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Luis Valente, MURP • July 2026

Issue

Public transportation is a lifeline for low-income people and households with limited or no access to a private vehicle, providing critical access to work, school and other opportunities. While access to private vehicles has increased among low-income households over time, transit riders remain disproportionately low-income and non-white. These disparities are especially pronounced at night, when fewer traditional commuters are traveling, and workers with evening, overnight or irregular schedules are more likely to rely on public transportation. Yet these travelers are often sidelined by transportation planners and policymakers, who often prioritize commute travel periods when ridership is highest.

The emphasis on peak service can create difficult conditions for riders who travel during the late night and early morning periods (i.e., the “third shift”), including less frequent service and longer waits at transit stops, often in environments that are perceived as unsafe. Third-shift riders experience these conditions disproportionately due to their schedules, and for women, traveling at night can exacerbate pre-existing safety concerns. For many of these riders, transit may be their only option, but that should not mean accepting lower standards of safety or service.

As Los Angeles prepares for the 2028 Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games, regional transportation investments present a rare opportunity to improve nighttime transit safety. This project examined the Los Angeles Department of Transportation’s Integrated Mobility Hubs (IMH) project to identify design improvements and planning practices and policies that can make transit safer and more accessible after dark.

Study Approach

Pico Station, a light rail station on the Los Angeles Metro A and E Lines in Downtown Los Angeles, served as the primary data collection site for this project. As one of the priority locations for LADOT’s IMH project, the station provided a real-world planning context and helped identify policy and design recommendations applicable both to Pico Station and other planned IMH sites. This project relied on three primary data collection methods: rider surveys, observation mapping and case studies with informational interviews.

First, surveys were administered to users waiting on the Pico Station platform and at nearby bus stops to understand perceptions of safety and desired transit improvements among transit riders. Responses were analyzed by gender and primary trip period to understand how experiences varied across different demographic groups. Second, observation mapping documented how people navigated and used the station area during daytime and nighttime periods. Last, case studies and informational interviews with transit agency and transportation department staff from other jurisdictions helped identify best practices for station access planning and implementation.

Key Findings

Women reported feeling unsafe at night at much higher rates than men, both at Pico Station and in transit environments generally (Figure 1). Third-shift riders were slightly more likely than riders in other trip periods to report feeling unsafe. The modest differences between trip periods, however, may be due to the fact that third-shift travelers have a different baseline for evaluating transit safety compared to other demographics. Regardless, both findings underscore the need

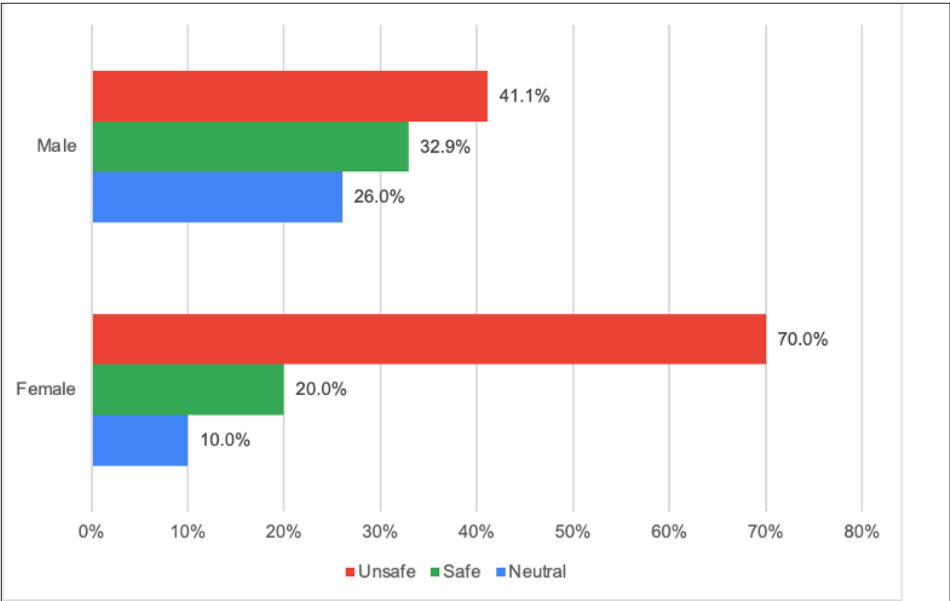


Figure 1.
General Nighttime Transit Safety Sentiments by Gender

to plan for those who take transit outside traditional commute hours and provide consistency in trip safety and quality.

Riders consistently identified the presence of Metro Ambassadors and other transit staff, as well as police officers, along with improved lighting at and near transit stations, as the most important safety enhancements. Wayfinding was less central to riders’ concerns, though respondents strongly preferred clear physical signage and maps over QR codes.

Interviews with practitioners emphasized the need for clear agreements and processes for the implementation of station-area interventions. Participants strongly recommended station access planning documents to serve as a “north star” during planning and design processes.

Recommendations

- » Mobility hubs extend beyond rail platforms and include bus stops, bikeshare stations, and local streets that are relatively darker and experience less foot traffic. Thus, safety and accessibility improvements should cover a much larger footprint to ensure a high-quality mobility experience for all, regardless of mode choice.
- » Safety is a key priority for transit riders, especially women and third-shift travelers. Agencies should prioritize providing visible transit staff and/or security personnel and maintaining consistent lighting conditions at and

around rail platforms and bus stops. Wayfinding should prioritize simple tools, such as physical signage and station-area maps, over digital ones.

- » Station-area planning frameworks are vital to deliver the safety and accessibility interventions identified by transit riders. To that end, agencies should develop IMH site-specific implementation plans that identify priority improvements informed by community engagement efforts, assign responsibilities to agencies and jurisdictions, and include cost estimates to guide planning, design, implementation and long-term maintenance.
- » Use LA28-related planning and funding opportunities to center the needs of vulnerable populations and deliver lasting improvements that will enrich the transit experience for all.

More Information

Valente, L. (2026). Way-Finding the Gold Standard: Design and Policy Recommendations to Improve Nighttime Transit Safety and Accessibility in Los Angeles (Master’s capstone, UCLA). Retrieved from: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8cc135j8>