



PUBLIC TRANSIT SAFETY AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Project Objective

Sexual harassment is a common occurrence in transit environments, but while a robust literature has examined the social and physical parameters of transit crime, we know less about the extent, type, sites, and socio-physical determinants of sexual harassment in transit environments, and even less about effective response strategies. The aim of this study was to cast light on these issues.

Problem Statement

Riders may face sexual harassment during different parts of their transit journey, while waiting at stops, being onboard transit vehicles, or walking to/from a bus stop or a railway station. Sexual harassment in transit settings affects female riders disproportionately. 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.

Research Methodology

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 inquire about their awareness of transit harassment on their systems and their efforts to combat sexual harassment in transit settings.

Results

- 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

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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 clearly a factor affecting sexual harassment. Statistically, significantly higher percentages of female students (64% on the bus and 65% on the train system) reported being affected than men (32% on the bus and 31% on the train system).
- Race/ethnicity is 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 are significantly smaller than incidents of verbal harassment.
- Time of day matters. For students from both genders, perceptions of safety on the bus and rail systems is significantly lower during nighttime; statistically higher numbers of female students never feel safe, and as a consequence, report 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. Students identified poorly illuminated bus stops as one of the top reasons for feeling unsafe. 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.
- 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.

Recommendations

Listening and responding 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 actions. 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 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 bus service minimizes 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.
- Take advantage of digital technologies such as apps and text alert systems to facilitate real-time reporting of sexual harassment incidents.