

Crime and Harassment on Public Transportation: A Survey of SJSU Students Set in International Context

Project 1810
March 2020

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Communities around the world are gradually becoming aware that transit riders, and especially women, are often victims of a wide range of offenses of a sexual nature that happen on buses and trains, and at bus stops and train stations. This study examines the safety concerns of college students with respect to sexual harassment and assault: how these may vary by gender; how their concerns affect their choices about using transit; and what types of behavioral and travel adaptations students adopt in the face of these concerns.

Better understanding the extent and nature of sexual harassment on transit is a critical issue for transit operators and others working to combat the problem. When fear of sexual crime limits whether and how people ride transit, the result is reduced mobility for individuals, as well as lost ridership for transit agencies.

Study Methods

We surveyed a random sample of 891 students at San José State University (SJSU), a large public university in the San Francisco Bay Area. The online survey explored in detail whether and how student riders had experienced sexual harassment, as well as how fear of such harassment influenced their transit use.

Findings

Key study findings include the following:

Sexual harassment is common. Sadly, the survey results reveal that sexual harassment is a common—even routine—experience for SJSU student transit riders. Almost two-thirds (63%) had experienced some form of harassment over the last three years while using the bus or train.

Sexual harassment creates fear and reduces transit use. A quarter of riders said that fear of sexual harassment prevented them from using transit more often, and many more reported taking precautions that limited their mobility, including traveling only during the daytime and avoiding certain bus or train stops.

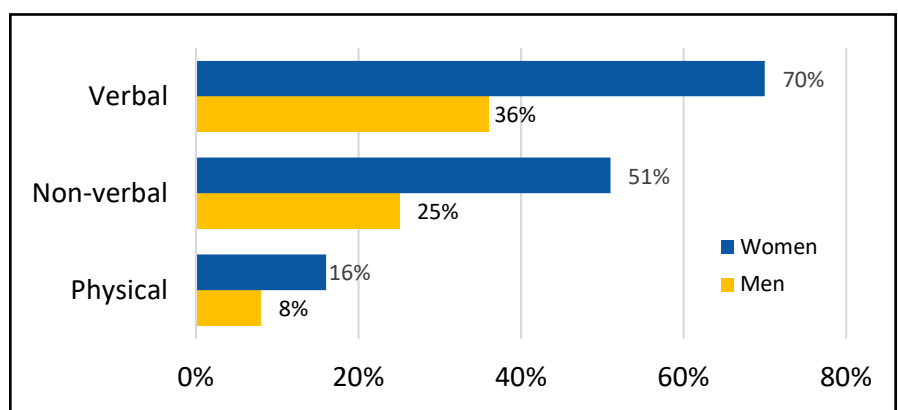
Experiencing harassment has long-term impacts. Students who had been prior victims of harassment were much more likely than others to report feeling unsafe using transit, consider sexual harassment a problem, report reduced use of transit,

and take precautions when riding transit.

Sexual harassment affects both genders, but far more women.

Although some men reported being victims and worried about harassment, far more women were affected. For example, roughly twice as many women as men had experienced sexual harassment on bus transit (see figure).

Types of Harassment Experienced by Female vs. Male Bus Riders



Sexual harassment remains largely unreported. Fewer than 10% of victims reported their harassment experiences to anyone at all, and they reported such experiences mostly to friends or family rather than to police or transit operators.

The SJSU student experience is a global experience. The SJSU experience is roughly typical of students around the world, although SJSU students were particularly likely to report feeling unsafe after dark.

Implications for Policy Makers

The study findings suggest the following implications:

- **Educate the public about harassment.** Transit operators, police, and other responsible public agencies can instigate widespread educational campaigns to raise awareness about the problem and encourage victims and bystanders to report sexual harassment incidents.
- **Include questions about sexual harassment on passenger surveys.** Transit operators can better understand the problem and extent of harassment on their systems if they conduct systematic surveys that ask passengers about their experiences with harassment.
- **Make it easy to report harassment.** Smartphone apps and dedicated phone lines can help victims and bystanders report harassment and other crimes in real time.
- **Give attention to the physical environment.** Respondents made clear that poorly maintained and dark transit environments made them fearful, a finding that points to the value of keeping transit settings well-lit and well-maintained.
- **Safe-guard against anti-social behaviors.** Survey respondents called for more police patrols and security cameras on both platforms and transit vehicles, to reduce antisocial behavior.
- **Learn from industry best practices.** Communities can learn a great deal from the practices of transit operators that have prioritized efforts to reduce sexual crimes, including anti-harassment campaigns, training of transit vehicle operators, request-a-stop policies, and use of digital technologies to report harassment events.

About the Authors

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To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/research/1810



MTI is a University Transportation Center sponsored by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Office of the Assistant Secretary for Research and Technology and by Caltrans. The Institute is located within San José State University's Lucas Graduate School of Business.