

Girls for a Safe Transit Report (May 2009) - by the Rogers Park Young Women's Action Team

Executive Summary

Each year, over 1.8 million rides are taken on the Chicago public transit system. In 2008, the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) boasted an average weekday ridership of over 1.68 million people. The extent to which these public transit users experience a safe ride is a critical measure of success for both the CTA as well as the Chicago Police Department (CPD). Over the past six years, the Rogers Park Young Women's Action Team (YWAT) has received feedback from many young women who feel unsafe during their daily commutes and who have too often become victims of sexual harassment and/or assault¹ on Chicago buses and trains (i.e. the EL).

In an effort to better understand the extent of this harassment and assault in the Chicago public transit system and to develop a framework for improved rider safety, the YWAT conducted an online and paper survey garnering respondents from a large and diverse group of Chicago transit riders. Over 639 surveys were collected over a period of six months during 2008-2009.

These survey results provide anecdotal evidence of public transit sexual harassment and assault characteristics and also represent the most systematic attempt to compile such data in Chicago.

Key Findings

DEMOGRAPHICS

- 77 percent of survey respondents were female; 23% were male.
- 26 percent of survey respondents were between the ages of 15-19; 23 percent were between the ages of 26-35; 22 percent were between the ages of 20-25; 11 percent were between the ages of 11-14; and 11 percent were between the ages of 36-45.
- 41 percent of survey respondents identified as Black; 37 percent of survey respondents were White; 13 percent were Latino; 5 percent identified as "other"; and 3 percent as Asian.

¹ For the purposes of this survey and report, harassment was defined as sexual solicitation, name calling, yelling, unwanted physical contact or being followed. Sexual assault was defined as any attempt or actual unwanted sexual contact (including attempted rape, rape, and forced oral/anal intercourse).

- 59 percent of respondents live on the Northside; 20 percent of respondents live on the Southside; 12 percent of respondents live on the Westside.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ASSAULT ON THE CTA

- 42 percent of respondents reported feeling UNSAFE on the CTA.
- 52 percent of respondents reported having been sexually harassed on the CTA.
- 13 percent of respondents reported having been sexually assaulted on the CTA.

REPORTING TO AUTHORITIES

- 91 percent of respondents who indicated that they were sexually harassed and/or assaulted did NOT file an official complaint with the police or CTA.
- 9 percent of respondents who indicated that they were sexually harassed and/or assaulted did file an official complaint with the police or CTA.
- Of those who did file an official complaint, 60 percent filed it with the CTA and 44 percent filed it with the Chicago Police Department.

WITNESSES ACCOUNT

- 44 percent of respondents have personally witnessed an incident of sexual harassment or assault on the CTA.
- Of those who have personally witnessed harassment or sexual assault on the CTA, only 22 percent intervened. This means that 78 percent did NOT.
- 78 percent of respondents who were sexually harassed or assaulted and/or witnessed sexual harassment or assault cited the rapid transit “RED LINE” as the place where these incidents occurred.
- 23 percent of respondents who were sexually harassed or assaulted and/witnessed sexual harassment or assault cited the rapid transit “BLUE LINE” as the place where these incidents happened.

ADDRESSING SEXUAL VIOLENCE ON THE CTA

- 88 percent of respondents think that the CTA **needs to improve** safety measures for citizens who access their facilities.

When asked which strategies would be the most effective way of reducing the number of sexual assault and harassment incidents on the CTA:

- 34 percent of respondents wanted better safety amenities namely brighter lights in stations and on trains, working pay phones, and more emergency and intercom systems.
- 32 percent of respondents wanted increased police presence on the EL or buses.
- 19 percent of respondents wanted public education campaigns on personal safety and who to contact if one is sexually assaulted or harassed on the CTA.

To help chart a collaborative approach to a more responsible and secure transit system, and to provide a starting point for discussion of needed changes, the YWAT offers several recommendations for safety improvements that may limit the risk of sexual harassment and assault in the Chicago transit system.

Recommendations:

1. Ensure that CPD tracks sexual harassment and assault crimes as stand-alone offenses; tracks the prevalence of these crimes across time, neighborhood, individual train and bus lines, and stations; and makes all of these statistics publicly available and easily accessible.
2. Increase CPD presence on buses and trains.
3. Launch an ongoing public awareness campaign to educate riders about: the risk of sexual harassment and assault on the CTA; preventive measures that riders can take; steps that victims of sexual harassment and assault can take to seek support; and the overall importance of reporting sexual harassment and assault incidents to authorities.
4. Develop a standard protocol for CPD and CTA to address sexual harassment and sexual assault and offer training on these issues to CTA employees and police officers.
5. Introduce and upgrade needed safety amenities throughout the transit network (namely brighter lights in stations and on trains, working pay phones, and more emergency and intercom systems).
6. Create a hotline where riders can easily report incidents of sexual assault and assault.

I. Introduction

One transportation safety concern that is largely overlooked in the public eye is that of public transit sexual harassment and assault. A lot of anecdotal evidence suggests that incidents of sexual harassment and assault in the CTA are commonplace. To better understand this issue, YWAT developed a paper and web-based survey. A copy of our survey is included in this report. The survey was e-mailed to over 500 people on our mailing list through constant contact. It was also circulated via other organizational listserves. Finally, members of YWAT distributed surveys to riders at several key EL stations across Chicago. YWAT collected surveys from over 600 people for this study. In conducting and analyzing the results of this survey, the goal of the YWAT is to better understand public transit riders' experiences with and impressions of sexual harassment and assault incidents in the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA) with the aim of outlining concrete solutions to prevent crime, empower and protect riders, and create a safer transit system for Chicagoans.

II. Survey Results

Respondent Profile

The online and paper survey received 639 responses from Chicago public transit riders. Table 1 displays the demographic profile and transit travel behavior of respondents. Majority and plurality response categories are bolded.

Table 1. Respondent Demographics and Public Transit Behavior

Gender					
Female			Male		
77%			23%		
Age					
11-14	15-19	20-25	26-35	36-45	46-59
11%	26%	22%	23%	11%	4%
Race					
White	Black	Latino/a	Asian	Other	
37%	41%	13%	3%	5%	
Area of Residence					
Northside	Southside	Westside	Loop	Other	
59%	20%	12%	4%	6%	
Typical Public Transit Travel Time					
7 am-12pm	12pm-6pm	6pm-12am	12am-7am		
63%	44%	30%	4%		

As will be detailed below, the survey results illustrate that sexual harassment and assault are not only realities of the CTA – they are also commonplace, and yet underreported, highlighting the need for prevention and response measures.

Safety and the CTA

Do you feel safe on the CTA?	
YES	NO
58%	42%

While the majority of respondents (58%) said that they feel safe on the CTA, a very substantial group of riders (42%) report NOT feeling safe on the CTA. **It is notable that 46 percent of female respondents report NOT feeling safe on Chicago transit.** This is obviously a gendered phenomenon. Women feel disproportionately less safe riding public transit than their male counterparts.

As part of the survey, YWAT asked riders to share their comments about sexual harassment and assault in the CTA. One respondent illustrates the reality that for some any sense of safety is conditional: “Overall, I feel safe in the CTA but I do know to travel only certain routes at certain times a day as a woman when I am alone.” So while this respondent answered “yes” to the question of whether she felt safe on the CTA, it is clear that this sense of safety is constrained. The respondent still feels the need to take preventative measures to “keep” herself safe by avoiding certain travel times and transit lines.

A male respondent suggested that while he felt safe in the CTA, many of his female friends did not experience the same sense of security: “Sexual assault, although a concern, has not been a problem for me. As a male, I have rarely been approached or assaulted, however, several of my female friends have been, and they have retold their horror stories to me.”

Many female respondents shared their personal stories of feeling unsafe on the CTA. This particular example was illustrative and repeated by several respondents:

“I was harassed and yelled at by someone on the bus for not responding to his catcalls. I felt unsafe getting off the bus at my normal stop, as he exited there. I had to stay on the bus longer and walk several blocks home by myself at night. I felt quite unsafe.”

These experiences should be a big concern for the Chicago Transit Authority as it seeks to ensure rider safety in its facilities and on its bus and rail system.

Experiences of harassment and assault

Have you ever been sexually assaulted on the CTA?	
YES	NO
13%	87%

Thirteen percent of survey respondents have been victims of sexual assault on the Chicago transit system. The reality that over 1 in 10 transit riders within the survey response group have experienced what they classify as sexual assault is cause for great concern. **Notably, over 16% percent of female respondents said that they have experienced sexual assault on the CTA.**

Have you ever been sexually harassed on the CTA?	
YES	NO
52%	48%

By comparison to sexual assault, sexual harassment is far more common in the CTA. Over fifty-two percent of our respondents have been sexually harassed in the CTA system. **58% of female respondents indicated that they have experienced sexual harassment in the public transit system.**

Several respondents shared their personal harassment and assault experiences with us. The following is a sample of some of their comments:

“One day while riding the EL train home from school, I was sexually assaulted. There was a man who appeared to be in his 40’s sitting in the seat behind me. I didn’t think anything of it, until I felt something on my back. I put my hand behind my back to see if I had accidentally sat on something and was shocked to find the hand of the man sitting behind touching and rubbing my back. I was alone, scared, and shocked, and the first thing that came to my mind was to move. So I moved to the other side of the train but still feeling uncomfortable, I decided to get off the train. Once off the train I decided to call my parents to let them know what happened and they instructed me to go to the conductor, but by this time it was too late. I had already left the train station. Now, as I sit and reflect on that day, I wish I would have told an authoritative figure so that that man would not have the opportunity to prey on other young girls...If CTA really valued its customers then they would take all measures needed to protect them to the best of their ability.”

“My experience included a man masturbating in the seat directly across from mine. It was a very uncomfortable situation and I looked around to see if anyone else noticed him but they did not. I considered moving to another end of the train but thankfully my stop was next so I hurriedly exited the train.”

“Aside from one masturbator, the harassment I’ve seen has always been of the “hey baby, smile!” type. It’s so normalized I don’t even think most people realize what’s going on. It’s just something women have to endure – I think that’s wrong.”

“I have been harassed twice on the red line. Both times men exposed their genitalia to me. Of these two incidents one offender was masturbating while staring at me. I have a friend who was on the Redline when she felt her hair being pulled, she turned around and saw a man using her hair to masturbate. She started to scream he fled and but no one from the CTA or on the train helped. She cut off all her hair and has kept it short since.”

Some respondents expressed great frustration and anger about their experiences of harassment or assault.

“I am sick of feeling tense or caged in or worried some man is going to stare at me and jerk off, because it happens almost every week.”

The survey asked respondents to indicate what transit line were they sexually harassed or assaulted on and/or where did they witness sexual assault or harassment. They were asked to check all EL lines that applied and to also add bus routes.

What EL-line were you sexually assaulted or harassed on, or did you witness sexual assault or harassment on (check all that apply)?					
Red	Purple	Brown	Blue	Green	Orange
78%	8%	10%	23%	11%	5%

Reporting harassment and assault

To understand the extent of victim reporting, the survey asked sexual harassment and assault victims whether they contacted CPD and/or the CTA to file a report or seek assistance. The following table illustrates the breakdown.

If you have been sexually harassed and/or assaulted, were you able to file an official complaint with the police or CTA?	
YES	NO
9%	91%

If you filed an official complaint, who did you file with, and what was the outcome?	
CTA	Police
60%	44%

Overwhelmingly, victims of both sexual harassment and assault did not contact the police and/or the CTA to file a report or seek assistance. These findings support the assumption that sexual harassment and assault are very much underreported. Many respondents offered their comments as to why they are reluctant to report these incidents:

“I don’t report them to authorities, because I feel like I’ll be poo-pooed by the cops as being overly sensitive. Instead, I tell my friends, both male and female, my schoolmates, and acquaintances to watch out, and encourage them to pass on the info to other people.”

“One instance when I pressed the emergency call button at the Morse stop on the red line platform and no one ever returned the call. I don’t know if the system wasn’t working or if the CTA worker just didn’t respond but this is unacceptable.”

“It never occurred to me to report anything – when it’s rush hour and you’re late for work, it’s hard to justify investing the time to file a report (I assume it would take a long time) just cos some guy stuck his hand between my legs. Or, in the case when I realized that on a nearly-empty blue line train a guy was staring at my sister and me and jerking off, my first instinct was to grab my sister and get off the train asap. I was so worried about getting away that again I didn’t report it. If (when?) it happens again I’ll report it.”

These responses indicate that there are often no police or CTA representatives nearby at the time of the incident; that some of the safety equipment is inadequate; and that victims believe their complaints will not be taken seriously.

Witnessing Sexual Harassment and Assault & the Need for Community Intervention

The survey asked respondents to indicate whether they have seen a fellow transit rider being sexually harassed and/or assaulted in the CTA.

Have you personally witnessed harassment or sexual assault on the CTA?	
YES	NO
44%	56%
If you answered yes, did you intervene?	
YES	NO
22%	78%

44 percent of respondents answered that they have personally witnessed harassment or sexual assault on the CTA. This statistic demonstrates the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and assault incidents in the Chicago transit system. Particularly noteworthy is that very few respondents actually intervened to help.

Respondents shared their comments about the need for community intervention in order to address issues of public transit sexual harassment and assault:

“During my encounter with a male, the train was full of people; literally every seat was taken. When said male sat down next to me and harassed me, even though I spoke very loudly and yelled that he was harassing me, people looked away and I physically had to take myself out of my seat in order for him to get up. This was very disheartening to me. I hope that others’ experiences reflect a more active role of community intervention.”

“I wish all CTA riders (including myself) would speak up more and stand up for our fellow riders when we see harassment occurring. We don’t need to put up with that kind of behavior but it’s only when someone speaks up that it will stop. We’ve seen that officials (such as police or CTA employees) are often not available to help us. We must help ourselves.”

“I’ve been groped multiple times on the CTA and a few times made a scene to get people on the train’s attention an to stop the groping. The groping has always stopped but never once has any other passenger on the train backed me up or otherwise intervened.”

Recommendations/Need for Improved Responses

The overwhelming majority of survey respondents indicated that the CTA needs to improve safety measures for citizens who access their facilities.

Do you think that the CTA needs to improve safety measures for citizens who access their facilities?	
YES	NO
88%	12%

The survey findings highlight some critical safety concerns from the survey population: 1) that sexual harassment and assault in the CTA are a commonplace experience; 2) that sexual harassment and assault in the CTA are largely unreported by victims and witnesses due to a combination of factors including the absence of transit authorities at the scene of the incident, the “normalization” of acts of harassment, the lack of properly functioning equipment like phones, and the belief that authorities will not be able to

apprehend the perpetrator or otherwise provide assistance; 3) that riders are unaware of any recourse and resource that the CTA provides to address these matters. The CTA could introduce a number of policies and procedures that could address these basic safety concerns. While these changes should be discussed by authorities and public transit riders, the following recommendations -- developed based on survey respondent suggestions and best practices from other major cities -- provide a starting point for a dialogue on how to address sexual harassment and assault incidents in the CTA.

Survey respondents were asked to offer their opinion about which of the following strategies would be the most effective way of reducing the number of sexual assault and harassment incidents on the CTA.

Effective Strategies to Reduce Sexual Harassment and Assault in the CTA	
Public education campaigns on personal safety and who to contact if one is sexually assaulted or harassed on the CTA	19%
Increased police presence on the EL or buses	32%
Better safety amenities: brighter lights in stations and on trains, working pay phones, and more emergency intercom systems	34%
Having more buses and/or trains during rush hours	6%

Data Collection and Availability

1. The Chicago Police Department in conjunction with the CTA should collect, track, and publish public transit sexual harassment and assault data.

The crime statistics that the CPD generates, tracks, and publishes form the basis of public safety management strategies both of the CPD and other secondary responders, such as government agencies, community groups, and other organizations providing public safety support services.

Under the current system, the CPD does not collect or track public transit sexual harassment and assault data as a stand-alone crime statistic or category of statistics; instead only those occurrences which fit within other crime definitions are captured. For example, a sexual assault victim, depending on the severity of the assault, can fall in the heading of "criminal sexual assault."

Tracking public transit sexual harassment and assault in distinct categories (versus embedded in an umbrella category) is essential to understanding the prevalence of such crimes, to analyzing the factors of sexual harassment and assault commonality (such as time of day and transit line), and finally to determine best practices for prevention and response to these types of occurrences. It is unrealistic to expect CPD and the CTA to craft effective strategies on the basis of inadequate data.

Equally critical is the public availability of public transit sexual harassment and assault data. When crime data is not disclosed to the public, outreach and preventive services to riders cannot be provided in a strategic way. In addition, riders are not empowered to tailor their transit behavior in a way that maximizes their personal safety. Several major metropolitan cities, including Boston and Washington D.C., publish police reports on transit agency websites clearly denoting crimes that occur in their subway system². The transparency of crime statistics allows riders to be more vigilant, particularly on certain buses, stations, and trains. Further, the data help the local transit authority and community organizations formulate prevention and response strategies for crime.

With an overwhelming number of survey respondents not reporting sexual harassment and assault incidents to the CPD and/or CTA, these agencies should explore the creation of a hotline to encourage transit riders to report these crimes, and to provide a hassle-free and non-threatening means to do so. The hotline's purpose would be two-fold: 1. to allow the CPD to collect more accurate data on sexual harassment and/or assault incidents in the CTA; 2. to help the CTA in tailoring prevention and response strategies. Through public education campaigns, the hotline could become a critical resource in better understanding the factors of sexual harassment and assault incidents.

Increase CPD presence on CTA buses and the EL

Police enforcement is a critical part of any effort to reduce the risk of public transit sexual harassment and assault. In fact, 31.8 percent of survey respondents indicated that an increased police presence on the EL or buses would be an effective way of reducing the number of sexual assaults and harassment. One respondent commented: "Night travel especially on the EL is a very vulnerable place. It would be an improvement to have a police presence and more emergency systems there."

² See Washington, DC Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority. http://wmata.com/about/mtpd/weekly_crime_stats.cfm; Boston, MA Massachusetts Bay Transit Authority. <http://transitpolice.us/index.htm>.

We were unable to gather adequate data to assess the current level of monitoring and oversight of public transit by the Chicago police department. This information was not made available to us. After repeated inquiries, YWAT was informed that there is no way for the CPD to monitor how many of their officers are monitoring public transit on at a given time.

Structural Changes

33.9% of survey respondents indicated that structural changes would be the most effective way of reducing the number of sexual assault and harassment incidents on the CTA.

1. The CTA should install brighter lights on the EL and stations, ensure working emergency phones and pay phones, and ensure working intercom systems.
2. The CTA should increase its monitoring of its closed circuit television system to curb and prevent sexual harassment and assault.

Public Awareness

A key factor in deterring sexual harassment and assault in the CTA is full public participation in monitoring and reporting those offenses. 19% of survey respondents cited this strategy as an effective way of reducing harassment and assault. In order to educate the public and inform both victims and witnesses about these crimes, the CTA, in partnership with other government agencies and community groups, should sponsor an ongoing public education campaign. Ideally, this public education campaign would provide the following:

- Definitions and related legal punishments of sexual harassment and assault;
- Response steps for victims and witnesses to secure assistance; and
- Statements on the importance of reporting sexual harassment and assault.

It is important that realistic and useful information be shared with CTA riders so that they can properly respond if harassed or assaulted. A respondent echoed this statement: "Normally I feel really safe on the CTA but the couple of instances where I have experienced sexual harassment really made me fear for my safety. And frustrated because I was unaware of what actions I could realistically take."

This public education campaign may also help to deter potential criminals by reinforcing the fact that the CPD and CTA will take these crimes seriously.

In addition to public education, it is important to **develop and issue standard sexual harassment and assault response protocols** and to **provide related training to CTA employees as well as police officers** about issues of sexual violence. One survey respondent offered: “CTA officials should be trained to be anti-violence and better respond to survivors of violence on the CTA.”

Conclusion

This survey and summary report are an important first step in addressing and understanding the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault in the Chicago public transit system. Publicly available data on these occurrences, greater enforcement, simple structural changes, and developing sexual violence protocols, and public education campaigns, can all contribute to reducing the instances of sexual harassment and assault in the CTA.

All questions about this report should be directed to the Rogers Park Young Women’s Action Team – rpwat@hotmail.com.

Young Women's Action Team

Sexual Harassment and Assault Survey

1. Which age range do you fall into?

11-14 15-19 20-25 26-35 36-45 46-59 60 and older

2. What is your gender?

Female Male

3. Which is your race?

White Black Latino/a Asian Other

4. Where do you live?

Northside Westside Southside Loop (Downtown) Other

5. What time of day do you most often travel on the Chicago Transit Authority (CTA)?

7am-12pm 12pm-6pm 6pm-12am 12am-7am

6. Do you feel safe on the CTA?

Yes No

7. Have you ever been harassed on the CTA? (We define harassment as sexual solicitation, name calling, yelling, unwanted physical contact, or being followed.)

Yes No

8. Have you ever been sexually assaulted on the CTA? (We define sexual assault as any attempted or actual unwanted sexual contact)

Yes No

9. If you answered yes to questions 7 or 8, were you able to file an official complaint with the police or CTA?

Yes No

10. If you answered yes to question 9, who did you file with, and what was the outcome?

CTA Police

Outcome _____

11. Have you personally witnessed harassment or sexual assault on the CTA?

Yes No

12. What EL-line or bus route were you sexually assaulted or harassed on, or did you witness sexual assault or harassment on?

Red Purple Brown Blue
 Green Orange Pink Yellow

Bus Route: _____

13. Do you think that the CTA needs to improve safety measures for citizens who access their facilities?

Yes No

14. In your opinion, which of the following strategies would be the most effective way of reducing the number of sexual assault and harassment incidents on the CTA? (Please select only one.)

- a) Public education campaigns on personal safety and who to contact if one is sexually assaulted or harassed on the CTA.
- b) Increased police presence on the EL or buses.
- c) Better safety amenities: brighter lights in stations and on trains, working pay phones, and more emergency and intercom systems.
- d) Having more buses and/or trains during rush hours.
- e) Other: _____

Any additional comments on your CTA experiences?