

Transit safety among college students in Vancouver, Canada

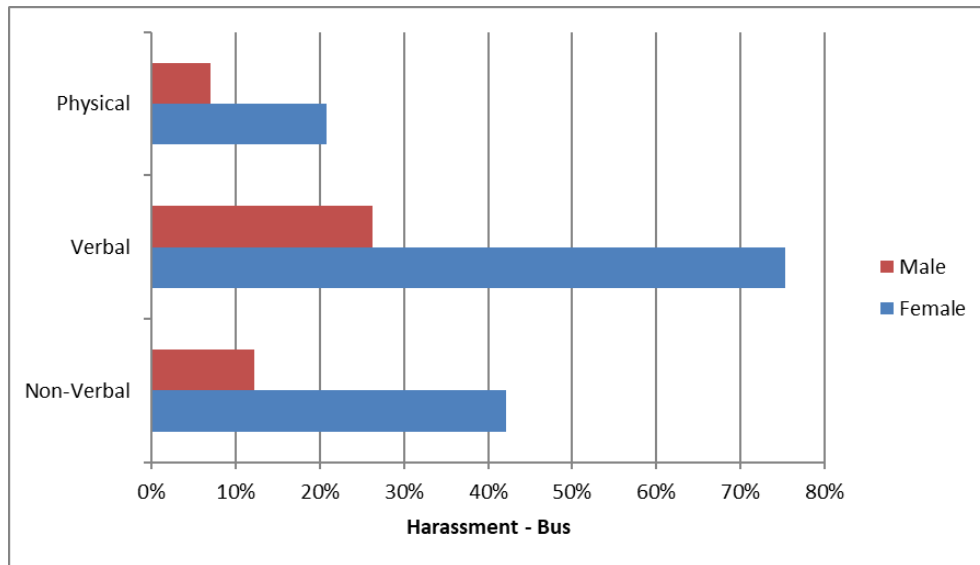
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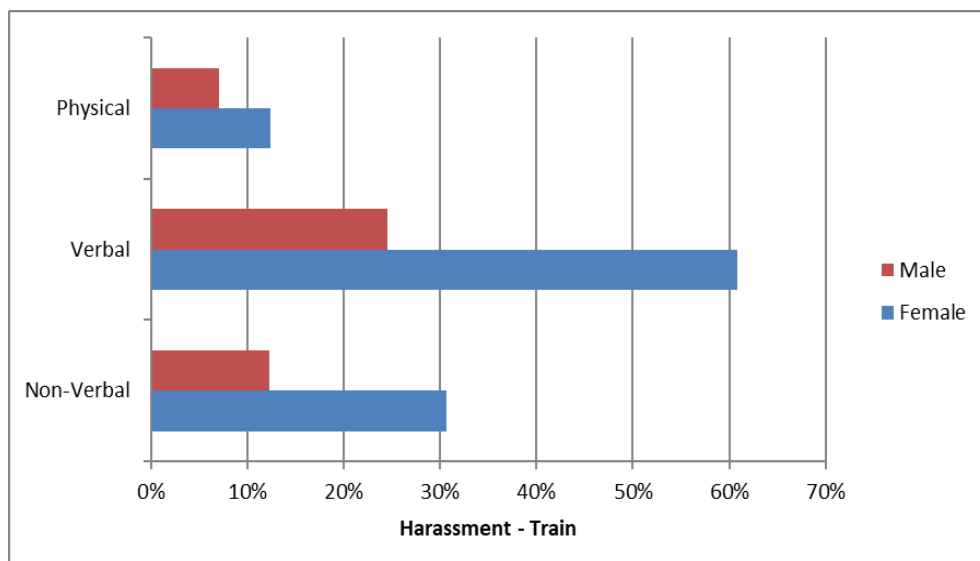
Security is one of the main factors that can influence the mobility of individuals as they travel throughout cities (Ceccato, Uittenbogaard & Bamzar, 2013). Transit passengers have often expressed heightened levels of concern and fear while using different modes of transit and during their journeys to and from transit platforms and stops. Past research has shown that transit passengers' fears and concerns about safety influence their travel decisions (Loukaitou-Sideris & Fink, 2009). In particular, fear of transit is more pronounced in certain social groups compared to others. Groups such as females, the elderly, minorities, and low-income individuals are more likely to report feeling fearful of using transit systems to travel (Gekoski, Gray, Adler, & Horvath, 2017; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2014). Post-secondary students often represent a number of the aforementioned social groups and provide a unique opportunity to further explore differentiations of age, gender, race, sexual orientation, and prior victimization in passenger safety and mobility.

In an attempt to examine perceived safety and victimization on different public transportation systems, a comparative study was conducted in eighteen cities around the globe led by Dr. Vania Ceccato and Dr. Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris. The following case study provides results from Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.

An online survey was administered to university students at Simon Fraser University (SFU) between June 2018 and February 2019 to assess victimization and perceived safety using Metro Vancouver's public transportation system. A total number of 304 survey responses were collected. The majority of respondents were young female university students between the ages of 18 to 29. Thirty-seven percent of respondents reported taking the bus between three to four times a week compared to thirty percent of respondents who used the SkyTrain and/or West Coast Express three to four times a week. On average, students travel between 30 minutes to 2 hours to travel to school during the weekday.



The most common type of sexual harassment experienced by students was verbal harassment followed by non-verbal and physical harassment, in both bus and train travel. Sixty-six percent of students experienced verbal harassment on the bus while 54% of students experienced verbal harassment on the SkyTrain and/or West Coast Express. The most common types of verbal harassment experienced by female transit riders included unwanted sexual looks or gestures (56% for bus, 45% for train), catcalling such as calling respondents “babe”, “honey” or “sweetheart” (44% for bus, 33% for train) and sexual comments about one’s clothing and/or looks (39% for bus, 27% for train). Respondents shared that verbal harassment often acted as a precursor to other escalating physical behaviours such as “trapping individuals” in their seats by refusing to move, following individuals after they disembarked from the bus, and “manspreading”, taking up far more room to sit than is necessary. Many students indicated in the survey that they felt vulnerable to additional harm if they refused to comply with their harasser’s wishes. For example, one student indicated that they felt pressured to answer questions of a personal nature in fear that refusal to do so would lead to additional victimization.



Of those who reported being a victim, only 32% chose to report their victimization to others. Female students were far more likely to not report their victimization compared to their male counterparts. Those reporting the harassment experience primarily turned to friends and family rather than contact the police and/or transit authorities. Students who did not report their victimization felt their crime was not serious enough to warrant the attention of the police, and that it was unlikely the criminal(s) would be arrested. Interestingly, when asked if a student had been a victim of a sexual assault or harassment crime while using the bus, SkyTrain, and/or West Coast Express, 55% of respondents indicated they had never been a victim of such crimes, despite experiencing individual harassment behaviours. For example, 66% of the total sample responded that they had experienced verbal harassment on the bus yet 55% of the sample responded they had never been a victim. The perception of what constitutes as a victim of harassment and/or sexual assault appears to be different compared to the experiences shared by the respondents.

Results from the current study demonstrate that persistent fears of criminal victimization and sexual harassment are regularly faced by university students in Metro Vancouver. Students often need to adapt their behavior to avoid victimization in transit environments. Of particular concern, female students are disproportionately targeted for criminal victimization and harassment compared to their male peers. Greater efforts need to be implemented by transit and policing authorities to help create a safer environment for passengers, particularly females.