

Learning about Street Harassment on Transit: A Survey Instrument for Transit Agencies

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This study was conducted in accordance with California Senate Bill 1161 (2022), state legislation that directed the Mineta Transportation Institute to develop a reliable, easy-to-use survey instrument that transit operators can use to collect information from passengers about the extent, location, and characteristics of any street harassment they experience on their systems.

Although the legislation is focused on California’s transit agencies, the study findings are relevant to agencies outside the state.

Types of Street Harassment

Verbal



- Threatening or hostile comments, sounds, gestures
- Sexual comments or sounds

Non-verbal



- Racist or sexualized gestures or looks
- Following or stalking
- Exposing private body parts
- Showing pornographic images

Physical



- Groping, rubbing, playing with hair, or other touching
- Pushing, spitting, coughing on someone, or other physical assault
- Personal property damaged or stolen

Source: Design by Minhvy Tran, adapted from the RedDot Foundation SafeCity initiative and Vania Ceccato, “Sexual Violence in Public Transportation,” International Encyclopedia of Transportation (2019).

Defining Street Harassment

The legislation defines street harassment as “words, gestures, or actions directed at a specific person in a public place...that the person experiences as intimidating, alarming, terrorizing, or threatening to

their safety.” The wide range of harassing behaviors can be conceptually categorized as verbal, non-verbal, and physical. These harassing actions may target the victim on account of personal characteristics such as “sex, race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, ethnic group identification, age, mental disability, physical disability, medical condition, genetic information, marital status, or sexual orientation.”

Street Harassment and Public Transit

Street harassment has been a persistent phenomenon on public transportation, albeit one that goes largely underreported. Harassment takes place in public spaces and transit environments such as transit vehicles, transit stops, and on the way to these (or other) destinations. Although riders of any gender may suffer from harassment, the problem is more severe for women and girls, especially those who are low-income or of color. Evidence also suggests that nonbinary and transgender individuals experience disproportionate levels of sexual harassment in transit.

Riders who witness or are victims of harassment may restrict their transit use, such as limiting transit trips to only those taken during the day or those that can be taken with a companion. Other people stop using transit altogether. This restriction of mobility creates an acute problem for those who lack the financial resources or physical ability to use other modes of transportation.

The Need for a Specialized Passenger Survey Questionnaire

Transit passenger surveys are a well-established research method that agencies use to improve their service. Typically, surveyors approach passengers

while they are using the transit system and request that they complete a brief paper survey. Questions about safety are sometimes included on passenger surveys, but very few surveys to date have asked about street harassment.

Study Methods

To develop the recommended survey, we first reviewed literature about street harassment and assault on public transit. In addition, we analyzed transit passenger surveys to explore what questions are asked about safety and harassment. Next, we developed a draft questionnaire and refined it through repeated rounds of feedback from transit riders, advocates working to combat the problem of street harassment, and experts in transit passenger survey design. Finally, we also pilot-tested the questionnaire with 329 riders from one rail and one bus transit agency in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Principles Guiding the Questionnaire

The complete survey questionnaire, which is available in multiple languages, was designed to achieve four primary objectives:

- Cover all topics required by SB 1161. The legislation requires the survey to collect data on a wide variety of experiences and personal characteristics.
- Document experiences associated with all different types of harassing behaviors. One problem that researchers face when studying the nature and extent of harassment is that members of the general public often do not associate the term “street harassment” with all the behaviors important to the study. Therefore, it is essential that surveys clearly delineate the specific behaviors of interest, rather than simply asking if passengers have experienced or witnessed “harassment.”
- Maximize the likelihood that passengers will accept, complete, and submit the survey. Survey results are only useful when a large and diverse set of passengers respond, yet a key problem for any survey project is convincing people to respond. Strategies for encouraging respondents to submit completed surveys center on designing

a questionnaire that is short and cognitively simple to complete.

- Design a survey that is easy to administer and process. Respondents answer most questions with just a check mark box, an approach that facilitates quick and accurate data entry for survey administrators.

Resources for Transit Operators

The survey questionnaire is available on the MTI website in 14 languages, including English, Spanish, and Chinese.

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/2301



The California State University Transportation Consortium (CSUTC), led by the Mineta Transportation Institute, fosters synergies across the entire California State University system to conduct impactful transportation research and engage in workforce development initiatives that increase mobility of people and goods and strengthen California's economy.