

Girls for Safe Transit – a Young Women’s Action Team (YWAT) Campaign

Our Campaign’s History: In 2008, the Rogers Park Young Women’s Action Team (YWAT) developed a survey to explore the prevalence of sexual harassment and assault in the Chicago Public Transit system. This youth-led participatory action research project administered online and paper surveys and collected information from over 630 public transit riders. In May 2009, YWAT released a report indicating that a high number of Chicagoans had been harassed or assaulted on public transit. In response to these findings, the YWAT launched the **Girls for Safe Transit campaign**. This campaign is dedicated to reducing harassment and assaults – particularly gender and discrimination based – on public transportation in Chicago. The campaign has been focused on raising public awareness, community building, and facilitating changes that ensure girls and young women in Chicago can get from one location to another safely and securely. Visit http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QW1_OWNqCi4 to check out a video about our campaign.

Our Guiding Principle: We believe that all individuals should be treated equally and with dignity and respect, recognizing that women, people of color, youth, LGBT individuals, gender nonconforming individuals, and those who live or work in areas with lacking or limited access to public transit face the biggest safety challenges on public transit.

Our Values:

1. All individuals have a right to feel safe in public spaces.
2. Public agencies should be held accountable for ensuring public safety.
3. All individuals should be able to ride public transit free of harassment or violence.
4. Individuals and communities have the power to make social change through education, organizing, and action.

Our Key Research Findings:

SEXUAL HARASSMENT AND ASSAULT ON THE CHICAGO TRANSIT AUTHORITY (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.

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.

Our Recommendations:

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 has offered several recommendations for safety improvements that may limit the risk of sexual harassment and assault in the Chicago transit system.

1. Ensure that the Chicago Police Department (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. 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.
3. 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.
4. 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).
5. Create a hotline where riders can easily report incidents of sexual assault and assault.

Steps Taken to Implement Our Campaign:

1. Members of the YWAT met with our alderman Joe Moore in early June to discuss the findings from our research. We also enlisted his support in setting up a meeting with CTA representatives. Alderman Moore also agreed to be a vocal advocate for addressing girls' safety concerns in the public transit system.
2. Members of the YWAT met with our Cook County Commissioner Larry Suffredin to communicate our research findings and get his commitment to act as a vocal advocate for transit safety. Commissioner Suffredin has been a longstanding supporter of our work and contributed \$150 for our "CTA stories" spoken word event in June 2009.
3. On Monday June 15th 2009, Chicago Sun-Times Transportation reporter Mary Wisniewski wrote a front page article highlighting the problem of sexual harassment in the CTA and featuring the results of YWAT's research. This article led to YWAT securing meetings with CTA representatives including the VP of System Safety and the Chicago Transit Police. Representatives of the CTA made a commitment to addressing a number of the concerns that YWAT had raised.
4. YWAT members appeared on local television and radio to share their research findings.
5. On Wednesday July 15th 2009, YWAT members made public comments about our findings and recommendations at the CTA Board meeting.
6. On Thursday July 16th 2009, another front page article appeared outlining the steps that CTA will take to implement some of YWAT's recommendations.
7. YWAT followed up with our CTA contact to get written confirmation of the steps that the agency will take to address our concerns.

CTA's Response to Our Girls for Safe Transit Campaign:

The following e-mail was received from Amy Kovalan, Senior Vice President, Safety, Security & Risk Compliance for the Chicago Transit Authority on July 20th, 2009:

Following our discussions, the CTA has taken the following steps to add another layer to our awareness and security procedures:

- CTA has issued a bulletin to remind employees of the agency's stance on harassment and what to do if harassment occurs.
- The security tips brochure is being updated to stress the importance of reporting assaults and harassment occurs.
- CTA Customer Service has created a specific code to categorize harassing complaints – we will use this information to monitor this type of complaint and deploy additional resources as needed.
- CTA is incorporating what to do if harassment occurs into a broader customer information campaign that will include message cards on trains and buses. The campaign is called "If It's Unwanted, It's Harassment."

Media Links:

- Article about YWAT's CTA research:

<http://www.suntimes.com/news/transportation/1622746,CST-NWS-ride15.article>

- Article about the CTA's response to YWAT's Safe Transit Campaign

<http://www.suntimes.com/news/transportation/1668966,CST-NWS-harass16.article>



For more information about YWAT, visit our website at www.youngwomensactionteam.org.