
- Victims significantly underreport their sexual harassment experiences. Only 10% of all students who had experienced or observed crimes of sexual harassment reported the incident. There is little variation in reporting rates among different gender or race/ethnicity groups.
- Only a few transit agencies collect information on harassment. Most of the transit agencies interviewed do not administer regular onboard passenger surveys; and when they do, they do not commonly ask about harassment.
- include better lighting, station and stop upkeep, bus stop placement in well-used areas, removal of blind spots, etc.
- Reduce passenger exposure and perceptions of fear while waiting for transit. Increasing the frequency and reliability of the bus will minimize passenger waiting and exposure. Increasing service frequency also helps reduce overcrowding, an environmental condition that enables physical harassment (groping). Transit agencies can also consider on-demand stops and services during evening hours.
- Implement transit harassment hotline or digital app. Making sexual harassment reporting quick, easy and discreet through hotlines or digital apps can help to overcome the problem of severe underreporting.
- Employ well-designed and targeted educational campaigns. Campaigns can reduce harassment behaviors, encourage reporting, and educate bystanders on how to help stop harassment.
- Consider community policing approaches that can increase perceptions of safety. Transit agencies may employ more security patrols at some locations and times of day. Ideally, these security patrols could be conducted by transit staff or community policing. Transit staff should also be trained to deal specifically with sexual harassment.

## Recommendations

Listening to student suggestions can be one of the first steps that transit operators can take to ease perceptions of fear and counteract the prevalence of harassment. However, to tackle a phenomenon as pervasive as sexual harassment in transit environments, we need multi-pronged strategies that include research, design, and policy action. Below are some suggestions.

- Understand sexual harassment patterns through surveys. Transit agencies should conduct regular passenger surveys with specific questions about sexual harassment experiences of different groups throughout the entire transit journey.
- Employ crime prevention through environmental design strategies. Transit agencies should focus on environmental design strategies that students highlight as important markers of safety. Some of these strategies

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## For More Information

This policy brief is based on the report: Loukaitou-Sideris, A., Brozen, M., Ding, H., Pinski, M., & Siddiq, F. (2020). *Public transit safety among university students*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Lewis Center for Research Policy Studies. Retrieved from <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9wf3r12k>